

# **AN EXAMINATION OF THE HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS AND THE TRUTH OF THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE**

## **PART I: INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE**

These notes examine the historical evidence for the Christian message. The notes are divided into four parts. Part I is a brief introduction to the purpose of the notes and an outline of the content of the Christian message. Part IV is a brief conclusion. The majority of the notes are formed by Parts II and III which cover two main topics concerning the historical evidence for the Christian message: Part II examines whether the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John- the first four books of the New Testament) are historically reliable. Part III examines whether the basic Christian message is true.

These notes are concerned primarily with historical evidence. As such, they deal with many objections concerning the historical evidence for the Christian message. For the most part, however, these notes do not deal with the philosophical and theological objections such as regards the problem of evil, other religions, the logical consistency of Christian doctrines (such as the Trinity or the Incarnation), and other objections commonly put forward against the Christian faith. Responses -arguably adequately- can and have been formulated to counter these objections. However, as important as these objections and responses are, it is beyond the scope of these notes to consider such issues here. Our focus will remain historical.

Before considering the historical evidence for the truth of the Christian message, it is important to make clear what this message is. Different Christian beliefs are perhaps as numerous as the Christians who hold them. Christians disagree about various aspects of the Christian faith. However, there are some core beliefs which all Christians more or less share. It is not our purpose here to discuss the subtleties of Christian doctrine, but rather to examine those parts of the Christian message which are central and most important. The basic Christian message is this: that Jesus is the Christ and Lord and through him comes salvation! Different Christians understand Jesus' being the Christ (the Messiah) and the nature of salvation in different ways. But the basic Christian message remains the same. In order to put some flesh on this skeleton of the basic Christian message we consider one particular explanation and development of the Christian proclamation which puts this message and its importance in context. Of course, the best way to gain a deeper understanding of what Christianity is all about is to read the gospel accounts- and the rest of the Bible- yourself. The basic Christian message could be developed as follows:

God created the heavens and the earth and all therein and made it good. God made men and women with freedom: freedom to do good or to do evil. In seeking our own good and in the neglect of the good of our neighbor and of God's commandments, mankind chose to do evil and to reject God's rule. The whole of nature and creation has been corrupted by the evil that has resulted. God, however, was determined to restore human life and to restore also our relationship with him. By making himself known to the Israelites he showed to them how life was now to be lived for the community and under his rule by giving them commandments, his law. God desired that they would live at peace with one another and with him. But despite these advantages, all mankind continued to do evil in the eyes of God. More was needed than simply God's commandments. Through various prophets in Israel's history, God announced that he would act dramatically in history to end the alienation of men and women with God and one another. These prophecies were all fulfilled in the person Jesus Christ, the completion of God's work to heal the world through the nation of Israel.

God took on the nature of a man in the person Jesus Christ. Jesus came to restore God's reign, to restore human life to what God had intended and to restore man's relationship with God. Jesus demonstrated in his life a life of love, of service, of participation in community and of obedience to God. Jesus furthermore took our sins, our wrongdoing, upon himself and died on a cross for us. On the third day following his death, Jesus was raised from the dead and later ascended into heaven. Through his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus triumphed over sin and death. Through his crucifixion and resurrection those who entrust their lives to Jesus Christ are forgiven their sins and given new life - they are empowered to obey God and to love those around them. God desires that all men and women return to him and everyone who believes in Christ's work on the cross and determines to live life for him is forgiven and is granted eternal life, brought to fullness at Christ's return. God works within the lives of those who follow him and gives them his Spirit to empower them to do good. These good works and the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ are ultimately worked out in the life of the Church. Christians meet together to remember, experience and respond to God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Together, the Church worships God, serves the community by bringing justice and mercy to the earth, proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ, and helps its members in accomplishing this work. At the completion of history, Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead; and subsequently all of creation will be restored to fulfill what God had intended for it. All that which, in the end, refuses participation with him will be done away with; but all who embrace this participation with God will be restored to a great and glorious perfection in heaven with Him.

This is the story presented in the Old and New Testaments. The central events in this story consist in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and it is center of the story of the Scriptures that we are concerned with in these notes: the accuracy of the documents that record these events and the truth of the Christian understanding about the significance of Jesus' identity and life.

## PART II: THE RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

The term “gospels” refers to the first four books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books present themselves as historical descriptions of, and theological reflection on, some of the events which took place in Jesus’ life. In this part of the document we briefly consider four major reasons why the gospels are historically reliable. Some of the arguments in the third part of this document (which argues for the truth of the basic gospel message) presuppose that the gospel accounts are at least roughly historically reliable. In this second part of the document we will argue for a conclusion stronger than is necessary for the third part: we will argue for high degree of historical reliability for the gospel accounts. We will also deal with a number of major objections against the reliability of the gospel accounts concerning each of the four arguments presented.

