

## JESUS CHRIST—DEAD OR ALIVE?

Kyle Butt, M.A.

In all likelihood, most of you reading this month's issue of *Reason and Revelation* already have made up your minds about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Truth be told, the majority of you probably believe that Jesus Christ lived on this Earth for approximately 33 years, died at the hand of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, was buried in a new tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, and miraculously defeated death by His resurrection three days later.

But there may be some of you who have lingering doubts about the truthfulness of the resurrection of Christ. In fact, many people have much more than lingering doubts; they already have made up their minds that the story of the resurrection happened too long ago, was witnessed by too few people, has not been proven scientifically, and thus should be discarded as an unreliable legend.

Regardless of which position best describes your view of Christ's resurrection, what we all must do is check our prejudice at the door and openly and honestly examine the historical facts attending the resurrection.

### FACT—JESUS CHRIST LIVED

Determining whether Jesus Christ actually lived is something that must be established before one can begin to discuss His resurrection. If it cannot be proved beyond reasonable doubt that He did walk this Earth, then any discussion about whether or not He arose from the dead digresses quickly into an exercise in yarn stringing based on little more than guesswork and human imagination. Fortunately, the fact that Jesus lived is practically universally accepted. A host of hostile witnesses testified of His life, and the

New Testament documents in intricate detail His existence. [Even if one does not accept the New Testament as inspired of God, he or she cannot deny that its books contain historical information regarding a person by the name of Jesus Christ Who really did live in the first century A.D.] The honest historian is forced to admit that documentation for the existence, and life, of Jesus runs deep and wide (for an in-depth study on the historicity of Christ, see Butt, 2000). Thus, knowing that Jesus Christ existed allows us to move farther into the subject of His resurrection.

### FACT—JESUS CHRIST DIED

For most people, coming to the conclusion that Jesus died is not difficult, due to either of two reasons. First, the Bible believer accepts the fact that Jesus died because several different biblical writers confirm it. Second, the unbeliever accepts the idea, based not upon biblical evidence, but rather on the idea that the natural order of things which he has experienced in this life is for a person to live and eventually die. Once evidence sufficient to prove Christ's existence in history has been established, the naturalist/empiricist has no trouble accepting His death. However, in order to provide such people with a few more inches of common ground on this matter, it would be good to note that several secular writers substantiated the fact that **Jesus Christ did die**. Tacitus, the ancient Roman historian writing in approximately A.D. 115, documented Christ's physical demise when he wrote concerning the Christians that "their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilatus" (1952, 15.44).

In addition to Roman sources, early Jewish rabbis whose opinions are recorded in the Talmud acknowledged the death of Jesus. According to the earlier rabbis,

Jesus of Nazareth was a transgressor in Israel who practised magic, scorned the words of the wise, led the people astray, and said that he had not come to destroy the law but to add to it. **He was hanged** on Passover Eve for heresy and misleading the people (Bruce, 1953, p. 102, emp. added).

Likewise, Jewish historian Josephus wrote:

[T]here arose about this time Jesus, a wise man.... And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross on his impeachment by the chief men among us, those who had loved him at first did not cease (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.3).

The fact that Pilate condemned Christ to the cross is an undisputed historical fact. As archaeologist Edwin Yamauchi stated:

Even if we did not have the New Testament or Christian writings, we would be able to conclude from such non-Christian writings such as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger that...he [Jesus—KB] was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius (1995, p. 222).

It is at this point in our study that some would suggest that Hugh Schonfield's infamous "Swoon Theory" should be considered. Schonfield (1965) postulated that Christ did not die on the cross; rather, He merely fainted or "swooned." Later, after being laid on a cold slab in the dark tomb, He revived and exited His rock-hewn grave. Such a theory, however, fails to take into account the hei-

# CONTENTS

## ARTICLES

- Jesus Christ—Dead or Alive?*  
Kyle Butt . . . . . 9

## DEPARTMENTS

- Speaking Schedules . . . . . 13

### Note from the Editor

- Announcing: Five New Titles in  
the Apologetics Press Tract Series*  
Bert Thompson . . . . . 16

