

Credibility of Miracles-The Historical Resurrection of Jesus Christ

"Therefore, whether it be I or they, so we preach and so you believed. But if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith. Then we are also false witnesses to God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all."
-1 Corinthians 15:11-19

While there are many differences between Christianity and other religions, I want to point out one key (and perhaps the most important) difference now. Non-Jewish/Christian myths do not fall apart when one removes the supernatural. When David Benioff wrote the screenplay for the movie *Troy* based on Homer's *Illiad*, he did just that. Although the gods were mentioned in the movie, no event took place that was attributed to the divine. Despite the absence of the supernatural, the story did not change in a meaningful manner, it simply became less artistic. Paris still stole Helen from Menelaus. Greek and Trojan heroes still fought and died. Troy still fell after a clever stratagem by the Greeks. Even without the interference of the gods, events still played out on cue.

If we remove the supernatural from the King Arthur legends, then we still see an idealistic but naive boy rise to power through his courage and charisma, build a group of loyal followers who strove to meet his ideals only to fall victim to a resentful and wicked world when their pride got in the way of prudence. President John Kennedy's White House was not called "Camelot" because Kennedy had his own "Excalibur", but because of the dreams Kennedy had for the US echoed the dreams Arthur had for Britain. Christianity certainly is an exciting story, but without the miracles it is nothing but a contradictory, improbable and pointless saga consisting of a bunch of fools, liars and crazy people.

Many atheists implicitly acknowledge this fact, as can be evident in their attempts to explain away "miracles" as unusual historical events that have been embellished upon. Here, I will discuss one key miracle in historical detail: the Resurrection of Christ. This is the miracle that gave credibility to the 1st Century apostles. Apparently, other miracles were not sufficient as the pharisees so easily dismissed them: "If I do not perform my Father's works, do not believe me; but if I perform them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may realize [and understand] that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." (John 10: 37-38) If the Resurrection was not a historical fact, then the apostles would have failed to gain any followers and Christianity would have been stillborn. However, the Bible is so intricately interlocked

within itself that I must provide some background on His historical birth and death before addressing the Resurrection properly.

1) The Historical Birth of Jesus: Our discussion of the credibility of the Resurrection being a historical fact actually starts hundreds of years *before* Jesus was even born! Moses and many prophets predicted a Messiah for at least 1,300 years before the birth of Christ. In Daniel 9:24-27, we see a complex prophecy that requires knowledge of Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10, and has a tie in with Matthew 24:15. While the time line was not exactly historically accurate (nor was it expected to be as such), neither was it far off. Jewish spiritual leaders waited centuries and were actually fairly accurate in predicting the time of His arrival from this revelation (if one assumes Jesus as the anointed one from Daniel 9:26, then off by about 50 years). The Jewish people *were* expecting and preparing for the Messiah during the time of Jesus. The Pharisees integrated themselves so successfully and deeply into the daily lives of the Jewish people *because* of their efforts to purify the people for His coming (problem was, they fell victim to the temptations of the world themselves). While the patient waiting of Simeon and Anna (daughter of Phanuel) in the Temple (Luke 2:25-38) may seem strange to us, to a 1st Century Jew such a story would seem quite appropriate and even expected. When the Gospels speak of the most powerful Jewish priests taking such a keen interest in a carpenter's son from the backwater hamlet of Nazareth, we see just how expectant the Jewish people really were and how eager the priests were to ensure a pretender didn't mislead the people. At least one of the chosen twelve initially felt this way too: "Philip found Nathaniel and told him, 'We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.' But Nathaniel said to him, '*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'" (John 1: 46-47, *italic mine*)

Pretenders to this title did exist. The book of The Acts of the Apostles (5:36-37) mentions two such pretenders (Theudas and Judas the Galilean). Non-biblical historical records verify that these two and many more existed during a span of nearly 200 years: from approximately 100 years before Christ to approximately 100 years after His birth. While we don't know who He was speaking of in particular, Jesus mentions another pretender in John 5:43: "I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me; yet if another comes in his own name, you will accept him."