Various objections to the arguments put forward and responses to these objections are presented below. These objections and responses are indented and in a smaller type face and can perhaps be skipped on a first reading. Objections which are thought to be of greater importance are starred.

### 1. EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

The four gospels were written not long after the life and death of Jesus and thus, at the time of writing, there were people still alive to remember, write, check, and potentially challenge the written accounts of Jesus’ life. Exactly how long after the death of Christ (approximately AD33) were the gospel accounts written and what is the evidence for this? The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were quoted by an early Christian believer named Clement in his writings in 96AD. Portions of all four gospels and most of the rest of the New Testament were quoted by Ignatius in 108AD. Most New Testament scholars date Mark around 50-60 AD, Matthew and Luke around 70AD, and John around 80-90AD. Even very liberal scholars now date Mark 70AD, Matthew and Luke 80AD, and John 90AD. Not all scholars agree with either of these datings. JAT Robinson, a critical New Testament scholar, dates John as the earliest of the gospels. There is some evidence (no reference to the Jewish war in these documents) that all four accounts were written prior to the period of the Jewish war (66-70 AD). There would have been other eyewitnesses alive during this period capable of verifying or falsifying the claims of these gospels.

Not only were the accounts written shortly after the lifetime of Jesus, but the gospels were written by people who had witnessed or had access to people who had witnessed the events of Jesus’ life. Mark almost certainly used Peter as a source. Peter was one of Jesus’ three closest disciples - an eyewitness. Luke claims to have used eyewitnesses. There is considerable evidence that the disciple John - who was also one of the closest three- wrote John's gospel. (Some liberal theologians disagree largely because of the theological sophistication of the gospel.) Tradition reports that the disciple Matthew wrote Matthew's gospel or maybe an earlier version of it perhaps in Aramaic. Many of these eyewitnesses were Jesus’ disciples and witnessed the events and dialogue recorded. Since the four gospel authors had access to a great deal of eyewitness testimony, they at least had the potential to produce accurate accounts of Jesus’ life. Jesus’ teaching involved a great deal of morality. For the disciples, followers of Jesus, fidelity in witness would then clearly be of importance.

Much of the remainder of the New Testament was written by a convert to Christianity named Paul in the form of letters to various churches. Paul's letters were almost certainly written in the 50's and 60's AD. We can tell this from the book of Acts (the fifth book of the Bible-written by Luke) and references to various events within Paul's letters.

\*Objection: The stories about Jesus were probably significantly distorted between the time of Jesus’ death and the writing of the gospels.

Response: We saw above that some of the eyewitnesses involved in the writing of the gospels were Jesus’ disciples. The disciples may have taken notes on Jesus’ teaching. While this possibility is not out of the question, the difficulty of obtaining books or scrolls of papyrus during this time period render this possibility somewhat less likely. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the disciples committed to memory much of Jesus’ teaching. This was a common practice at the time. Rabbis became famous for having memorized the Old Testament which is much longer than all four gospels combined! Furthermore, although narrators at the time were allowed significant liberty in the retelling of a story (probably about 10-40% would vary), research shows that often a story involved certain unalterable points. The Christian community- including the disciples (eyewitnesses)- very likely monitored the retelling of narrative concerning Jesus. In addition to this we can discern from other persons and incidents in history that substantial modification of oral tradition and legendary developments take significantly more time than is involved in the case of the person of Jesus. Classical historian Sherwin-White from Oxford examined the rate at which legend accrued in the ancient world. Not even two full generations was enough time for legend to develop and to wipe out a solid core of historical truth. The gospels were written within the lifetime of Jesus’ contemporaries. Furthermore there is a near consensus in modern scholarship that 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, a passage from one of Paul's letters, is a creed which dates within just a few years of Jesus’ death. This creed refers to Jesus’ death for sins, that he was buried, and that on the third day he rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples and others. In addition to this, as we will discuss more fully below, there were Jews still alive when the gospels were circulating who had witnessed the events in which Jesus was involved and would have been more than happy to set the record straight if there had been embellishment or falsehood.

Summary: The documents were written not long after Jesus’ death. The most likely candidates for the authorship of gospel includes eyewitnesses - even some of Jesus’ disciples. The disciples observed the events the gospels testify to. Furthermore fidelity in witness would clearly have been of importance to them.

\*Objection: The earliest manuscript we have (part of John's gospel) dates about 130AD. The earliest complete New Testament we have dates much later. Were the biographies reliably preserved?

Argument from documents: The early church read out various parts of the New Testament in their meetings. Because of this, each church needed copies of the New Testament documents. Christianity did not spread in any systematic way. Copies were not produced from any central location. Nevertheless all the manuscripts we do have coincide very closely. It is estimated that we now know the exact text of at least 97-99% of the original Greek New Testament. This indicates that the copying was on the whole done accurately; the transmission was trustworthy. Furthermore

although the earliest manuscripts do not date until well into the second century (around 130 AD), many Christian works written earlier than this quote substantial parts of the New Testament.