## RESOURCES

- The “Twelve”?* . . . . . 5-R  
Questions and Answers . . . . . 8-R  
In the News . . . . . 8-R

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### Editor:

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.\*  
(\*Microbiology, Texas A&M University)

### Associate Editor:

Brad Harrub, Ph.D.\*  
(\*Neurobiology, University of Tennessee)

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### Mailing Address:

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nous nature of the scourging (sometimes referred to as an “intermediate death”) that Christ had endured at the hand of Roman lictors, or the finely honed skills of those Roman soldiers whose job it was to inflict such gruesome punishment prior to a prisoner’s actual crucifixion. To press the point, in the March 1986 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, William Edwards and his coauthors penned an article, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” that employed modern medical insight to provide an exhaustive description of Jesus’ death (256: 1455-1463). Sixteen years later, Brad Harrub and Bert Thompson coauthored an updated review (“An Examination of the Medical Evidence for the Physical Death of Jesus Christ”) of the extensive scientific evidence surrounding Christ’s physical death (2002). After reading such in-depth, medically based descriptions of the horrors to which Christ was exposed, and the condition of His ravaged body, the Swoon Theory quickly fades into oblivion (where it rightly belongs). Jesus died. Upon this, we all most certainly can agree.

### FACT—THE TOMB OF CHRIST WAS EMPTY

Around the year A.D. 165, Justin Martyr penned his *Dialogue with Trypho*. At the beginning of chapter 108 of this work, he recorded a letter that the Jewish community had been circulating concerning the empty tomb of Christ:

A godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilaean deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.

Somewhere around the sixth century, another caustic treatise written to defame Christ circulated among the Jewish community. In this narrative, known as *Toledoth Yesu*, Jesus was described as the illegitimate son of a soldier named Joseph Pandera. He also was labeled as a disrespectful deceiver who led many away from the truth. Near the end of the treatise, under a discussion of His death, the following paragraph can be found:

A diligent search was made and he [Jesus—KB] was not found in the grave where he had been buried. A gardener had taken him from the grave and had brought him into his garden and buried him in the sand over which the waters flowed into the garden.

Upon reading Justin Martyr’s description of one Jewish theory regarding the tomb of Christ, and another premise from *Toledoth Yesu*, it becomes clear that a single common thread unites them both—the tomb of Christ had no body in it!

All parties involved recognized the fact that Christ’s tomb laid empty on the third day. Feeling compelled to give reasons for this unexpected vacancy, Jewish authorities apparently concocted several different theories to explain the body’s disappearance. The most commonly accepted one seems to be that the disciples of Jesus stole His body away by night while the guards slept (Matthew 28:13). Yet, how could the soldiers identify the thieves if they had been asleep? And why were the sentinels not punished by death for sleeping on the job and thereby losing their charge (cf. Acts 12:6-19)? And an even more pressing question comes to mind—why did the soldiers need to explain anything if a body was still in the tomb?

When Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost, after the resurrection of Christ, the crux of his sermon rested on the facts that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. In order to silence Peter, and stop a mass conversion, the Jewish leaders needed simply to produce the body of Christ. Why did not the Jewish leaders take the short walk to the garden and produce the body? Simply because they could not; the tomb was empty—a fact the Jews recognized and tried to explain away. The apostles knew it, and preached it boldly in the city of Jerusalem. And thousands of inhabitants of Jerusalem knew it and converted to Christianity. John Warwick Montgomery accurately assessed the matter when he wrote:

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 (1964, p. 78).

The tomb of Jesus was empty, and that is a fact.

### FACT—THE APOSTLES PREACHED THAT JESUS PHYSICALLY ROSE FROM THE DEAD

Regardless of whether or not one believes that Christ rose from the dead, one thing that cannot be denied is the fact His apostles preached that they saw Jesus after He physically rose from the dead. The New Testament book of Acts stresses this issue almost to the point of redundancy. Acts 1:22, as one example, finds Peter and the other

apostles choosing an apostle who was to “become a witness” of the resurrection of Christ. Then, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter insisted in his sermon to the multitude that had assembled to hear him that “God raised up” Jesus and thus loosed Him from the pangs of death (Acts 2:24). And to make sure that his audience understood that it was a **physical** resurrection, Peter stated specifically that Jesus’ “flesh did not see corruption” (Acts 2:31). His point was clear: Jesus **had** been physically raised from the dead and the apostles **had** witnessed the resurrected Christ. [Other passages which document that the central theme of the apostles’ preaching was the bodily resurrection of Christ include: Acts 3:15; 3:26; 4:2,10,33; and 5:30.] Furthermore, the entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 (especially verse 14) verifies that the preaching of the apostle Paul centered on the resurrection.

