

The Life and Times of Jesus Christ

12

The Resurrection of the Messiah

The fact of Jesus' death is a principal tenet of the New Testament. **1 Peter 3:18** says:

“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God...”

Paul, too, emphasizes the death of Christ “for our sins” as being “of first importance” (**1 Corinthians 15:3**). For this reason, before we can even look at the resurrection of Christ, we must first establish beyond a shadow of doubt that he did, in fact, die.

The Fact of Jesus' Death

In the last lesson, we went into considerable detail regarding the ordeal of Christ's scourging and crucifixion. There was a two-fold reason for this. Not only do we want to appreciate the intense suffering that Christ willingly took upon himself, but we also want to establish a simple fact: There is simply no way that Christ could have survived the ordeal of the cross.

C Truman Davis, a respected physician, explains the type of trauma induced by crucifixion:

“As [Jesus] slowly sags down, with more weight on the nails in the wrists, excruciating pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms to explode in the brain – the nails in the wrists are putting pressure on the median nerves. As He pushes Himself upward to avoid this stretching torment, He places His full weight on the nail through His feet. Again there is the searing agony of the

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▶ **The Resurrection of the Messiah** ◀

nail tearing through the nerves between the metatarsal bones of the feet. At this point, as the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by his arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically, he is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen.”¹

In this brief description, we see a snapshot not just of the agony Christ endured on the cross, but also of the way a crucified person eventually succumbed to death. A victim sometimes died of hypovolemic shock – the terminal loss of blood – but the majority died of suffocation. The positioning of the body was designed to make it difficult and agonizing to breathe. The pectoral and intercostal muscles, which work with the diaphragm to inhale and exhale breath, are impaired by the posture of the victim. Slowly, over a matter of hours or days, the victim would succumb to asphyxia or related heart failure.

William Edwards provides further insight into the death process of crucifixion:

“Adequate exhalation required lifting the body by pushing up on the feet and by flexing the elbows and adducting the shoulders. However, this maneuver would place the entire weight of the body on the tarsals and would produce searing pain. Furthermore, flexion of the elbows would cause rotation of the wrists about the iron nails and cause fiery pain along the damaged median nerves. Lifting of the body would also painfully scrape the scourged back against the rough wooden *stipes*. Muscle cramps and paresthesias of the outstretched and uplifted arms would add to the discomfort. As a result, each respiratory effort would become agonizing and tiring and lead eventually to asphyxia.”²

This process is summarized by another medical expert:

“Due to the shallow breathing, the victim’s lungs begin to collapse in small areas, causing hypoxia (lack of oxygen) and hypercarbia (too much carbon dioxide). A respiratory acidosis, with lack of compensation by the kidneys due to the loss of blood from the numerous beatings, resulted in an increased strain on the heart, which beats faster to compensate. Fluid builds up in the lungs. Under the stress of hypoxia and acidosis the heart eventually fails.”³

In the light of this expert testimony, we can see that crucifixion may be defined as an “excruciating death by slow suffocation, loss of blood, or related heart failure.”

The Evidence of Jesus’ Death

Despite the overwhelming evidence that Jesus did indeed die, various theories have been concocted that attempt to explain away the death of Christ. These include versions of the “swoon theory,” which holds that Jesus simply became unconscious and was mistaken for being dead, and a conspiracy theory which

claims that Jesus was drugged with a powerful narcotic during the incident of **John 19:28-30**. But a reading of the Gospel record allows no possibility that Jesus escaped death on the cross – either by accident or by conspiracy.

Let's assess the following facts to determine whether Jesus could have possibly survived the ordeal of crucifixion:

The Romans were not novices at crucifixion

The Roman army had a long history of experiments with crucifixion, and the execution squad in charge of Jesus would have overseen many crucifixions before. They knew, at least second hand, the agonies of crucifixion and had previously seen the dead hang for hours on crosses. As Michael Green comments:

“They knew a dead man when they saw one – and their commanding officer had heard the condemned man's death cry himself and certified the death to the governor, Pontius Pilate.”⁴

Because of the pressure of the upcoming Sabbath, the Romans went around the victims to break their legs in order to hasten death. But **John 19:33** tells us that when they came to Jesus “they found he was already dead.” This one statement alone should be sufficient to confirm the actual death of Jesus of Nazareth. If those soldiers were brought into a modern court of law, their testimony would be proof enough of the veracity of Christ's death.

The soldiers were under severe penalty regulations

The soldiers also had every incentive to make sure that Jesus was indeed dead. If a crucified man somehow escaped death on the cross, the execution squad itself would be executed. This was common practice in Roman times, as illustrated in **Acts 12:18-19**. There is simply no way that the execution squad would have allowed Jesus to be taken down off the cross without first ensuring that he was truly dead. Like Albert Roper, we can say:

“Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers, crucified according to the laws of Rome, which the soldiers had to the very last degree faithfully carried out.”⁵

Jesus hung motionless on the cross for some time

After his last great cry, Jesus would have sagged on the cross. In this position, even if he had somehow simply become unconscious, he would have quickly asphyxiated. **Mark 15:42-45** tells us that Jesus was not taken down from the cross until three things had happened:

- Joseph of Arimathea had gone to Pilate with a request for the body of Jesus.
- Pilate, amazed at the speed at which Jesus had died, summoned the centurion in charge of Christ's crucifixion.
- Upon the report from the centurion that Jesus had indeed died, Pilate signs the papers for the release of the body of Jesus to Joseph's care.

