

Did Jesus really rise from the dead?

By Terran Williams

Atheist Bertrand Russell wrote in 1925, "I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my own ego will survive."¹ Well, that's cheerful. Russell clearly bordered on the morose, but we've all wondered, with perhaps more optimism, what will happen to us when we die.

If life after death is not an option, then Russell is right: our bodies will rot and nothing else of us will survive. No consciousness. No happiness. No hope. And, several decades of existentialist window dressing aside, what that really means is an accidental world with no ultimate meaning.

What makes Jesus unique among religious leaders and among great leaders in general, is his relationship with death. Leaders have met with all manner of untimely deaths - assassination, self-inflicted death, accidental death before the world was ready for them to go. But death sought and found them nonetheless. What is not unique about Jesus is that his enemies killed him; what is unprecedented, if the Gospels are to be believed, is that he foretold how and when it would happen and resigned himself to it (actually chose it), stating that death had no power over him.

Theologian R. C. Sproul has stated, "The claim of resurrection is vital to Christianity. If Christ has been raised from the dead by God, then he has the credentials and certification that no other religious leader possesses. Buddha is dead. Mohammad is dead. Moses is dead. Confucius is dead. But, according to ... Christianity, Christ is alive."²

So different and so abnormal is all this that a part of us would like to dismiss it as myth. But is the resurrection to be relegated to a Sunday school story – or is there evidence?

Researcher Josh McDowell said, "After more than seven hundred hours of studying this subject and thoroughly investigating its foundation, I have come to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men, OR it is the most fantastic fact of history."³ Right. So which is it?

Let's keep our minds open.

Cynics and skeptics

Not everyone is willing to fairly examine the evidence. Bertrand Russell admits his take on Jesus **was "not concerned" with historical facts.**⁴ Historian Joseph Campbell, without citing evidence, calmly told his PBS television audience that the resurrection of Jesus is not a factual event.⁵ Other scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar, agree with him.⁶ None of these skeptics present any evidence for their views.

True skeptics, as opposed to cynics, are interested in evidence. In a Skeptic magazine editorial entitled **"What is a skeptic?" the following definition is given: "Skepticism is... the application of reason to any and all ideas - sacred cows allowed. In other words... skeptics do not go into an investigation closed to the possibility that a phenomenon might be real or that a claim might be true. When we say we are 'skeptical', we mean that we must see compelling evidence before we believe."⁷**

Unlike Russell and Crossan, many true skeptics have investigated the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. In this article we will hear from some of them and see how they analysed the evidence for what is perhaps the most important question in the history of the human race: Did Jesus really rise from the dead?

Self-prophecy

In advance of his death, Jesus told his disciples that he would be betrayed, arrested, and crucified **and that he would come back to life three days later. That's a strange plan! What was behind it?** Jesus was no entertainer willing to perform for others on demand; instead, he promised that his death and resurrection would prove to people (if their minds and hearts were open) that he was indeed the Messiah.

Bible scholar Wilbur Smith remarked about Jesus,

When he said that he himself would rise again from the dead, the third day after he was crucified, he said something that only a fool would dare say, if he expected longer the devotion of any disciples - unless He was sure he was going to rise. No founder of any world religion known to men ever dared say a thing like that.⁸

In other words, since Jesus had clearly told his disciples that he would rise again after his death, **failure to keep that promise would expose him as a fraud. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. How did Jesus die before he (if he did) rose again?**

What should have been the end of the story?

You know what Jesus' last hours of earthly life were like if you watched the movie by road warrior/braveheart Mel Gibson. If you missed parts of The Passion of the Christ because you were shielding your eyes (it would have been easier to simply shoot the movie with a red filter on the camera), just flip to the back pages of any Gospel in your New Testament to find out what you missed.

As Jesus predicted, he was betrayed by one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot, and was arrested. In a mock trial under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, he was convicted of treason and condemned to die on a wooden cross. Prior to being nailed to the cross, Jesus was brutally beaten with a Roman cat-o'-nine-tails, a whip with bits of bone and metal that would rip flesh. He was punched repeatedly, kicked, and spat upon.