Even Joseph McCabe, one of the early twentieth century’s most outspoken infidels, remarked: “Paul was absolutely convinced of the resurrection; and this proves that it was widely believed not many years after the death of Jesus” (1993, p. 24). The skeptical modernist Shirley Jackson Case of the University of Chicago was forced to concede: “The testimony of Paul alone is sufficient to convince us, beyond any reasonable doubt, that this was the commonly accepted opinion in his day—an opinion at that time supported by the highest authority imaginable, the eye-witnesses themselves” (1909, pp. 171-172). C.S. Lewis correctly stated: “In the earliest days of Christianity an ‘apostle’ was first and foremost a man who claimed to be an eyewitness of the Resurrection” (1975, p. 188).

It has been suggested by some critics that the apostles and other witnesses did not actually see Christ, but merely hallucinated. However, Gary Habermas had this to say about such a fanciful idea:

[H]allucinations are comparably rare. They’re usually caused by drugs or bodily deprivation. Chances are, you don’t know anybody who’s ever had a hallucination not caused by one of those two things. Yet we’re supposed to believe that over a course of many weeks, people from all sorts of backgrounds, all kinds of temperaments, in various places, all experienced hallucinations? That strains the hypothesis quite a bit, doesn’t it? (as quoted in Strobel, 1998, p. 239).

Indeed, the hallucination theory is a feeble attempt to undermine the fact that the apostles (and other first-century eyewitnesses of a risen Christ) preached the message that they really **had** seen a resurrected Jesus.

The apostles preached that Christ physically rose, and those who heard the apostles verified that they preached the resurrection. Apart from what a person believes about the resurrection of Christ, he or she cannot deny (legitimately) the fact that the apostles traveled far and wide to preach one central message—“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

#### FACT—THE APOSTLES SUFFERED AND DIED BECAUSE OF THEIR TEACHINGS ABOUT THE RESURRECTION

As the list of facts continues, one that must be enumerated is the verified historical fact that the majority of the apostles suffered cruel, tortuous deaths because they preached that Christ rose from the dead. Documenting these persecutions is no difficult task. *Fox’s Book of Martyrs* relates that Paul was beheaded, Peter was crucified (probably upside down), Thomas was thrust through with a spear, Matthew was slain with a halberd, Matthias was stoned and beheaded, Andrew was crucified, and the list proceeds to describe the martyr’s death of every one of the Lord’s faithful apostles except John the brother of James (Forbush, 1954, pp. 2-5).

Additional testimony comes from the early church fathers. Eusebius, who was born about A.D. 260 and died about 340, wrote that Paul was beheaded in Rome and that Peter was crucified there (*Ecclesiastical History*, 2.25). [Exactly how and where Peter was martyred is unclear from history; the fact that he was martyred is not.] Clement of Rome (who died about A.D. 100), in chapter five of his *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, also mentioned the martyrs’ deaths of Peter and Paul. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, documented the death of James when he stated: “Now about that time Herod the king put forth his hand to afflict certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword” (Acts 12:1-2). The apostle Paul perhaps summed it up best when he said:

For, I think, God hath set forth us the apostles last of all, as men doomed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, both to angels and men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye have glory, but we have dishonor. Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place; and we toil, working

with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat: we are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things, even until now (1 Corinthians 4:9-13).

Wayne Jackson correctly noted that “while men may die out of religious deception, they do not willingly go to their deaths knowing they are perpetrating a hoax” (1982, 2:34).