All this would have taken a little more than an hour. During this period, Christ's continued motionlessness is strong evidence that he had indeed died.

A soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear

The soldiers were already convinced that Jesus was dead (otherwise they would have gone ahead and broken his legs anyway). But to ensure that he was dead, one of the soldiers took a spear and ran it between his ribs – through his lungs and into his heart. John, an eye-witness to this event, records what happened in **John 19:34-35**:

“...one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.”

Both John and the soldiers recognized this “sudden flow of blood and water” as a post-mortem effect and John presents it as an incontrovertible proof that Jesus was indeed already dead. So what is the significance of this blood and water?

The fact that blood and water flow separately but copiously from the wound is strong evidence that the spear pierced the pericardium (the sac that surrounds the heart) and the heart itself. As one prestigious medical journal explains:

“Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to His side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that 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. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.”⁶

The Gospel record provides every indication that Christ truly died upon the cross. And how did he die? The medical evidence, as presented in **John 19:34**, “demonstrates that the death of Christ was due, not to physical exhaustion, or to the pains of crucifixion, but to the agony of mind producing rupture of the heart.”⁷

According Samuel Houghton, a respected physiologist of the nineteenth century, five distinct cases may be observed when the side is pierced post-mortem with a knife:

- **No flow** of any kind follows the wound, except the slight trickling of blood (this is what usually occurs).
- **A copious flow of blood only** follows the wound (this is found in cases of death by drowning and by strychnia, and would also be the case in the normal death of a crucified person).
- **A flow of water only**, succeeded by a few drops of blood, follows the wound (this is found in cases of death from pleurisy, pericarditis and rupture of the heart).
- **A copious flow of water, succeeded by a copious flow of blood**, follows the wound (this may arise from a crucified person who had immediately previous to crucifixion suffered from pleuritic effusion).
- **A copious flow of blood, succeeded by a copious flow of water**, follows the wound (this case would occur in a crucified person who dies from a rupture of the heart).

In the light of this, Jesus probably died of an “ventricular septal rupture, caused by an acute myocardial infarction” – or, in layman’s terms, “a ruptured heart.” The agony of the cross, compounded by the weight of mankind’s total sin and judgment, literally broke the heart of Jesus.

The Breaking of the Legs

Read John 19:31-36

The duration of crucifixion differed from victim to victim, but it was seldom less than a day and a half. As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains:

“The length of this agony [before death] was wholly determined by the constitution of the victim, but death rarely ensued before thirty-six hours had elapsed.”⁸

Ordinarily, Jesus and his fellow victims may have been expected to hang on the cross for another 24-36 hours, but because the next day was a “special Sabbath” (the first day of the weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread), the Sanhedrin petitioned Pilate to have the victims’ legs broken so that they might die well before sunset, enabling the Jews to remove their bodies from the crosses before the beginning of the holy day.

Crucifraction – the practice of breaking the legs of a crucified man – was commonly practiced in Roman times and was used when it was desirable to hasten the victim’s death. The breaking of the legs prevented the victim from rising on his feet in order to take a full breath, resulting in rapid suffocation, often in just a few minutes. As the *NIV Commentary* explains:

“When there was reason to hasten death, the execution squad would smash the victim’s legs. Death followed almost immediately, either from shock or from collapse that cut off breath.”⁹

The soldiers, however, did not bother to break Jesus’ legs because they noted he was *already* dead. John sees great spiritual significance in the fact that the soldiers did not break Christ’s legs, for it is the fulfilment of both Old Testament prophecy (**Psalm 34:20**) and the Passover type (**Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:11-12**). But it also shows that Jesus did not die as the victim of man’s caprice, but rather voluntarily laid down his life to suffer the judgment of both man and God.

The Preparations for Burial

The burial of Christ was an essential part of God’s redemptive process. As Paul declares, reciting one of the most ancient Christian creeds:

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried...”

After describing Christ’s identification with us in suffering, **Isaiah 53:9** tells us:

“He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.”