Argument by comparison with the preservation of other documents of that time: There are well over 5,000 catalogued Greek New Testament manuscripts and possibly over 25,000 if other languages are included. The earliest of these dates at 130AD. Manuscripts with more significant portions of the text date around 200AD. This is far greater manuscript support than any other document from the time. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote his "Annals of Imperial Rome" in about 116AD. The earliest manuscript dates about 850AD. We have nine Greek copies of first-century historian Josephus's "The Jewish War." The earliest of these dates to the tenth century. There is a Latin translation from the fourth century. Next to the New Testament, the greatest amount of manuscript support for any ancient document is of Homer's "Iliad". There are about 650 Greek manuscripts of it today. They come from the second and third century AD and following. The work was composed about 800BC. It is therefore unsurprising that the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament documents date somewhat later than the date of their writing. A similar or larger difference between the date of writing and the dating of the earliest manuscripts is found in the case of all ancient writings.

## 2. JEWS AND THE DOCUMENTS

There were Jewish eyewitnesses still alive during the time when the gospels were being written who were hostile to the spread of Christianity and would have been highly motivated to show these documents to be false. The documents clearly stood against this source of scrutiny and criticism. Christianity spread during this time- even in Jerusalem.

Objection: Were the documents necessarily in circulation while eyewitnesses were still alive?

There is a reference around 150AD to Christians everywhere meeting on Sunday to read out together portions of the New Testament. By this time the documents were very widely circulated. There is an earlier reference around 112AD to Christians meeting on a fixed day of the week. Furthermore there are a number of very early Christian writers who refer to or quote from many New Testament documents. Clement writing from Rome in 96AD refers to eleven New Testament documents including Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If the gospels had made it as far as Rome, they were clearly in circulation in Israel well before this date. Historians are quite certain that there was significant interaction between Jews and Christians during this period. Jews would have had access to these documents.

Summary: If the gospel accounts were substantially inaccurate it is likely they would have been successfully refuted by certain Jews.

Objection: How can we treat accounts which makes reference to "miracles" (people walking on water, rising from the dead, turning water into wine etc) as history?

Response: Any allegedly historical account which makes reference to incredible events will, of necessity, demand far more evidence for its reliability if it is to be believed. It is the purpose of this document to provide substantial evidence for the New Testament reliability. We ask the reader to suspend judgement until the end of the document to weigh whether there is enough evidence to believe that miracles did, in fact, occur. However, two further points merit additional argument.

We first wish to argue against the view that an account of a miracle could *never* be considered historical. The view that an account of a miracle is never historical presupposes that miracles do not occur. However if God exists and is all powerful, then clearly God is capable of performing miracles. If God created the entire universe it would not be too difficult for Him to turn water into wine. Because we do not know for certain whether or not God exists we cannot conclude that an account of a miracle can never be historical. A different argument against the very possibility of miracles runs as follows: A miracle is an act of God in violation of the laws of nature. A law of nature is an exceptionless regularity. If a miracle occurs, then the law of nature which this miracle violates could not be a law of nature because it is not an exceptionless regularity. Therefore there can be no miracles. However, this objection uses the term "law of nature" in a sense which is too narrow. If we define (sensibly) the laws of nature as the way the world proceeds in absence of special intervention by God then the objection fails. Eighteenth century philosopher David Hume put forward a different type of argument. Hume does not argue that miracles do not ever occur (he admits they might occur), but he argues that it is never reasonable for us to *believe* that one has occurred. Hume argues as follows: In evaluating testimony one generally takes into account the number of witnesses, their credulity, sincerity, honesty and their external circumstances. One thus assesses the likelihood of the testimony. One also considers the likelihood of the event allegedly witnessed. We are justified in believing the testimony only if the likelihood of the former outweighs the unlikelihood of the latter. Miracles, being contrary to observed uniformity, are to be assigned a likelihood as small as possible and so, in practice, this always outweighs testimony. Therefore miracles might occur; but in practice we never find ourselves in a situation in which it would be reasonable believe any particular incident to be one. Hume's method of determining whether we are justified in believing a miracle occurred is arguably roughly correct: we should weigh the strength of the testimony against the unlikelihood of the event. However Hume's conclusion does not follow. As the rest of this document will hopefully make clear, Hume underestimates the potential strength of testimony. Hume also ignores the need of the skeptic to provide an explanation of the testimony. It is not the miraculous event which is to be weighed against the testimony, but the skeptic's explanation which is to be weighed against the explanation that a miracle was actually witnessed. It may turn out that the skeptic's explanation is even more unlikely than the explanation that the miracle did in fact occur. We have not argued here that the miracles recorded in the gospels did actually happen. We have simply argued against the view that an account of a miracle could *never* be considered historical.