Some ill-advised attempts have been made to deny that Christ’s apostles actually died because of their belief in, and preaching of, the resurrection. For example, it has been proposed that the apostles died because they were political instigators or rabble-rousers. However, combining the high moral quality of their teachings with the testimony of the early church fathers, and acknowledging the fact that their primary task was to be witnesses of the resurrection, it is historically inaccurate to imply that the apostles suffered for any reason other than their confession of the resurrection. The fact of the matter is, the apostles died because they refused to stop preaching that they had seen the Lord alive after His death.

#### FACT—THE BIBLE IS THE MOST HISTORICALLY ACCURATE BOOK OF ANTIQUITY

Sir William Ramsay was a one-time unbeliever and world-class archaeologist. His extensive education had ingrained within him the keenest sense of scholarship. But along with that scholarship came a built-in prejudice about the supposed inaccuracy of the Bible (specifically the book of Acts). As Ramsay himself remarked:

[A]bout 1880 to 1890, the book of the Acts was regarded as the weakest part of the New Testament. No one that had any regard for his reputation as a scholar cared to say a word in its defence. The most conservative of theological scholars, as a rule, thought the wisest plan of defence for the New Testament as a whole was to say as little as possible about the Acts (1915, p. 38).

As could be expected of someone who had been trained by such “scholars,” Ramsay held the same view. He eventually abandoned it, however, because he was willing to do what few people of his time dared to do—explore the Bible lands themselves with an archaeologist’s pick in one hand and an open Bible in the other. His self-stated intention was to prove the inaccuracy of Luke’s history as recorded in the book of Acts. But, much to his surprise, the book of Acts passed every test that any historical narrative

could be asked to pass. In fact, after years of literally digging through the evidence in Asia Minor, Ramsay concluded that Luke was an exemplary historian. Lee S. Wheeler, in his classic work, *Famous Infidels Who Found Christ*, recounted Ramsay's life story in great detail (1931, pp. 102-106), and then quoted the famed archaeologist, who ultimately admitted:

The more I have studied the narrative of the Acts, and the more I have learned year after year about Graeco-Roman society and thoughts and fashions, and organization in those provinces, the more I admire and the better I understand. I set out to look for truth on the borderland where Greece and Asia meet, and found it here [in the book of Acts—KB]. You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's, and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment, provided always that the critic knows the subject and does not go beyond the limits of science and of justice (Ramsey, 1915, p. 89).

In his book, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, Ramsay was constrained to admit:

Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy, he is possessed of the true historic sense.... In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest historians (1915, p. 222; cf. also Ramsay's 1908 work, *Luke the Physician*).

Indeed, Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, is widely acknowledged as an extremely accurate historian in his own right—so much so that Ramsay converted to Christianity as a result of his personal examination of the preciseness of Luke's historical record. It is of interest, then, to note what Luke himself wrote concerning Christ's resurrection:

The former treatise I made, O Theophilus, concerning all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day in which he was received up, after that he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom he also showed himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing unto them by the space of forty days, and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God (Acts 1:1-3).

What legitimate reason is there to reject Luke's testimony regarding Christ's resurrection when his testimony on every other subject he presented is so amazingly accurate? As Wayne Jackson noted:

In Acts, Luke mentions thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine Mediterranean islands. He also mentions ninety-five persons, sixty-two of which are not named elsewhere in the New Testament. And his references, where checkable, are always correct. This is truly remarkable, in view of the fact that the political/territorial situation of his day was in a state of almost constant change (1991, 27:2).

Other Bible critics have suggested that Luke misspoke when he designated Sergius Paulus as proconsul of Cyprus (Acts 13:7). Their claim was that Cyprus was governed by a propraetor (also referred to as a consular legate), not a proconsul. Upon further examination, such a charge can be seen to be completely vacuous, as the late Thomas Eaves documented:

As we turn to the writers of history for that period, Dia Cassius (*Roman History*) and Strabo (*The Geography of Strabo*), we learn that there were two periods of Cyprus' history: first, it was an imperial province governed by a propraetor, and later in 22 B.C., it was made a senatorial province governed by a proconsul. Therefore, the historians support Luke in his statement that Cyprus was ruled by a proconsul, for it was between A.D. 40-50 when Paul made his first missionary journey. If we accept secular history as being true, we must also accept biblical history, for they are in agreement (1980, p. 234).