Read John 19:38-42

Everything in the Gospel record is in complete accord with what is historically known of first-century Jewish burial practices. Alfred Edersheim explains:

“Not only the rich, but even those moderately well-to-do, had tombs of their own, which probably were acquired and prepared long before they were needed, and treated and inherited as private and personal property. In such caves, or rock-hewn tombs, the bodies were laid, having been anointed with many spices, with myrtle [and] aloes...The body was dressed and, at a later period, wrapped, if possible, in the worn cloths in which originally a Roll of the Law had been held.”¹⁰

Merrill Tenney elaborates on these customs:

“In preparing a body for burial according to Jewish custom, it was usually washed and straightened, and then bandaged tightly from the armpits to the ankles in strips of linen about a foot wide. Aromatic spices, often of a gummy consistency, were placed between the wrappings or folds. They served partially as a preservative and partially as a cement to glue the cloth wrappings into a solid covering.”¹¹

From **Matthew 27:57-61** we discover that the tomb Jesus was laid in was a new, unused tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, set in a garden near the crucifixion site. The tomb was in all likelihood not an natural cave, but an artificial excavation in the rock – probably the very rock of Golgotha itself. Unlike our tombs, it was not cut vertically, but horizontally into the face of the rock. Inside the tomb were probably several shelves cut into the rock, where the dead bodies could be laid, but **Matthew 27:60** makes it clear that the tomb had never been used before, so all the shelves would have been empty.

Of Christ’s burial, Wilbur Smith makes this observation:

“We know more about the burial of the Lord Jesus than we know of the burial of any single character in all of ancient history...We know who took His body from the cross; we know something of the wrapping of the body in spices, and burial clothes; we know the very tomb in which this body was placed, the name of the man who owned it, Joseph, of a town known as Arimathea. We know even where this tomb was located, in a garden nigh to the place where He was crucified, outside the city walls. We have four records of this burial of our Lord, all of them in amazing agreement...”¹²

Every indication from the Gospel records is that the burial of Christ was a hasty one, conducted in the knowledge that the Sabbath was fast approaching. Jewish burials required four important steps before interment:

- The body is washed thoroughly*
- The body is anointed with myrrh, aloes and other fragrant spices
- The body is clothed in *tachrichim* – a complete set of burial clothes†
- The body is wrapped tightly in burial strips, using the spices as an adhesive

* In the case of someone killed where there was bloodloss (as in combat or crucifixion), it was Jewish tradition *not* to wash the body, because it was believed that the blood was part of the body and should remain untouched until resurrection day.

† In the case of someone who died naked, Jewish tradition required that the body be buried naked.

As Byron McCane explains:

“Jewish funerals almost always took place the same day as the death. The eyes of the deceased were closed, the corpse was washed with perfumes and ointments, its bodily orifices were stopped, and strips of cloth were wrapped tightly around the body – binding the jaw closed, fixing arms to the sides, and tying the feet together. Once prepared, the corpse was placed on a bier or in a coffin and carried out of town in a procession to the family tomb, usually a small rock-cut cave entered through a narrow opening that could be covered with a stone.”¹³

The burial of Jesus, however, had some marked differences. Although **John 19:40** tells us that Christ’s burial “was in accordance with Jewish burial customs,” it is also obvious that these burial rites were not completed, otherwise there would have been no need for the women to return on the following Sunday to complete the burial preparations. There was no time to properly anoint and wrap the body, and this explains why Jesus described Mary’s anointing of his body in **Mark 14:8** as being done “beforehand to prepare for my burial.”

The Rolling of the Stone

All four Gospel accounts also agree that a large stone was rolled in front of the entrance to Jesus’ tomb. G M Mackie explains:

“The opening to the central chamber was guarded by a large and heavy disk of rock which could roll along a groove slightly depressed at the center, in front of the tomb entrance.”¹⁴

This stone was often called the “great stone” (**Matthew 27:60**) or, in Hebrew, the *Golel*. It was generally of such a size that it required several men to move it, since it may weigh from one to three tons. The reason for this large stone was to protect the body against intruders – both animal and human.

The Placing of the Guard

Read Matthew 27:62-66

Read Matthew 28:2-4,11-15

Many critics have questioned the historicity of this account. It smacks too much of a deliberate “apologetic” – an attempt to answer an objection that had arisen at the time of the writing of this Gospel account. We can see this in Matthew’s quite transparent statement in **28:15**:

“And this story [that the disciples stole the body of Jesus] has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.”

But the basic logic behind the placing of the guard is not unreasonable. As John Wenham points out regarding the arrest of Jesus:

“It is a great mistake to underestimate the anxiety which the following of Jesus caused the authorities. On the one hand was its sheer size...On the other

hand was its Galilean complexion. Galilee was a hotbed of Messianic expectation and zealot unrest...There had been a number of disquieting occurrences: the insurrection of Barabbas had been recently quelled; Pilate had been involved in an ugly incident, in which he had mingled the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices; only a few days previously Jesus had made a royal entry into the capital. All this means that Pilate would be inclined to listen seriously to suggestions by the chief priests on matters of security. Thus it seems right to believe that a distinguished deputation had waited on the governor in order to procure a strong reserve of soldiers for the arrest.”¹⁵

And this nervousness could well have extended beyond the death of Jesus. They were aware of what Jesus had said in **Matthew 12:39-40**:

“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Fearing exactly the kind of staged “resurrection” of which they eventually accused the disciples, the Sanhedrin approached Pilate to request a guard to avoid this kind of “deception.”* But what of the historical character of this account? To the skeptic, it certainly sounds like something concocted to prove a point.