Not all such pretenders were pure Jewish. Included in this number is King Herod the Great, who killed off a group of Jewish priests to silence them. The priests had concluded Herod could *not* be the Messiah because he was an Edomite. This explains why Herod, even as paranoid and bloodthirsty as he was, would specifically send soldiers to kill a half dozen or so male infants in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18, people today greatly exaggerate how populous Bethlehem was back then, at the time it was very small).

Even if the gentiles had no designs to claim to be the Messiah, the Jewish expectation appears to have at least inspired their imaginations. When the man who would be Tiberius Caesar Augustus (the emperor whose face was on the coin in Mark 12:16-17) was born, Virgil wrote of him in terms that mirrored the Jewish Psalms: "Smile at the birth of the boy, chaste Lucina. In him the iron age shall cease and the golden age shall begin, and the months enter on their mighty march. Under your (Caesar Augustus) guidance, whatever tracks remain of our old

wickedness, once done away, shall free the Earth from never-ceasing fear. He (Augustus) shall receive the life of gods, and he shall...with his father's worth reign over a world at peace." (Virgil, *Fourth Eclogue*, translated by Scott Hahn). When Jesus requested the coin to settle the head tax dispute (Matthew 22:21 and Mark 12:17), there was a subtle reminder here being made as to who the real Messiah was and as to who was a pretender.

In summary, the birth of the Christ was not something that caught the world unaware: the Jews were expecting him for at least 1,300 years and had a good idea of when to expect him for nearly 500 years. If this were not the case, then there would have been no reason to pay attention to Jesus or any of the pretenders. For an event to have been predicted so accurately over a millennium prior to its manifestation may not be conclusive of a miracle, but certainly deserves close attention as to what happens next. Namely, His death.

2) The Historical Death of Jesus:

...called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus...
-Senator Tacitus, *Annals*, book 15, chapter 44; translated by A.J. Church and W. J. Brodribb

The type of death Jesus suffered is found several places in the Old Testament, and before crucifixion was brought to Israel with the Romans in about 63 BC. When the Jews were to mark their houses with the blood of the lamb the night of the Passover (Exodus 12:7), tradition has it that it was done with a hyssop branch and the blood smeared in the shape of a cross. This predates the Romans by about 1300 years. When the men of Israel (except for the house of Levi) lost their priestly duties from the Golden Calf incident (Exodus 32:26-29), all sacrifices had to be made in the Temple of Jerusalem. We also know from the Talmud that such sacrifices were attached to crossed sticks so the men could return to their homes with them for the Passover feast. This tradition would have started at least 1200 years before the Romans entered Israel. The type of death Jesus would have to endure had been prophesied more than a millennia in advance, but the message was hidden.

So far, all I have done is give the background for the historical death of Jesus. But did such a death take place historically? Roman records say yes. A legal document confirms that a Jesus of Nazareth was crucified for treason in a time consistent with Christian teachings. A person of no less political power than Senator Tacitus regarded as the greatest historian of his time, also claims it as a historical fact approximately 75 years after the event (*Annals*, book 15, chapter 44).

Finally, I want to point out how public the death of Jesus was. It was during Passover *and* in Jerusalem. I already mentioned that only sacrifices could be made at the Temple, and the Temple only existed in Jerusalem. Passover is one of the most important events in Jewish history and its rituals are very strict. Every righteous Jew in the Roman Empire would have made great pains to be there, not just the farmers in the local countryside. Jews from Rome would have traveled 1400 miles by foot or by small boat to arrive for this feast, so important was

it to them. The historical death of Jesus could not be denied by the Jewish community as nearly the entire Jewish population would have witnessed it.

We not only have outside proof that Jesus died a historical death, but we can actually see the type of death He was to face by understanding the traditions that surrounded events of the bible. We also have the death as being described as so public, that no righteous Jew could deny it happened.

3) The Historical Resurrection: We have seen that the Jews were not only looking for a Messiah, but, after 1,300 or more years of waiting, believed that the time was right based on the prophesy of Daniel. We have seen that there was nearly a 200 year period where numerous individuals who sought to make a claim on being the Messiah. We have seen, from Roman records, that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical person who died in a manner foretold in a symbolic manner long before crucifixion was used. But we also see some room for interpreting the signs, with Biblical and historical records showing many pretenders taking advantage of that leeway. Why is it that a carpenter's son from the middle of nowhere is the one called Messiah today while the others are relegated to obscure histories if remembered at all?