The science of archaeology seems to have outdone itself in verifying the Scriptures. Eminent archaeologist William F. Albright wrote: "There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament tradition" (1953, p. 176). The late Nelson Glueck, himself a pillar within the archaeological community, said:

It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible (1959, p. 31).

Such statements—offered 40+ years ago—are as true today as the day they were made.

Please note, however, that this argument is not being introduced here to claim that the New Testament is inspired (although certain writers have used it in this way quite effectively). Rather, it is inserted at this point in the discussion to illustrate that the books which talk the most about the resurrection

have proven to be accurate when confronted with any verifiable fact. Travel to the Holy Lands and see for yourself if you doubt biblical accuracy. Carry with you an honest, open mind and an open Bible, and I assure you that you will respect the New Testament writers as accurate historians.

## ON SUPPOSED CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE GOSPELS

Maybe the New Testament documents are accurate when they discuss historical and geographical information. But what about all the alleged "contradictions" among the gospel accounts of the resurrection? Charles Templeton, who worked for many years with the Billy Graham Crusade but eventually abandoned his faith, used several pages of his book, *Farewell to God*, to compare and contrast the statements within the four gospels, and then concluded: "The entire resurrection story is not credible" (1996, p. 122). Another well-known preacher-turned-skeptic, Dan Barker, has drawn personal delight in attempting to locate contradictions within the four accounts of the resurrection. In his book, *Losing Faith in Faith*, he filled seven pages with a list of the "contradictions" he believes he has uncovered. Eventually he stated: "Christians, either tell me exactly what happened on Easter Sunday, or let's leave the Jesus myth buried" (1992, p. 181).

It is interesting, is it not, that Barker demands to know "exactly what happened" on a day in ancient history that occurred almost 2,000 years ago? Such a request speaks loudly of the historical legitimacy of the resurrection story, since no other day in ancient history ever has been examined with such scrutiny. Historians today cannot tell "exactly what happened" on July 4, 1776 or April 12, 1861, yet Christians are expected to provide the "exact" details of Christ's resurrection? Fortunately, the gospel writers described "exactly what happened"—without contradiction. Examine the following evidence.

### Head-on Collusion

"Collusion: A secret agreement between two or more parties for a fraudulent, illegal, or deceitful purpose" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2000, p. 363). Even if we never had heard the word collusion before, most of us still would understand the situation it describes. Suppose, for example, that five bank robbers don their nylon-hose masks, rob the city bank, and stash the cash in a nearby cave. Each robber then goes back to his respective house until

the police search is concluded. The first robber hears a knock at his door and, upon opening it, finds a policeman who “just wants to ask him a few questions.” The officer then inquires, “Where were you, and what were you doing, on the night of February 1, 2002?” The thief promptly responds, “I was at Joe Smith’s house watching television with four other friends.” The policeman obtains the four friends’ names and addresses and visits each one of their homes. Every single robber, in turn, tells exactly the same story. Was it true? Absolutely not! But did the stories all sound exactly the same, with seemingly no contradictions? Yes.

Now, let’s examine this principle in light of our discussion of the resurrection. If every single narrative describing the resurrection sounded exactly the same, what do you think would be said about those narratives? “They must have copied each other!” In fact, in other areas of Christ’s life besides the resurrection, when the books of Matthew and Luke give the same information as the book of Mark, critics today claim that Matthew and Luke must have copied Mark because it is thought to be the earliest of the three books. Another raging question in today’s upper echelons of biblical “scholarship” is whether Peter copied Jude in 2 Peter 2:4-17 (or whether Jude copied Peter), because the two segments of scripture sound so similar.

Amazingly, however, the Bible has not left open the prospect of collusion in regard to the resurrection narratives. Indeed, it cannot be denied (legitimately) that the resurrec-

tion accounts have come to us from **independent** sources. In his book, *Science vs. Religion*, Tad S. Clements vigorously denied that there is enough evidence to justify a personal belief in the resurrection. He did acknowledge, however: “There isn’t merely one account of Christ’s resurrection but rather an embarrassing multitude of stories...” (1990, p. 193). While he opined that these stories “disagree in significant respects,” he nevertheless made it clear that the gospels are separate accounts of the same story. Dan Barker admitted the same when he boldly stated: “Since Easter [his wording for the resurrection account—KB] is told by five different writers, it gives one of the best chances to confirm or disconfirm the account” (1992, p. 179). One door that everyone on both sides of the resurrection freely admits has been locked forever by the gospel accounts is the dead-bolted door against collusion.