“The story of the setting of the guard is one of the most extraordinary pieces of Christian apologetic ever written...it bristles with improbabilities at every point: the sabbath visit to the governor, the great earthquake, the flashing angel rolling back the stone, the reporting to the chief priests, the bribe to the soldiers to tell the tale that they were asleep on duty – everything invites, not belief, but incredulity. And how stupid, having introduced the useful apologetic idea of a closely guarded tomb, to give a handle to the opposition by even hinting that the guards did not do their job! It is a worthless piece of Christian apologetic at whatever date it was written, *unless it happens to be undeniably true.*”¹⁵

There are only two possibilities:

- The story of the setting of the guard is a concoction, for the purpose of answering the vague charge that “the disciples stole the body.” If this is the case, it is very badly concocted and its flaws would be obvious to anyone. If **Matthew 27:62-28:15** is meant to be help the Christian message, it poorly suits this purpose.
- That is, of course, unless it actually happened and the basic facts could not be denied by the enemies of the Church. If **Matthew 27:62-28:15** was written as a genuine response to allegations by Jewish detractors, it is then simply a reporting of the facts known by both believers and unbelievers

* It is the irony of Matthew that the Sanhedrin heeded Jesus’ words about “rising from the dead” more than the disciples themselves, but this was because Jesus’ enemies were looking for a deception, whereas Jesus’ disciples were looking for a glorification that they did not realize would be preceded by a humiliation.

alike – that a delegation from the Sanhedrin did in fact approach Pilate, that a guard was indeed posted, and that these guards claimed that the disciples had stolen the body while they were asleep. The only thing that Matthew is adding, then, is that these guards were bribed to tell a lie.

There are three words that Matthew uses in his account that point strongly to this being a direct repetition of the story told by those opposed to the Gospel. These three words are “while we slept” (**Matthew 28:13**, KJV). Frank Morrison asks:

“What are these three words doing in a pro-Christian document, circulating widely throughout Palestine, if they do not represent something very real and actual in the original charge? Let us grant that the story of a guard at the tomb had a certain apologetic value to the early Christians, since it made it more difficult for unbiased persons to believe in the physical abduction of the body. But the essence of this defence was that the guards should keep awake. A guard which slept was of no use to the Christians, and was futile and dangerous as an apologetic. Why, then, did this strange reference to the sleeping of the guard become embedded, not only in the wording of the charge itself, but also in the Christian version of what happened?”¹⁶

The answer is, of course, that the story of the sleeping guards was already in currency. Matthew says that the story of the stolen body “has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.” If this is the case, we should give Matthew the benefit of the doubt and allow that there was indeed a posting of a guard at the tomb, for the evidence is strong that he is not concocting such a story, but rather providing insight into what really happened on that fateful morning.

But even allowing for the historicity of **Matthew 27:62-66**, one question remains unanswered. What was the composition of the guard? There are three possibilities:

The guard was made up of Roman soldiers

This is the most obvious conclusion when the passage itself is studied. The terms Matthew uses refer exclusively to Roman soldiers, not the Temple Guard, who were not true soldiers but rather a kind of priestly police. This is also in line with the fact that the tomb was sealed with what could only have been the official Roman seal of the Judaeian governor.

But if they were indeed Roman soldiers, why did they report back to Caiaphas instead of Pilate? And how could Caiaphas bribe them and say: “If news of this reaches the ear of the governor, I will set it right for you”? *Of course* news would reach the ear of the governor. They had been dispatched under the orders of the governor himself. To this, Josh McDowell answers:

“If the priests had wanted to post temple police at the tomb, they would not have needed the orders of the governor to do it. As it happened, the Roman soldiers came to the chief priests for protection, because they knew that they would have influence over Pilate and would keep them from being executed: ‘We will win him [the governor, Pilate] over and keep you out of trouble’ (**Matthew 28:14**).”¹⁷

The guard was drawn from the Temple Guard

The other alternative is that the guard was completely comprised of the temple police. When Pilate replied to the Sanhedrin's request with, "You have a guard," this may have been a refusal. "Why ask me?" Pilate is saying. "You have your own guard. Use them!"

If this is the case, this would more easily explain the actions of the guards in reporting to the Sanhedrin and also in Caiaphas' response that he would look after the matter, should news reach the governor's ears.

The guard included both Roman soldiers and Temple Guard

This is not out of the question, for we have a precedent for this with the arrest of Jesus, which appears to have included both Jewish and Roman contingents. So let's assume that this is the case. The Sanhedrin requested and received a squad of Roman soldiers to guard the tomb, and this squad was reinforced by a squad of Temple Guard. The makeup of this mixed guard was probably similar to that of the arresting party on 14 Nissan.