Secondly, before moving on, we wish to make brief mention of three incidental points in support of the historicity of the miracle accounts found in the gospels: (1) If Jesus was God, as the gospel accounts arguably record him claiming to be and as is argued below, it is not unbelievable that he performed miracles and such activity is, in fact, perhaps what we would expect. If God came to earth and nothing unusual happened it would indeed be surprising. (2) Jews opposed to Christianity would have clearly wanted to discredit the gospel accounts. In later Jewish writings Jesus is called a sorcerer who led Israel astray which acknowledges that he really did work marvelous wonders. This would have been a perfect opportunity to level the accusation that these miracles in fact never occurred. Instead the writers dispute only the source of Jesus' power. (3) If there were no miracles it would have been easier for the disciples to proclaim Jesus as a great religious leader or as God without reference to the miracles because the miracle stories could have been falsified.

### 3. PERSECUTION OF THE GOSPEL WRITERS

Christianity was in many ways a very radical departure from Judaism and thus was met by much hostility from Jews opposed to Christianity and, later on, the Roman world at large. Eleven of the twelve disciples died as martyrs. The gospel writers had a lot to lose by writing and circulating the documents they did and they had little to gain- unless to present the truth. It seems unlikely that these authors would have risked their lives by writing what they did unless what they believed what they were recording to be true. Further analysis of the situation and the threat of death of the disciples and gospel writers and possible objections to this line of argument are examined below in the next and third part of the document.

Summary: The gospel writers faced the threat of death for writing what they did. It is unlikely they would have written their accounts unless they were trying to, and believed to be, presenting truth.

### 4. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGIC EVIDENCE

Much historical and archeological research has confirmed many details found within gospels accounts. We have space here only to outline some of these. Josephus was a Jewish historian born in 37 AD. In an undisputed passage of one of his works he refers to the death of James, the brother of Jesus who Josephus says was called the Christ. A second passage alludes to Jesus' divinity, miracles, and resurrection. Most scholars believe that the passage is authentic but has been significantly modified by a later Christian scribe rendering it unreliable. The original passage perhaps only referred to Jesus being crucified under Pontius Pilate and Jesus being a wise teacher who many followed. The Roman historian Tacitus also refers to Jesus' death under Pilate. Jewish writings refer to Jesus' healing and miracles but ascribe these activities to sorcery. Clearly at least some gospel details are corroborated by other writers.

The gospel writers claim that the earth went dark during part of the time that Jesus hung on the cross. If darkness had fallen over the whole earth one would expect some mention of the event outside the Bible. In AD 52 a historian named Thallus wrote a history of the eastern Mediterranean world since the Trojan War. Although Thallus's work has been lost, it was quoted by Julius Africanus in about AD 221 and it made reference to the darkness that the gospels refer to. Phlegon, a Greek author wrote a chronology soon after 137 AD and reported that in the year of the 202nd Olympiad (i.e. 33 AD) there was "the greatest eclipse of the sun" and that "it became night in the sixth hour of the day [i.e. noon]."

\*Objection: Were any of these writers biased in favor of Christianity?

Response: Although not a popular figure at the time among most Jews, Josephus, being himself Jewish was certainly not biased in favor of Christians. The writing of the Roman historian Tacitus are generally quite unsympathetic to the success and spread of Christianity. Many Jews were highly antagonistic towards Christianity and certainly would not have wanted to write anything in its favor. Thallus appears to have been trying to explain the darkness by natural causes. In the passage making reference to Thallus, Julius Africanus writes "Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away the darkness as an eclipse of the sun- unreasonably, as it seems to me" and then goes on and tries to argue that it couldn't have been an eclipse, given when the Crucifixion occurred. This entire section of Africanus's work would not have been included if Thallus had not written what Africanus claims he did.

Archaeological digs and excavated inscriptions have confirmed numerous details in the gospels concerning political leaders and incidental details of daily life. Archaeology has also uncovered various locations referred to by the gospels which were previously thought by many archaeologists not to have existed. This has been especially true in recent years with John's gospel. The accuracy of these details is some indication- not a conclusive proof- but some evidence that the witnesses are reliable in their overall account. Actual incidents of archaeological research confirming the gospel accounts abound. However it would take much space to examine even a few of them.

Summary: Much historical and archeological research has confirmed many details found within gospels accounts.

### SUMMARY OF PART II

Before we turn to the third part of this document we review here the reasons outlined above why the gospel accounts are historically reliable:

(1) The documents were written not long after Jesus death. The most likely candidates for the authorship of gospel includes eyewitnesses- even some of Jesus' disciples. The disciples observed the events the gospels testify to. Furthermore fidelity in witness would clearly have been importance to them. (2) If the gospel accounts were inaccurate it is likely they would have been successfully refuted by certain Jews. (3) The gospel writers faced the threat of death for writing what they did. It is unlikely they would have written their accounts unless they were trying to and believed to be presenting truth. (4) Much historical and archeological research has confirmed many details found within gospels accounts.