Then, using mallets, the Roman executioners pounded the heavy wrought-**iron nails into Jesus'** wrists and feet. Finally they dropped the cross in a hole in the ground between two other crosses bearing convicted thieves.

Jesus hung there for approximately six hours. Then, at three in the afternoon - that is, at exactly the same time the Passover lamb was being sacrificed as a sin offering (a little symbolism there, you think?) - **Jesus cried out, "It is finished" (in Aramaic), and died. Suddenly the sky went dark and an earthquake shook the land.**⁹

Pilate wanted verification that Jesus was dead before allowing his crucified body to be buried. So a **Roman guard thrust a spear into Jesus' side. The mixture of blood and water that flowed out was a clear indication that Jesus was dead. Jesus' body was then** taken down from the cross and buried in **Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Roman guards next** sealed the tomb and secured it with a 24-hour watch.

Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples were in shock. Dr. J. P. Moreland writes of their mental state. "They no longer had confidence that Jesus had been sent by God. They also had been taught that God would not let his Messiah suffer death. So they dispersed. The Jesus movement was all but stopped in its tracks."¹⁰

All hope was vanquished. Rome and the Jewish leaders had prevailed - or so it seemed.

Something happened

But it wasn't the end. The Jesus movement did not disappear (obviously), and in fact Christianity exists today as the world's largest religion. Therefore, we've got to know what happened after Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb.

In a New York Times article, Peter Steinfels cites the startling events that occurred three days after **Jesus' death: "Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanised from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened. ... But exactly what?"**¹¹ That's the question we have to answer with an investigation into the facts.

There are only five plausible explanations for Jesus' alleged resurrection, as portrayed in the New Testament:

- 1. Jesus didn't really die on the cross.**
2. The 'resurrection' was a conspiracy.
3. The disciples were hallucinating.
4. The account is legendary.
5. It really happened.

Let's work our way through these options and see which one best fits the facts.

Was Jesus dead?

"Marley was deader than a doornail, of that there was no doubt." So begins Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, the author not wanting anyone to be mistaken as to the supernatural character of what is soon to take place. In the same way, before we take on the role of CSI and piece together evidence for a resurrection, we must first establish that there was, in fact, a corpse. After all, occasionally the newspapers will report on some 'corpse' in a morgue who was found stirring and recovered. Could something like that have happened with Jesus?

Some have proposed that Jesus lived through the crucifixion and was revived by the cool, damp air in the tomb - **"Whoa, how long was I out for?" But that theory doesn't seem to square with the medical evidence.** An article in the Journal of the American Medical Association explains why this so-called 'swoon theory' **is untenable: "Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicated that Jesus was dead. The spear, thrust between his right ribs, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby ensured his death."**¹² But skepticism of this verdict may be in order, as this case has been cold for 2,000 years. At the very least, we need a second opinion.

One place to find that is in the reports of non-Christian historians from around the time when Jesus lived. Three of these historians mentioned the death of Jesus.

- **Lucian (c.120–after 180 a.d.)** referred to Jesus as a crucified sophist (philosopher).¹³
- **Josephus (c.37–c.100 a.d.)** wrote, **"At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of amazing deeds. When Pilate condemned him to the cross, the leading men among us, having accused him, those who loved him did not cease to do so."**¹⁴
- **Tacitus (c. 56–c.120 a.d.)** wrote, **"Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty... at the hands of our procurator Pontius Pilate."**¹⁵

This is a bit like going into the archives and finding that on one spring day in the first century The Jerusalem Post ran a front-page story saying that Jesus was crucified and dead. Not bad detective work, and fairly conclusive.