A cord was stretched across the *golel* stone and a Roman wax seal placed on either end, so that any disturbance of the stone would break the seal. This seal would have had the official stamp of Pilate himself and everyone knew that to break such a seal would incur the immediate wrath of Rome. As Alfred Roper points out:

"The Roman seal affixed to the stone before Joseph's tomb was far more sacred to [the Roman soldiers] than all the philosophy of Israel or the sanctity of her ancient creed. Soldiers cold-blooded enough to gamble over a dying victim's cloak are not the kind of men to be hoodwinked by timid Galileans or to jeopardize their Roman necks by sleeping on their post."¹⁸

The fact of the matter is that **Matthew 28:11-15** has all the characteristics, not of poor Christian apologetic, but of poor Jewish apologetic. The claim that "the disciples stole the body" was made by the enemies of Christ. It has the hallmarks of an explanation made in haste and in desperation – an explanation that, Matthew points out, cannot be supported when examined closely.

The Events of Easter Morning

Let's now look at the actual events on the Sunday following Christ's interment in the tomb. Many critics have pointed to the apparent discrepancies of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Christ as proof that they are not genuine eyewitness accounts. Here are some of the observations:

- In **Matthew**, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" arrive at the tomb at dawn. In **Mark**, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are on their way to the tomb "just after sunrise." In **Luke**, "the women" (which include Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joanna)

go to the tomb “very early in the morning.” In **John**, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb “while it was still dark.”

- In **Matthew**, there is a violent earthquake, and an angel rolls back the stone from the tomb. This angel, apparently sitting on the stone he has rolled away, then speaks to the women and tells them of the resurrected Christ. In **Mark**, the women see “a young man dressed in a white robe” sitting inside the tomb, and he speaks to them of the risen Christ. In **Luke**, two “men in clothes that gleamed like lightning” appear beside the women as they stand inside the tomb. In **John**, Mary Magdalene sees two angels sitting inside the tomb only after running to tell the disciples that the body was missing.
- In **Matthew**, the women rush from the tomb in great fear and joy, run to tell the disciples and meet Jesus on the way. In **Mark**, the women run out of the tomb in fear and don’t tell anyone. In **Luke**, the women report the story to the disciples, who are disbelieving. In **John**, only Mary Magdalene rushes back to report the missing body to the disciples. Peter and John then run to see for themselves, and it is only after this that Mary Magdalene meets the risen Jesus.

Before we look at a reconciliation of these accounts, however, it must be stressed that the points of agreement far outweigh the apparent discrepancies. If anything, these four accounts show that there is little in the way of contrived collaboration between the authors. They are drawing on their own witness accounts, each of which differ slightly, as any four independent witnesses should when describing the same incident. The only question that remains is this: can these four accounts be satisfactorily harmonized to show that *all four* are faithfully describing exactly the same events? As William Craig points out:

“The differences between the empty tomb narratives suggest that we have multiple, independent attestation of the empty tomb story. Sometimes people say, ‘Matthew and Luke just plagiarized from Mark,’ but when you look at the narratives closely, you see divergences that suggest that even if Matthew and Luke did know Mark’s account, nevertheless they also had separate, independent sources for the empty tomb story.”¹⁹

It is important for us to understand is that all the apparent discrepancies are in the secondary details – things such as the number of angels, or the precise wording of the angels to the women. The core of the story remains unchanged, leading even the usually skeptical historian Michael Grant to state:

“True, the discovery of the empty tomb is differently described by the various gospels, but if we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, then the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was, indeed, found empty.”²⁰

There are many examples in ancient history where two or more sources contradict one another. We have two independent narratives, for example, of Hannibal crossing the Alps to attack Rome, yet these two accounts are contradictory and

impossible to reconcile. No historian, however, doubts the fact that Hannibal did, in fact, mount such a campaign. The fact that there are discrepancies in the secondary details does not undermine the historicity of Hannibal crossing the Alps.

From a *historical* standpoint, a full reconciliation is not required to establish the historicity of the empty tomb. But from the Christian standpoint, since we believe that the Gospel accounts are both accurate and without error, such a reconciliation is important. For this reason, we will present one possible harmonization of the four accounts in the supplementary lesson, **SP112-12**.

But let's take a brief look at some of the supposed contradictions, and determine whether there is any basis for a claim that these discrepancies undermine the historicity of the Gospel record.

The time of the women's visit

The timing of the women's visit to the tomb can be easily reconciled. Each of the writers uses a different expression to describe the same time of the day. **Matthew** calls it "at dawn." **Mark** refers to it as "very early...just after sunrise." **Luke** says it was "very early in the morning." And **John** describes it as "early...while it was still dark." Even as they stand, these details are close enough to be acceptable as valid testimony in any modern courtroom. But further harmonization is still easily possible. What some forget is that time would have passed from when the women left their homes and when they arrived at the tomb itself. And so, while it may have been "still dark" when they left, it could easily have been "just after sunrise" by the time they arrived.