### **PART III: IS IT TRUE?**

Perhaps the gospel accounts are roughly historically reliable. Perhaps Jesus did say some of the things he was recorded to have said. But is what Jesus said true? In this section we will present five arguments of varying scope to demonstrate that the basic gospel message as presented above in part one is roughly correct.

#### **1. JESUS' IDENTITY: LORD, LIAR OR LUNATIC?**

Many people believe that Jesus was simply a good moral teacher and nothing more. However because Jesus said the things he did this popular option is, in fact, not open. In sometimes subtle and other times not so subtle ways, Jesus claimed to be God. Either this claim was true or it was false. If it was true then Jesus is Lord over all the earth and we must either accept or reject his Lordship. If Jesus' claims are false then either he knew his claims were false or he did not know they were false. We will consider each alternative in turn. If Jesus knew his claim was false then he was a liar and he was also a hypocrite for he taught others to be honest. However this does not square with all other aspects of his life in which he is otherwise clearly the purest and noblest character in history. How could someone who deliberately lied live and teach as Jesus did? The other alternative is that Jesus actually thought himself to be God but was not. However for someone in a monotheistic culture to claim to be God and then to tell others that their eternal destiny depended on him is no slight flight of fancy, but insanity. Someone who said the sort of things Jesus said and incorrectly believed them would be a lunatic. However Jesus' poise and composure in answering the traps and tests of the Pharisees and in caring for the poor and needy would have been remarkable for someone insane. The gospel accounts portray him as exhibiting no inappropriate emotion, being in contact with reality, having amazing insights into human nature, and enjoying deep and abiding relationships. His profound teaching also seems to be utterly inconsistent with lunacy. There appear to be no signs that Jesus was suffering from any mental illness. Perhaps the clearest way to see Jesus was neither a liar nor a lunatic is by reading through the gospel accounts oneself. Jesus could not have been a good moral teacher. Either Jesus was Lord, a liar, or a lunatic. The latter two options seem very implausible. The alternative is that Jesus was and is Lord and God. If Jesus were God he knew all things. His teachings were true. Our outline of the gospel message above would be roughly correct with Jesus being both Lord and God. We then choose whether we accept or reject his Lordship.

Objection: Jesus claimed to be God only in John's gospel which many scholars believe to be less historically credible than the other gospels.

Response: Jesus explicitly claims to be God only in John's gospel. Jesus says "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30). However Jesus very clearly claims to be God in the other gospels. This is clear from Jesus' claiming to be able to forgive sins (against God) (Mk. 2:5-7; Lk. 7:48-50) and in the claim he makes concerning his involvement with the final judgement (Mt. 7:21-23). In Matthew's gospel, Jesus accept the worship other offer him (Mt. 28:17) and Jesus quotes Scripture describing God in reference to himself (Mt. 21:16). In all four gospel accounts the charge brought against Jesus for which he is sentenced to death is blasphemy- claiming to be God. Concerning all of the claims, the Jews, in line with Old Testament religion, would have understood Jesus as claiming to be God.

Objection: Perhaps Jesus knew he was not God but intentionally lied and claimed to be God because he thought that if others believed this it would increase the quality and/or purity of their lives. His death makes sense in this context because, although he died for a lie, he died generously to help what appears to be millions of people in their lives.

Response: While this possibility (as that of liar and lunatic) as presented above cannot be conclusively disproved, a few points render it very improbable. Jesus is consistently portrayed in the gospels as having a very close relationship with God. He teaches about God inside and away from the synagogue, claims to know God, spends long periods of time praying to God, etc. If Jesus did believe in the God which he speaks about then honesty and righteousness would have been of the utmost importance in his life. He would not have intentionally lied. It is possible that Jesus did not believe in God and that his apparently doing so was also a hoax to help propagate the lie which he allegedly thought would transform lives. However this modification makes the theory extremely implausible. It is very unlikely that Jesus would have always been able to consistently trick everyone throughout his entire life into thinking that he believed in God. The disciples, being so close to him, would almost certainly have noticed certain discrepancies. The only plausible alternative then becomes to suggest that the disciples and gospel writers were involved in the hoax as well, propagating the lie. The theory suffers still suffers from other difficulties, however. Christianity, the religion Jesus founded, was in many ways a very radical departure from Judaism and thus was met by much hostility from the Jews. Furthermore, Jesus' earthly ministry was focused almost entirely on the Jews; it was only after Jesus' death that the apostles began bringing the gospel of Jesus to the rest of the world. If Jesus' purpose had been to propagate a noble lie then to focus almost exclusively on the group of people who would be most hostile to it would have surely been the worst way to go about it. Furthermore, the Lord, Liar, Lunatic argument need not stand on its own. Perhaps the theory presented above is marginally plausible in isolation. However, several arguments below cannot be dealt with by assuming Jesus' life and teaching were a noble lie. If Jesus were not God (or did not believe in God) how do we explain the miracles, Paul's conversion experience, and the resurrection? We discuss these points further below.