In fact, **there is no historical account from Christians, Romans, or Jews that disputes either Jesus' death or his burial.** Even Crossan, a skeptic of the resurrection, agrees that Jesus really lived and died: **"That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be."**¹⁶ In light of such evidence, we seem to be on good grounds for dismissing the first of our five options. Jesus was clearly dead, **"of that there was no doubt."**

The matter of an empty tomb

No serious historian really doubts Jesus was dead when he was taken down from the cross. **However, many have questioned how Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb.** English journalist Dr. Frank Morison initially thought the resurrection was either a myth or a hoax, and he began research to write a book refuting it.¹⁷ The book became famous but for reasons other than its original intent, **as we'll see.**

Morison began by attempting to solve the case of the empty tomb. The tomb belonged to a member of the Sanhedrin Council, Joseph of Arimathea. In Israel at that time, to be on the council was to be a rock star. Everyone knew who was on the council. Joseph must have been a real person, otherwise, the Jewish leaders would have exposed the story as a fraud in their attempt to disprove the **resurrection. Also, Joseph's tomb would have been at a well-known location and easily identifiable, so any thoughts of Jesus being "lost in the graveyard" would need to be dismissed.**

Morison wondered why Jesus' enemies would have allowed the "empty tomb myth" to persist if it wasn't true. The discovery of Jesus' body would have instantly killed the entire plot.

And what is known historically of Jesus' enemies is that they accused Jesus' disciples of stealing the body, an accusation clearly predicated on a shared belief that the tomb was empty.

Dr. Paul L. Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, similarly stated, "If all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable... to conclude that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered... that would disprove this statement."¹⁸

The Jewish leaders were stunned and accused the disciples of stealing Jesus' body. **But the Romans had assigned a 24-hour watch at the tomb with a trained guard unit (from 4 to 12 soldiers).** Morison asked, **"How could these professionals have let Jesus' body be vandalised?" It would have been impossible for anyone to have slipped by the Roman guards and to have moved a two-ton stone. Yet the stone was moved away and the body of Jesus was missing.**

If Jesus' body was anywhere to be found, his enemies would have quickly exposed the resurrection as a fraud. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association, summarises the strength of this argument:

With an event so well publicised, **don't you think that it's reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ's body? ...The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.**¹⁹

So, with no body of evidence, and with a known tomb clearly empty, Morison accepted the evidence **as solid that Jesus' body had somehow disappeared from the tomb.**

Grave robbing?

As Morison continued his investigation, he began to examine the motives of Jesus' followers. Maybe the supposed resurrection was actually a stolen body. But if so, how does one account for all the reported appearances of a resurrected Jesus? Historian Paul Johnson, in *History of the Jews*, wrote,

“What mattered was not the circumstances of his death but the fact that he was widely and obstinately believed, by an expanding circle of people, to have risen again.”²⁰ The tomb was indeed empty. But it wasn't the mere absence of a body that could have galvanised Jesus' followers (especially if they had been the ones who had stolen it). Something extraordinary must have happened, for the followers of Jesus ceased mourning, ceased hiding, and began fearlessly proclaiming that they had seen Jesus alive.

Each eyewitness account reports that Jesus suddenly appeared bodily to his followers, the women first. Morison wondered why conspirators would make women central to its plot. In the first century, women had virtually no rights, personhood, or status. If the plot was to succeed, Morison reasoned, the conspirators would have portrayed men, not women, as the first to see Jesus alive. And yet we hear that women touched him, spoke with him, and were the first to find the empty tomb.

Later, according to the eyewitness accounts, all the disciples saw Jesus on more than ten separate occasions. They wrote that he showed them his hands and feet and told them to touch him. And he reportedly ate with them and later appeared alive to more than 500 followers on one occasion.

Legal scholar John Warwick Montgomery stated, “In 56 A.D. [the apostle] Paul wrote that over 500 people had seen the risen Jesus and that most of them were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6ff.). It passes the bounds of credibility that the early Christians could have manufactured such a tale and then preached it among those who might easily have refuted it simply by producing the body of Jesus.”²¹

Bible scholars Geisler and Turek agree. “If the Resurrection had not occurred, why would the apostle Paul give such a list of supposed eyewitnesses? He would immediately lose all credibility with his Corinthian readers by lying so blatantly.”²²

Peter told a crowd in Caesarea why he and the other disciples were so convinced Jesus was alive.

We apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by crucifying him, but God raised him to life three days later....We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. (Acts 10:39-41)

British Bible scholar Michael Green remarked, “The appearances of Jesus are as well authenticated as anything in antiquity. ...There can be no rational doubt that they occurred.”²³

Consistent to the end

As if the eyewitness reports were not enough to challenge Morison's skepticism, he was also baffled by the disciples' behavior. A fact of history that has stumped historians, psychologists, and skeptics alike is that these 11 former cowards were suddenly willing to suffer humiliation, torture, and death. All but one of Jesus' disciples were slain as martyrs. Would they have done so much for a lie, knowing they had taken the body?

The Islamic martyrs on September 11 proved that some will die for a false cause they believe in. Yet **to be a willing martyr for a known lie is insanity. As Paul Little wrote, “Men will die for what they believe to be true, though it may actually be false. They do not, however, die for what they know is a lie.”²⁴ Jesus' disciples behaved in a manner consistent with a genuine belief that their leader was alive.**

No one has adequately explained why the disciples would have been willing to die for a known lie. **But even if they all conspired to lie about Jesus' resurrection, how could they have kept the conspiracy going for decades without at least one of them selling out for money or position? Moreland wrote, “Those who lie for personal gain do not stick together very long, especially when**

hardship decreases the benefits.”²⁵

Former ‘hatchet man’ of the Nixon administration, Chuck Colson, implicated in the Watergate scandal, pointed out the difficulty of several people maintaining a lie for an extended period of time.

I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They **would not have endured that if it weren’t true. Watergate** embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world - **and they couldn’t keep a lie for three weeks. You’re telling me 12** apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.²⁶

Something happened that changed everything for these men and women. Morison acknowledged, **“Whoever comes to this problem has sooner or later to confront a fact that cannot be explained away. ...This fact is that... a profound conviction came to the little group of people - a change that attests to the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave.”**²⁷

A bad trip?

People still think they see a fat, gray-haired Elvis darting into Dunkin Donuts. And then there are those who believe they spent last night with aliens in the mother ship being subjected to unspeakable testing. Sometimes certain people can ‘see’ **things they want to, things that aren’t really there. And that’s why some have claimed that the disciples were so distraught over the** crucifixion that their desire to see Jesus alive caused mass hallucination. Plausible?

Psychologist Gary Collins, former president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, **was asked about the possibility that hallucinations were behind the disciples’ radically changed behavior. Collins remarked, “Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren’t something which can be seen by a group of people.”**²⁸

Hallucination is not even a remote possibility, according to psychologist Thomas J. Thorburn. “It is absolutely inconceivable that... five hundred persons, of average soundness of mind... should experience all kinds of sensuous impressions - visual, auditory, tactual - and that all these... experiences should rest entirely upon... hallucination.”²⁹

Furthermore, in the psychology of hallucinations, the person would need to be in a frame of mind where they so wished to see that person that their mind contrives it. Two major leaders of the early church, James and Paul, both encountered a resurrected Jesus, neither expecting, or hoping for the pleasure. The apostle Paul in fact led the earliest persecutions of Christians, and his conversion remains inexplicable except for his own testimony that Jesus appeared to him, resurrected.

From lie to legend

Some unconvinced skeptics attribute the resurrection story to a legend that began with one or more persons lying or thinking they saw the resurrected Jesus. Over time, the legend would have grown **and been embellished as it was passed around. In this theory, Jesus’ resurrection is on a par with King Arthur’s round table, little Georgie Washington’s inability to tell a lie, and the promise that Social Security will be solvent when we need it.**

But there are three major problems with that theory.

1. **Legends rarely develop while multiple eyewitnesses are alive to refute them.** One historian of ancient Rome and Greece, A. N. Sherwin-White, argued that the resurrection news spread too soon and too quickly for it to have been a legend.³⁰
2. **Legends develop by oral tradition and don't come with contemporary historical documents that can be verified.** Yet the Gospels were written within three decades of the resurrection.³¹
3. **The legend theory doesn't adequately explain either the fact of the empty tomb or the historically verified conviction of the apostles that Jesus was alive.**³²

Why did Christianity win?