The identity of the women

But what about the number and identity of the women themselves? According to **Matthew**, only two women went to the tomb – Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." Yet **Mark** tells us that three women went to the tomb – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. **Luke** concurs that it was three women, but identifies them as in **24:10** as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James. **John** stands apart from the other three accounts in recording that Mary Magdalene went alone to the tomb.

It is in **Luke** that we see the clue as to exactly how many women were present at the tomb on the morning of the Resurrection. First of all, in **Luke 24:1**, the women are not identified at all. **Luke** simply tells us that "the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb." Luke did not need to introduce the women at this point, because he had previously introduced them:

- **Luke 23:49** – "But all those who knew him, including the women *who had followed him from Galilee*, stood at a distance, watching these things."
- **Luke 23:55** – "The women *who had come with Jesus from Galilee* followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it."

So who were these women "who had followed him from Galilee"? Luke had first introduced them in **8:2**:

“...some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.”

Although there were a number of female followers of Jesus, Luke only identifies three of them in [Luke 8:2](#) – Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. But although the others are not mentioned, we know that one of them was Salome (the wife of Zebedee) and “the other Mary” (whom Mark calls “Mary the mother of James [the Lesser]”). Thus even though Luke only tells us of three specific women in [Luke 24:10](#), he does say that there were “others with them” – which probably would have included Susanna, Salome and others. Thus, like any good writer, Luke is employing selectivity in his account. He does not clutter the narrative with long lists of participants, but simply selects the names of the key players in the story.

And this is exactly what the other writers are doing. Just because Matthew only tells us of two women – Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” – going to the tomb, this doesn’t mean there weren’t others with them. Matthew isn’t employing *exclusivity* (by stating that there were two women and *only* two women going to the tomb); he is employing *selectivity* (by stating these two particular women went to the tomb).

Even John, who tells us of only one woman (Mary Magdalene), hints that

How Many Days in the Tomb?

[Read Mark 8:31](#)

[Read Luke 24:7,21,46](#)

[Read 1 Corinthians 15:4](#)

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that Jesus was in the tomb “three days” and “on the third day” came back to life. So what day was Jesus crucified on? There are two possibilities:

Friday

This is the traditional day of Jesus’ crucifixion. It seems reasonable enough, since Jesus was crucified on the day before the Sabbath ([Luke 23:54](#)), which is a Friday.

There is a problem with a Friday crucifixion, however. Even though it is possible to calculate three days between Jesus’ death on a Friday and resurrection on a Sunday (since the Jews calculated parts of a day as a full day), it is impossible to count three nights between Friday and Sunday.

[Read Matthew 12:40](#)

[Read Jonah 1:17](#)

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that he would be “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” So that leaves us with one more possibility.

Thursday

Jesus may have been crucified on a Thursday, since the Sabbath mentioned in the Gospel accounts was a “special Sabbath” ([John 19:31](#)). This was because 15 Nisan (the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread) was a special Sabbath, regardless of what day it fell on ([Leviticus 23:6-7](#)). Thus if 15 Nisan fell on a Friday, there would have been two Sabbaths between Thursday (the day of crucifixion) and Sunday (the day of the resurrection). This would make up the “three days and three nights” of [Matthew 12:40](#).

If Jesus was crucified on a Friday, it was probably in AD 33. If he was crucified on a Thursday, it was probably in AD 34.

other women went with her, for in **20:2** he records her reporting to the disciples: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* don’t know where they have put him!”

The number of angels

The record of how many angels were present at the tomb varies from account to account. But this need not concern us. Once again, selectivity is being employed by the writers. When all four accounts are taken as valid records of the events of that Sunday, it is clear that there were two angels present, but only one spoke. Some of the writers, therefore, do not mention the second angel because he is unnecessary to their story.

The message of the angel

But what about the message of the angel? How can the three different messages of the angels in **Matthew**, **Mark** and **Luke** be reconciled?

Let’s first establish two important facts:

- Firstly, the angel probably said all the things reported in each of the three accounts. Each writer selects that which is most important to his account, editing the speech for his purposes. Once again, selectivity, not exclusivity, is the key to understanding the differences between the three accounts.
- Secondly, we must remember that each account reports not so much what the angels said but, more precisely, the message that the women themselves reported to the disciples. The women, therefore, were the filter through which the message was delivered to its intended recipients. In their initial fright, each of the women may have remembered a different aspect of the message, so that a slightly different version of exactly the same message would have been delivered, depending on which of the women was reporting.

Also, as we shall see in the supplementary study, **SP112-12**, Matthew is probably recording what the women reported to the nine disciples in Bethany. Mark reports what Peter himself heard when the women later reported about their encounter with the angels. And Luke probably reports what the women themselves heard from the angel – the direct, unfiltered report of Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Joanna or Salome. It is even possible that Luke interviewed all four women, then edited the final message into its current form.