Summary: Because Jesus claimed to be God he was either Lord, a liar, or a lunatic. The latter two options seem extremely implausible. Jesus was Lord and God and thus, furthermore, what he taught was true.

#### **2. DISCIPLES' TRANSFORMATION AND DEATH**

During and after Jesus' death, the disciples were terrified. They left Jesus and fled when Jesus was arrested. Peter denied several times that he was a follower of Jesus. After Jesus' death the disciples were not teaching others about him, but hiding together from the Jewish authorities with the doors locked. They were feeble and frightened and understandably so: the person they had been following had been put to death, their own lives were at risk and furthermore, as Jews, they had been taught that God would not let his Messiah suffer death. They believed that anyone who was crucified was accused by God. However, only a few days later there was an almost immediate transformation. The disciples were on the streets proclaiming, even at the threat of death, that Jesus had been raised from the dead. What caused this radical transformation? The gospels indicate that the transformation was caused by the disciples having seen Jesus alive, risen from the dead. Could anything other than Jesus appearing to the disciples have caused this transformation?

The disciples had a lot to lose by proclaiming and writing about Christ and his life and resurrection. Tradition records that eleven of the twelve disciples died as martyrs. They were killed by sword, spear, arrows, stoning, or crucifixion because of the proclamation of their beliefs: that Jesus was Lord and that God had risen him from the dead. Would the disciples have died for a lie? Many throughout history have died for a lie; but in pretty much every case they had thought what they believed was the truth. Far far fewer have died for a lie knowing it was a lie; and if Jesus did not rise from the dead and appear to his disciples as the gospel accounts record, then the disciples knew this. If Jesus did not rise from the dead and appear to his disciples then the disciples died for a lie knowing it was a lie. Thinking things through logically and examining a history of martyrs, a clear pattern emerges: People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe that their beliefs are true, but people won't die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, the disciples would have known this and would not have been willing to suffer as they did.

Objection: Perhaps the disciple's knew that Jesus hadn't risen from the dead but they believed that if they claimed he did, then others would believe in Jesus' message and it would increase the quality and/or purity of their lives.

Response: Three points, while not conclusively disproving this possibility, render it quite unlikely: (1) Only the disciple John died a natural death. The other eleven disciples died as martyrs for their beliefs. If they were deceivers, it is difficult to explain why not one of them broke down under pressure. (2) That the disciples were perpetuating a lie is inconsistent with what we know about the moral quality of their lives. They personally condemned lying and stressed honesty. They encouraged people to know the truth. (3) It is unlikely that the idea to propagate such a noble lie conceived by one of the disciples would have been sufficient to bring about the radical transformation which occurred in the disciples: from scared and terrified to almost \*immediately\* being willing to die for the message.

Objection: Perhaps the disciples were hallucinating when they thought they saw Jesus or maybe they talked themselves into believing they had seen Jesus risen from the dead.

Response: See the response to the second objection below in section 3 on the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances.

\*Objection: Maybe the disciples were mad or seriously deluded like a group of cult members who commit mass suicide.

Response: There are at least three relevant differences between the disciples and the members of certain cult groups we now sometimes hear about on television: (1) Members of cults often join because of the security and acceptance which they feel will be offered. Leaders of cults are often attracted by potential for wealth and power. The disciples had none of these benefits. Far from security, the disciples were persecuted by the Jews for their beliefs and always in danger of losing their lives. Concerning wealth and power, Jesus' teaching significantly diminished the attraction of either of these. Jesus taught that a leader is first and foremost a servant- a person whose primary task is to work for and help others. Jesus' spoke frequently against those who hoarded money. He advocated extreme generosity. The disciples passed on these teachings and lived according to them. None of the usual "cult benefits" applied in the case of the disciples. (2) The disciples were quite a level headed group of people. Jesus had been put to death, their own lives were at risk and they were understandably frightened. They went into hiding like any sensible person would. Something radical had to have happened for them to later be boldly proclaiming their message. (3) The disciple John most probably wrote John's gospel. The disciple Peter was probably largely responsible for the account in the gospel of Mark. The gospels are not only historically reliable and theologically profound, but they are also some of the most beautiful pieces of literature the world has seen. They could not have been written by some group of deluded or lunatic people. The rapid initial spread of Christianity also testifies to the mental soundness of the disciples. Most cults gain a small number of members and then disappear. In just two decades, Christianity had spread throughout the Roman empire. A mad or deluded group of people simply could not have pulled off such a feat. The spread of Christianity required of the disciples' mental soundness, honesty, and commitment to the truth. The logic, mental soundness, and integrity of the disciples can furthermore be seen in the book of Acts which records many of the speeches some of the disciples made as Christians quickly grew in numbers.