### Dealing With “Contradictions”

Of course it will not be possible, in these few paragraphs, to deal with every alleged discrepancy between the resurrection accounts. But I would like to set forth some helpful principles that can be used to show that no genuine contradiction between the resurrection narratives has been documented.

#### *Addition Does Not a Contradiction Make*

Suppose a man is telling a story about the time he and his wife went shopping at the mall. The man mentions all the great places in the mall to buy hunting supplies and cin-

namon rolls. But the wife tells about the same shopping trip, yet mentions only the places to buy clothes. Is there a contradiction just because the wife mentioned only clothing stores, while the husband mentioned only cinnamon rolls and hunting supplies? No. They simply are adding to (or supplementing) each other’s story to make it more complete. That same type of thing occurs quite frequently in the resurrection accounts.

As an example, Matthew’s gospel refers to “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” as women who visited the tomb early on the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1). Mark cites Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome as the callers (Mark 16:1). Luke mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “the other women” (Luke 24:10). Yet John writes only about Mary Magdalene visiting Christ’s tomb early on Sunday (John 20:1). Dan Barker cited these different names as discrepancies and/or contradictions on page 182 of his book. But do these different lists truly contradict one another? No, they do not. They are supplementary (with each writer adding names to make the list more complete), but they are not contradictory. If John had said “**only** Mary Magdalene visited the tomb,” or if Matthew had stated that “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the **only** women to visit the tomb,” then there would be a contradiction. As it stands, however, no contradiction occurs. To further illustrate this point, suppose you have 10 one-dollar bills in your pocket. Someone comes up to you and asks, “Do you have a dollar bill in your pocket?” Naturally, you respond in the affirmative. Suppose another person asks, “Do you have five dollars in your pocket?” and again you say that you do. Finally, another person asks, “Do you have ten dollars in your pocket?” and you say yes for the third time. Did you tell the truth every time? Yes, you did. Were all three statements about the contents of your pockets different? Yes, they were. But were any of your answers contradictory? No, they were not. How so? The fact is: **supplementation does not equal contradiction!**

Also fitting into this discussion about supplementation are the angels, men, and young man described in the different resurrection accounts. Two different “problems” arise with the entrance of the “holy heralds” at the empty tomb of Christ. First, exactly how many were there? Second, were they angels or men? Since the former question deals with supplementation, I will discuss it first. The account in Matthew cites “an angel of the Lord who



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**Kyle Butt**

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descended from heaven” and whose “appearance was as lightning, and his raiment white as snow” (28:2-5). Mark’s account presents a slightly different picture of “a young man sitting on the right side, arrayed in a white robe” (16:5). But Luke mentions that “two men stood by them [the women—KB] in dazzling apparel” (24:4). And, finally, John writes about “two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain” (20:12). Are any of these accounts contradictory as to the **number** of men or angels at the tomb? Factoring in the supplementation rule, we must answer in the negative. Although the accounts are different, they are not contradictory as to the number of messengers. Mark does not mention “**only** a young man” and Luke does not say there were “**exactly** two angels.” Was there one messenger at the tomb? Yes, there was. Were there two as well? Yes, there were. **Once again, note that supplementation does not equal contradiction.**

#### *Were They Men or Angels?*

The second question concerning the messengers is their identity: Were they angels or men? Most people who are familiar with the Old Testament have no problem answering this question. Genesis chapters 18 and 19 mention three “men” who came to visit Abraham and Sarah. These men remained for a short time, and then two of them continued on to visit the city of Sodom. The Bible tells us in Genesis 19:1 that these “men” actually were angels. Yet when the men of Sodom came to do violence to these angels, the city dwellers asked: “Where are the **men** that came in to thee this night?” (Genesis 19:5). Throughout the two chapters, the messengers are referred to both as men and as angels with equal accuracy. They looked like, talked like, walked like, and sounded like men. Then could they be referred to (legitimately) as men? Yes. But were they in fact angels? Yes.