The Fact of the Empty Tomb

One fact that was accepted by all – believer and unbeliever alike – is that the tomb of Christ was empty on the Sunday morning following his crucifixion. This was never in contention. The only thing in contention was the *reason* for the empty tomb. As Frank Morrison explains:

“In all the fragments and echoes of this far-off controversy which have come

down to us we are nowhere told that any responsible person asserted that the body of Jesus was still in the tomb. We are only given reasons why it was not there. Running all through these ancient documents is the persistent assumption that the tomb of Christ was vacant. Can we fly in the face of this cumulative and mutually corroborative evidence? Personally, I do not think we can. The sequence of coincidences is too strong.”²¹

Morrison then goes on to say that “all the hypotheses which have come down to us from remote antiquity, purporting to explain the resurrection phenomena, take as their basic assumption the physical vacancy of the real tomb. This is more noteworthy because criticism on strictly rational grounds was not wanting even the earliest days of Christianity. Every conceivable taunt and imputation which it was possible to hurl at the disciples and their cause is reflected in the literature. We read at great length, for example, of the charge that Jesus was born of fornication; that the disciples threatened to set the Temple on fire; that Joseph of Arimathea could not be found when he was wanted; that the women were seen at the tomb as early as midnight; that the body was discovered by Pilate in a neighboring well. All these and many other innuendoes can be found in the apocrophal literature. Yet when we do come at last upon the indubitable snatches of controversy about the real issue we find – not as we should have expected, that the vacancy of the grave was stoutly and categorically denied, but that the disciples were accused of having abducted the body.”²²

The empty tomb is the one incontrovertible fact in every first century approach to the issue of Christ’s resurrection. As William Craig points out:

“When therefore the disciples began to preach the resurrection in Jerusalem and people responded, and when religious authorities stood helplessly by, the tomb must have been empty. The simple fact that the Christian fellowship, founded on belief in Jesus’ resurrection, came into existence and flourished in the very city where he was executed and buried is powerful evidence for the historicity of the empty tomb.”²³

The fact of the empty tomb, once accepted, narrows down the possibilities considerably. If we take the weight of this historical evidence into account, there are only two options:

Option #1 – The disciples stole the body

This has been the oldest claim by the anti-Christian camp, as evidenced by **Matthew 27:62-66**. But J P Moreland points out the ludicrousness of this claim:

“...the disciples had nothing to gain by lying and starting a new religion. They faced hardships, ridicule, hostility, and martyrs’ deaths. In light of this, they could have never sustained such unwavering motivation if they knew what they were preaching was a lie. The disciples were not fools and Paul was a cool-headed intellectual of the first rank. There would have been several opportunities over three to four decades of ministry to reconsider and renounce the lie.”²⁴

William Lane states it in even stronger terms:

“Without the belief in the resurrection the Christian faith could not have come into being. The disciples would have remained crushed and defeated men. Even had they continued to remember Jesus as their beloved teacher, his crucifixion would have forever silenced any hopes of his being the Messiah. The cross would have remained the sad and shameful end of his career. The origin of Christianity therefore hinges on the belief of the early disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead.”²⁵

Everything we read of the disciples before and after the resurrection event disavows the possibility that the disciples conspired to steal the body, then lie that Jesus had been raised from the dead. The accounts of their earlier wavering, petty bickering, unbelief and cowardice is realistic and convincing. And history attests to their later faith, fortitude and unity in the claim that Christ indeed was resurrected. What could be responsible for such an impressive turnabout were it not for a life-changing event?

Option #2 – Christ was indeed raised back to life

The Resurrection Message “could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not be established as a fact for all concerned”²⁶ and the fervor with which the disciples preached the fact of Christ’s resurrection would have been without cause had it not been that they were convinced of the reality of that resurrection. On this point, Frank Morrison concludes:

“Personally, I am convinced that no body of men or women could persistently and successfully have preached in Jerusalem a doctrine involving the vacancy of that tomb, without the grave itself being physically vacant. The facts were too recent; the tomb too close to that seething center of oriental life. Not all the make-believe in the world could have purchased the utter silence of antiquity or given to the records their impressive unanimity. Only the truth, in all its unavoidable simplicity, could have achieved that.”²⁷

And so, when these two things are taken into account – 1) the universal agreement that Christ’s tomb was indeed empty and 2) the earnest zeal with which the disciples preached the resurrection of Christ – we come to only one reasonable conclusion: Christ did indeed rise from the dead. In fact, as John Stott points out:

“Perhaps the transformation of the disciples of Jesus is the greatest evidence of all for the resurrection.”²⁸

Many Infallible Proofs

The story of Jesus doesn’t end on Easter Morning. Over the next forty days he made many appearances to over five hundred people (**1 Corinthians 15:5-8**) “and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (**Acts 1:3**). The Greek expression *en pollois tekmeriois* – translated “many infallible proofs” (KJV) – indi-

cates the strongest type of legal evidence. Here is just a sample of these proofs:

- He spoke with them (**John 20:19**)
- He walked with them (**Luke 24:13-16**)
- He broke bread with them (**Luke 24:30-31**)
- He showed them his wounds (**Luke 24:40; John 20:20,26-28**)
- He ate with them (**Luke 24:41-43; John 20:22**)
- He breathed on them (**John 20:22**)
- He performed a miracle for them (**John 21:1-11**)
- He prepared breakfast for them (**John 21:12-14**)
- He taught them (**Luke 24:25-27,44-47; Acts 1:3-7**)
- He commissioned them (**Matthew 28:18-21; Acts 1:8**)
- He ascended before them (**Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9**)

The Messianic Community

But the story of Jesus didn't even end when he ascended and returned to his Father, for in **John 14:18**, Jesus promised his disciples:

“I will not leave you as orphans; *I will come to you.*”

How did Jesus come to them? Through the sending of the Holy Spirit, who is also called “the Spirit of Jesus” (**Acts 16:7**) and “the Spirit of Christ” (**Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11**), and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (**Philippians 1:18**). In other words, through the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ continued to presence himself actively in the Church he had established. This is why Luke writes in **Acts 1:1-2** that his Gospel account was “about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven,” with the strong inference that his account of the Church's beginnings in **Acts** is about all that Jesus *continued* to do and to teach *after* the day he was taken up to heaven.

Fifty days after Easter Sunday a force was set loose upon the world – a force that impacted the world in its day and continues to impact the world today. As Wayne Jackson declares:

“...the impact of the Christian movement is powerful testimony to the reality of its Founder. It is inconceivable that a non-existent figure could have generated a societal force as world-shaking as Christianity. There is no logical way to explain how the Christian system started, and grew so rapidly, except for the fact that adherents knew of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Christianity itself is a monument to the vibrant presence of the God's Son in history. The cause we espouse is not grounded in a wispy vapor of antiquity, but on unshakable historical facts.”²⁹

In the last twelve lessons, we have explored the social setting and events that define the Life and Times of Jesus Christ. But if the title “Christ,” or Messiah, does indeed apply to Jesus, then his life and times did not end in the first century.

The first-century Church saw itself as a messianic community, a corporate ex-

tension of the Messiah himself. In fact, it even referred to itself as “the body of Christ” or “the body of the Messiah” (**Ephesians 1:22-23**). This meant that the life and mission of the Messiah continued to flow within the activities of the Church.

The continuing impact of Jesus Christ upon the lives of billions of people is testament to the truth of his messianic claim. Jesus himself declared his crucifixion not to be the end but the beginning of a whole new phase of human history. He said:

- **John 3:14-15** – “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, *that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*”
- **John 8:28-29** – “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, *then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.*”
- **John 12:32** – “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, *will draw all men to myself.*”

Philip Schaff describes the ongoing influence of Jesus in this way:

“Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Muhammad, and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all the philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of the school, he spoke words of life such as were never spoken before nor since and produced effects that lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he has set more pens in motion and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, works of art, learned volumes, and sweet songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.”³⁰

When we have evaluated both the Gospel record and the continuing historic impact of Jesus Christ, we can declare, together with the second-century Christian, Ignatius:

“[Jesus] was crucified in reality, and not in appearance, not in imagination, not in deceit. He really died, and was buried, and rose from the dead.”³¹

- ¹ C Truman Davis, "The Crucifixion," <http://www.gospeloutreach.net/crucifixion.html>.
- ² William D Edwards, et al, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," <http://www.geocities.com/alokonsen/death2.htm>.
- ³ Stuart Bergsma, "Did Jesus Die of a Broken Heart?" *The Calvin Forum*, 14:165, 1948.
- ⁴ Michael Green, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.223.
- ⁵ Albert Roper, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.225.
- ⁶ Edwards, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.223.
- ⁷ E H Day, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.223.
- ⁸ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- ⁹ *NIV Bible Commentary, Vol.2: New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p.128.
- ¹⁰ Alfred Edersheim, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.229.
- ¹¹ Merrill Tenney, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.230.
- ¹² Wilbur Smith, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.229.
- ¹³ Byron McCane, "The Scandal of the Grave," *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com>.
- ¹⁴ G M Mackie, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.232.
- ¹⁵ John Wenham, *The Easter Enigma* (Exeter, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1984), p.74.
- ¹⁶ Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1978), p.74.
- ¹⁷ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.237.
- ¹⁸ Alfred Roper, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.235.
- ¹⁹ William Lane Craig, quoted by Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p.290.
- ²⁰ Michael Grant, quoted by Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p.290.
- ²¹ Frank Morrison, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.244.
- ²² Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1978), p.173.
- ²³ J P Mooreland, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.242.
- ²⁴ William Lane Craig, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.243.
- ²⁵ William Lane Craig, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.205.
- ²⁶ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.244.
- ²⁷ Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1978), p.175.
- ²⁸ John Stott, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.252.
- ²⁹ Wayne Jackson, "The Historicity of Jesus Christ," *Christian Courier*, December 7, 1998, <http://www.christiancourier.com>.
- ³⁰ Philip Schaff, quoted by Edythe Draper, *Draper's Quotations for the Christian World*, extracted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- ³¹ Ignatius, quoted by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p.212.

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