Summary: The disciples' lives and actions were transformed by some event from lives of fear to lives of proclamation. It is unclear what might have led to this transformation other than seeing Jesus risen. The disciples knew whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead. It is very unlikely that the disciples would have died for the religious belief of the resurrection if they knew it was false- if Jesus had not risen from the dead and appeared to them.

### 3. THE EMPTY TOMB AND RESURRECTION APPEARANCES

After Jesus' death by crucifixion, his body was wrapped in linen with about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes. The body was placed in a tomb and a big stone was rolled in front of it. The gospel of Matthew reports that guards were placed in front of the tomb to ensure that the body of Jesus was not stolen since the Pharisees feared that the disciples would steal the body and claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. On the third day, however, the tomb was found empty. The guards fled to their superiors when they realized this. Two women and later some of the disciples observed the empty tomb. The disciples and others reported seeing the risen Jesus many times during the next forty days.

There are three major attempts at explaining away the empty tomb in order to maintain that Jesus did not rise from the dead: (1) It has been suggested that the two women and the disciples who saw the empty tomb went to the wrong tomb. However, it is very unlikely that the guard would have been at the wrong tomb given the concerns of the Pharisees. Furthermore, if the two women and the disciples had gone to the wrong tomb, the Pharisees could have simply produced the body of Jesus to refute the disciples claims. But they could not. This theory also fails to account for the disciple's transformation considered above. (2) A second theory is that Jesus did not die on the cross, but only fainted from exhaustion and blood loss. This theory however fails to explain how Jesus got past the guard. It is furthermore unlikely that a severely injured person (or any single individual) could have rolled away the stone. In addition to this, it does not explain the transformation of the disciples. Could he have convinced them that he was risen from the dead if it was abundantly clear that he hadn't actually died but was only severely injured? Furthermore, much medical research suggests that from the details the gospels provide about Jesus' crucifixion, one may conclude that Jesus was clearly dead when he was put in the tomb. Finally, Roman executioners were very accurate. They themselves would face death if any of their victims were to come down from the cross alive. (3) A third group of theories suggests that Jesus' body was stolen. Most theories propose that the body was stolen by the disciples. However it would have been extremely difficult to get past the Roman guard. Furthermore the transformation of the disciples would still be unaccounted for. Finally this act seems inconsistent with the moral quality of their lives. The suggestion that the body was stolen by the Roman or Jewish authorities is no more plausible. Why would they not have then simply produced the body to refute the disciples' claims that Jesus had risen from the dead?

The New Testament records that Jesus appeared to a group of women, then later Peter, the twelve disciples, James, Paul and many others. The appearances are attested to by Paul, three of the four gospels (only hinted at in most manuscripts of Mark), and very early Christian creeds (perhaps dating within ten years of Jesus' death). Paul includes a creed in his first letter to the Corinthians indicating that over five hundred people saw the risen Christ and that many of these were still alive. It is very unlikely that Paul would have written this if these people would not confirm that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead. His resurrection was in some ways a vindication of his life and teaching.

Summary: That Jesus' tomb was found empty cannot successfully be explained away by theories maintaining that Jesus rose from the dead. The empty tomb and the resurrection appearance are strong evidence that God did indeed raise Jesus from the dead. God's involvement here also provides confirmation about what Jesus said and taught before his death.

\*Objection: Maybe the empty tomb story is simply legendary and was constructed only after no one any longer remembered where Jesus was buried; thus making refutation impossible.

Response: Several points rule out this possibility: (1) Scholars believe that an early Christian creed found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 citing both Jesus' burial and resurrection was probably being used just a few years after Jesus' death. (2) As mentioned above, all the gospel accounts were likely to have been written while those who witnessed the events concerning Jesus were still alive. (3) The gospels records that women were the first to observe the tomb empty. The testimony of women at the time was regarded as unreliable (they were not allowed to serve as witnesses in a Jewish court of law). This being the case, if the empty tomb story had been legendary, this almost certainly would not have formed part of it. (4) Some research shows that the earliest Jewish polemic presupposes the historicity of the empty tomb. Not even the Jews were claiming the tomb still contained Jesus' body. The question being disputed was "What happened to the body?" These four points substantial evidence that there were still people who knew where Jesus had been buried when the story of the empty tomb was being told.

Objection: Could the resurrection appearances have been hallucinations or might have the disciples talked themselves into believing they had seen Jesus risen from the dead?