Morison was bewildered by the fact that "a tiny insignificant movement was able to prevail over the cunning grip of the Jewish establishment, as well as the might of Rome." Why did it win, in the face of all those odds against it?

He wrote, "Within twenty years the claim of these Galilean peasants had disrupted the Jewish church. ...In less than fifty years it had begun to threaten the peace of the Roman Empire. When we have said everything that can be said... we stand confronted with the greatest mystery of all. Why did it win?"³³

By all rights, Christianity should have died out at the cross when the disciples fled for their lives. But the apostles went on to establish a growing Christian movement.

J. N. D. Anderson wrote, "Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence - and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication. ...That simply wouldn't make sense."³⁴

Many scholars believe (in the words of an ancient commentator) that "the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church." Historian Will Durant observed, "Caesar and Christ had met in the arena and Christ had won."³⁵

A surprise conclusion

With myth, hallucination, and a flawed autopsy ruled out, with incontrovertible evidence for an empty tomb, with a substantial body of eyewitnesses to his reappearance, and with the inexplicable transformation and impact upon the world of those who claimed to have seen him, Morison became **convinced that his preconceived bias against Jesus Christ's resurrection had been wrong.** He began writing a different book - entitled *Who Moved the Stone?* - to detail his new conclusions. Morison simply followed the trail of evidence, clue by clue, until the truth of the case seemed clear to him. His surprise was that the evidence led to a belief in the resurrection.

In his first chapter, *The Book That Refused to Be Written*, this former skeptic explained how the **evidence convinced him that Jesus' resurrection was an actual historical event.** "It was as though a man set out to cross a forest by a familiar and well-beaten track and came out suddenly where he **did not expect to come out.**"³⁶

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Edwards, "Great Minds: Bertrand Russell," *Free Inquiry*, December 2004/January 2005, 46.
- ² R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1982), 44.
- ³ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1999), 203.
- ⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 16.
- ⁵ Joseph Campbell, an interview with Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, PBS TV special, 1988.
- ⁶ Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds, *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 2.
- ⁷ "What Is a Skeptic?" editorial in *Skeptic*, vol 11, no. 2), 5.
- ⁸ McDowell, *New Evidence*, 209.
- ⁹ Historian Will Durant reported, "About the middle of this first century a pagan named Thallus... argued that the abnormal darkness alleged to have accompanied the death of Christ was a purely natural phenomenon and coincidence; the argument took the existence of Christ for granted. The denial of that existence never seems to have occurred even to the bitterest gentile or Jewish opponents of nascent Christianity." Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 555.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 246.
- ¹¹ Peter Steinfels, "Jesus Died—And Then What Happened?" *New York Times*, April 3, 1988, E9.
- ¹² Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 224.
- ¹³ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 82.
- ¹⁴ McDowell, 82.
- ¹⁵ McDowell, 81, 82.
- ¹⁶ Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*(Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 49.
- ¹⁷ Morison, 9.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1981), 10.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor*, 66.
- ²⁰ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 130.
- ²¹ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 249.
- ²² Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*(Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 243.
- ²³ Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 97, quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Knowing the Truth about the Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House), 22.
- ²⁴ Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1967), 44.
- ²⁵ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 172.
- ²⁶ Charles Colson, "The Paradox of Power," *Power to Change*, www.powertochange.ie/changed/index_Leaders.
- ²⁷ Morison, 104.
- ²⁸ Quoted in Strobel, 238.
- ²⁹ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 274.
- ³⁰ Quoted in *Jesus Under Fire*, 154.
- ³¹ Habermas, 85.
- ³² Habermas, 87.
- ³³ Morison, 115.
- ³⁴ Quoted in McDowell, 249.
- ³⁵ Durant, 652.
- ³⁶ Quoted in McDowell, 9.