This is where the miracle of the Resurrection comes in. Without it, there is no logical reason to expect anyone to remember Jesus at all. After all, except for Matthew (a tax collector), His surviving disciples were just as poor as He was, and they certainly didn't have the recognition He did. I propose that what made the story of Jesus believable to early Christians whereas the pretenders fell into disrepute as soon as they died was that none of the pretenders performed the miracle of the Resurrection. Jesus alone was able to prove He was who He said He was because He could do what no other could do and raise Himself from the dead as He foretold. The only thing the Jewish (and later Roman) leaders had to do to destroy Christianity in its infancy would have been to provide the corpse of Jesus. Yet, they were unable to do this simple feat even though it was one of them who buried Jesus! (Mark 15:43-46 and Luke 23:50-53)

There are essentially three possible reasons why the Jews could not provide a body. The first is that Jesus was buried in an unmarked or mass grave. The second is that the location of the body was known, but stolen. The third is that Jesus rose from the dead as he and the prophets foretold.

The care the fastidious Jews took with respect to the dead makes the first first option seem unlikely, especially since followers of Jesus included the socialite Mary of Magdala and the rich Joseph of Arimathea (who was also a member of the Sanhedrin). All four gospels agree that they both looked after the body of Jesus in some manner. Furthermore, Matthew 28:11-15, shows the Jewish leaders themselves admitted they could not provide a body, despite a Roman guard being present. The location of the burial site for Jesus was clearly a historical fact and not disputed by either the early Christians or the opposing Jewish leaders.

The second possibility of the body being stolen would be an incredible story for first century Jews to accept. For a group of scared fishermen and a few despondent women to break

into a tomb guarded by Roman soldiers who were told specifically to watch out for them (Matthew 27:62-66) would be the 1st Century equivalent of modern day action-spy thriller movie, and just as improbable from a realistic perspective. But, to call such an adventure improbable is certainly not the same as to say it is impossible. Why would Jews risk excommunication from the Temple and even death if there was such an obvious doubt about such a theft? We not only have the martyrdom of St. Steven in the Acts of the Apostles or the records of the torture St. Paul went through, but the recordings of the most respected historian in the 1st Century AD (Senator Tacitus) describing how high the stakes were. Unless there was more to the Resurrection than just a missing body.

And there was more than just a missing body, there were witnesses of the Risen Christ. As we read through the ends of the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and even testimony in the Epistles, we see the risen Jesus appeared to many after His well known death. A single event claims that 500 brothers saw the Risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:6, note that by using "brothers" there is a strong suggestion that the number would have been even higher if family members were included). Included in this number is Saul, who was groomed to be the next High Priest and an eager killer of early Christians (various references to Acts and his own letters), who immediately converted.

These are very outrageous claims if false, yet many people testified to it being true despite threats of excommunication and death. And once people began to listen to the Gospel because they believed in the Resurrection, they learned of even more incredible events that, if untrue, would have likewise been easy to refute had it not been for the massive number of witnesses (5,000 men plus their families saw the multiplication of the loaves in John 6:10, and the trial of Jesus was a public spectacle for virtually the entire Jewish community).

There are those who will say that we only have the Christian's point of view on this matter, so it should be suspect. While that is a fair point, one must also consider *why* there is not a surviving testimony against it. This absence is especially interesting considering how violent opponents to the Christians were at the time, how unequal the resources of these opponents had were, and why so many other "messiahs" were quickly forgotten.

One must also keep in mind how contemporary the New Testament was to 1st Century Christians. Twenty four of the twenty seven books of the New Testament were written by those who witnessed the Risen Jesus, and 3 such writers (7 books) were active members of the public ministry of Jesus. The remaining 3 books were written by those who interviewed eye witnesses. As mentioned earlier, there were over 500 hundred apostles (and likely their family members) that swore seeing the Risen Christ. After Steven's martyrdom, they faced excommunication and worse (Acts 7:58-60). This didn't happen "a long, long time ago in a place far, far away", they took place in very specific places that were close by and observed by witnesses who were still alive.

Raymond Mulholland
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