To illustrate, suppose you saw a man sit down at a park bench and take off his right shoe. As you watched, he began to pull out an antenna from the toe of the shoe and a number pad from the heel. He proceeded to dial a number and began to talk to someone over his “shoe phone.” If you were going to write down what you had seen, could you accurately say that the man dialed a number on his **shoe**? Yes. Could you also say that he dialed a number on his **phone**? Indeed you could. The shoe had a heel, sole, toe, and everything else germane to a shoe, but in actuality it was much more than a shoe. In the

same way, the messengers at the tomb could be described accurately as men. They had a head perched on two shoulders and held in place by a neck, and they had a body that was complete with arms and legs, etc. So, they were men. But, in truth, they were much more than men because they were angels—holy messengers sent from God’s throne to deliver an announcement to certain people. Taking into account the fact that the Old Testament often uses the term “men” to describe angels who have assumed a human form, it is fairly easy to show that no contradiction exists concerning the identity of the messengers.

#### *Perspective Plays a Part*

What we continue to see in the independent resurrection narratives is not contradiction, but merely a difference in perspective. For instance, suppose a man had a 4x6 index card that was solid red on one side and solid white on the other. Further suppose that he stood in front of a large crowd, asked all the men to close their eyes, showed the women in the audience the red side of the card, and then had them scribble down what they saw. Further suppose that he had all the women close their eyes while he showed the men the white side of the card and had them write down what they saw. One group saw a red card and one group saw a white card. When their answers are compared, at first it would look like they were contradictory, yet they were not. The descriptions appeared contradictory because the two groups had a different perspective, since each had seen a different side of the same card. The perspective phenomenon plays a big part in everyday life. In the same way that no two witnesses ever see a car accident in exactly the same way, none of the witnesses of the resurrected Jesus saw the events from the same angle as the others.

Obviously, I have not dealt with every alleged discrepancy concerning the resurrection accounts. However, I have mentioned some of the major ones, which can be explained quite easily via the principles of supplementation or difference of perspective. An honest study of the remaining “problems” reveals that not a single legitimate contradiction exists between the narratives; they may be different in some aspects, but they are not contradictory. Furthermore, whatever differences do exist prove that no collusion took place and document the diversity that would be expected from different individuals witnessing the same event.

## THE PROBLEM WITH MIRACLES

**B**ased on historical grounds, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has as much or more evidence to verify its credibility than any other event in ancient history. Unfortunately, this evidence often gets tossed aside by those who deny the possibility of miracles. Using a strictly empirical approach, some have decided what is, and what is not, possible in this world, and miracles such as the resurrection do not fall into their “possible” category. Since they never have seen anyone raised from the dead, and since no scientific experiments can be performed on a resurrected body, they then assume that the gospel resurrection accounts must have some natural explanation(s). In an article titled “Why I Don’t Buy the Resurrection,” Richard Carrier embodied the gist of this argument in the following comment:

No amount of argument can convince me to trust a 2000-year-old second-hand report over what I see, myself, directly, here and now, with my own eyes. If I observe facts which entail that I will cease to exist when I die, then the Jesus story can never override that observation, being infinitely weaker as a proof. And yet all the evidence before my senses confirms my mortality.... A 2000-year-old second-hand tale from the backwaters of an illiterate and ignorant land can never overpower these facts. I see no one returning to life after their brain has completely died from lack of oxygen. I have had no conversations with spirits of the dead. What I see is quite the opposite of everything this tall tale claims. How can it command more respect than my own two eyes? It cannot (2000).

Although such an argument at first may appear perfectly plausible, it encounters two insurmountable difficulties. First, there are things that took place in the past that no one alive today has seen or ever will see, yet they still are accepted as fact. The origin of life on this planet provides a good example. Regardless of whether a person believes in creation or evolution, he or she must admit that some things happened in the past that are not still occurring today (or at least that have not been witnessed). To evolutionists, I pose the question: “Have you ever personally used your five senses to establish that a nonliving thing can give rise to a living thing.” Of course, evolutionists must admit that they never have seen such happen, in spite of all the origin-of-life experiments that have been performed over the last fifty years. Does such an admission mean, then, that evolutionists do not

accept the idea that life came from nonliving matter, just because they never have witnessed such an event? Of course not. Instead, we are asked to consider “ancient evidence” (like the geologic column and the fossil record) that evolutionists believe leads to such a conclusion. Still, the hard fact remains that no one alive today (or, for that matter, anyone who ever lived in the past) has witnessed something living come from something non-living.

Following this same line of reasoning, those who believe in creation freely admit that the creation of life on Earth is an event that has not been witnessed by anyone alive today (or, for that matter, anyone else of the past, except possibly Adam). It was a unique, one-time-only event that cannot be duplicated by experiment and cannot currently be detected by the five human senses. As with evolutionists, creationists ask us to examine evidence such as the fossil record, the inherent design of the Universe and its inhabitants, the Law of Cause and Effect, the Law of Biogenesis, etc., which they believe leads to the conclusion that life was created at some point in the past by an intelligent Creator. But, before we drift too far from our primary topic of the resurrection, let me remind you that this brief discussion concerning creation and evolution is inserted only to establish one point—everyone must admit that he or she accepts **some** concepts from the distant past without having personally inspected them using the empirical senses.

Second, it is true that a dead person rising from the dead would be an amazing and, yes, empirically astonishing event. People do not normally rise from the dead in the everyday scheme of things. Yet, was not that the very point the apostles and other witnesses of the resurrection were trying to get people to understand? If Jesus of Nazareth truly rose from the grave never to die again—thereby accomplishing something that no mortal man ever had accomplished—would not that be enough to prove that He was the Son of God as He had claimed (see Mark 14:61-62)? He had predicted that He would be raised from the dead (John 2:19). And He was!

Those first-century onlookers certainly understood that a person rising from the dead was not natural, because even they understood how the laws of nature worked. As C.S. Lewis explained:

But there is one thing often said about our ancestors which we must not say. We must not say “They believed in miracles because they did not know the Laws of Nature.” This is nonsense.

When St. Joseph discovered that his bride was pregnant, he “was minded to put her away.” He knew enough about biology for that.... When the disciples saw Christ walking on the water they were frightened; they would not have been frightened unless they had known the Laws of Nature and known that this was an exception (1970, p. 26).

The apostle Paul underscored this point in Romans 1:4 when he stated that Jesus Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, **by the resurrection from the dead.**” The entire point of Christ’s resurrection was, and is, that it proved His deity. As I stated earlier, most people who deny the resurrection do so because they refuse to believe in a God Who performs miracles, not because the historical evidence is insufficient.

### FACE THE FACTS

**W**hen dealing with the resurrection of Christ, we must concentrate on the facts. Jesus of Nazareth lived. He died. His tomb was empty. The apostles preached that they saw Him after He physically rose from the dead. The apostles suffered and died because they preached, and refused to deny, the resurrection. Their message is preserved in the most accurate document of which ancient history can boast. Independent witnesses addressed the resurrection in their writings—with enough diversity (yet without a single legitimate contradiction) to prove that no collusion took place.

The primary argument against the resurrection, of course, is that during the normal course of events, dead people do not arise from the grave—which was the very point being made by the apostles. But when all the evidence is weighed and it is revealed that the apostles never buckled under torture, the New Testament never crumples under scrutiny, and the secular, historical witnesses refuse to be drowned in a sea of criticism, then it is evident that the resurrection of Jesus Christ demands its rightful place in the annals of history as the most important event this world has ever seen. To quote the immortal words of the Holy Spirit as spoken through the apostle Paul to King Agrippa in the great long ago: “Why is it judged incredible with you, if God doth raise the dead?” (Acts 26:8).

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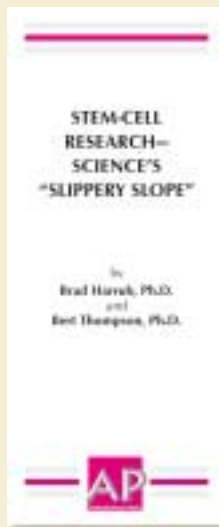
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**Bert Thompson**