Response: Hallucinations are individual occurrences. They aren't something seen by a group of people. Nor is it possible for one person to induce a hallucination in someone else. In addition to this, hallucinations are also comparably rare. It is very unlikely that all of these individuals experienced the same hallucination. Furthermore, people who hallucinate usually have a fertile mind in expectancy or anticipation; the disciples were fearful, doubtful, and in despair after the crucifixion. If the disciples had merely talked themselves into believing that they had seen Jesus after his death then it is unlikely that none of them would rethought and recanted at a later date given that they were being put to death because of this belief. It is also unclear how James, who initially didn't believe Jesus' Messiahship, and Paul, who originally persecuted Christians, could have been talked into believing that they had seen something

Objection: Don't the stories of the resurrection and the empty tomb in the various gospels contradict one another?

Response: There are a number of apparent discrepancies between the four accounts. All of the accounts however agree in the main details. Again, this is an unsurprising phenomenon with ancient histories. Because Matthew's and Luke's account differ somewhat from Mark's, this suggests that they had sources other than Mark concerning the empty tomb- perhaps reinforcing the general reliability of the accounts. Furthermore, many (if not all) of the discrepancies can be reconciled. Omission may be largely responsible for the apparent discrepancies in the accounts.

Objection: Might there have been no guard?

Response: While it seems very likely that a guard would have been placed given the concerns of the Jewish leaders, it has become disputed by contemporary scholarship. Only Matthew's gospel mentions the guards. The three theories above still have serious flaws: (1) still fails to explain why the Jewish leaders did not produce the body. (2) and (3) still fail to explain the disciple's transformation; (2) furthermore fails to explain who moved the stone and is inconsistent with medical findings; (3) is furthermore inconsistent with the moral quality of the disciple's lives. Finally, these theories all fail to explain what happened to Paul, the subject to which we turn next.

#### 4. PAUL

Paul (originally named Saul) had a Jewish education which took place under the strict doctrines of the Pharisees. He was devoted to the Jewish law and he himself became a Pharisee, i.e. a member of one of the leading Jewish groups. He could boast "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Gal. 1:14). Paul was vehemently anti-Christian. He rigorously persecuted Christians, going from house to house to put Christians in prison. Paul was so opposed to Christianity because the Christian message was that people were saved through belief in Jesus which he felt robbed the Jewish law of its value in salvation. Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. Suddenly, in Damascus, he didn't simply cease his persecution of Christians but instead joined their movement! The book of Acts, written by Luke, records (and Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians) that while on the way to Damascus the risen Christ appeared to him in blinding light and he heard Christ appoint him to be one of his followers. Paul quickly became the greatest missionary of the early church. He later died as a martyr for his beliefs. If Paul had not in fact seen the risen Christ it is very different to explain how the transformation in his life took place.

Objection: Perhaps Paul never actually existed or was never really an opponent of Christianity.

Response: We have six letters which Paul almost certainly wrote; seven others which he probably wrote. The latter part of Acts, written by Luke, is almost exclusively a historical record of Paul's missionary journeys. Peter's second epistle refers to Paul and his letters. Furthermore, both Acts and Paul's own letters testify to the fact that Paul had previously persecuted Christians. Peter had Paul's letters and Peter certainly knew whether or not Paul persecuted the church. There is no way conceivable Paul could have lied about being a persecutor of the church without this lie being exposed. Furthermore when he was writing this he was a follower of Christ and therefore committed to honesty and integrity. Evidence seems to show that there is no literary dependence between the writings of Luke and Paul. This coincident testimony should only be rejected in light of strong evidence to the contrary.

Summary: That Paul saw Christ risen from the dead is the most logical explanation for Paul's conversion.

## 5. PROPHECIES ABOUT CHRIST

For many years before the birth of Jesus the hope of the Jews was for the Messiah. This hope was grounded in numerous Old Testament texts. Many of these texts were prophecies. Isaiah revealed the manner of the Messiah's birth (of a virgin); Isaiah also wrote of his execution with common criminals; Micah wrote of the place of his birth (Bethlehem- a town which probably had less than 1000 people); Genesis and Jeremiah specified his ancestry (a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from the tribe of Judah, the house of David); the Psalms prefigured his betrayal, his accusation by false witnesses, his manner of death (pierced in the hands and feet, although crucifixion had not yet been conceived as a mode of punishment), and his resurrection (he would not decay but would ascend on high); the prophecy prefiguring his betrayal required that the Messiah would (1) be betrayed, (2) by a friend, (3) for thirty pieces, (4) of silver which will be (5) cast on the floor, (6) of the temple, and (7) used to buy a potter's field; Amos wrote of the darkness over the land at Jesus' death; Malachi and perhaps four other Old Testament verses require that the temple in Jerusalem (destroyed in AD70 and not yet rebuilt) be still standing; Zechariah records the Messiah's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey; and Daniel foretells the timing of the Messiah's birth. The gospels record all of these prophecies as being fulfilled in Christ. Jewish and secular historians make reference to details which also confirm many of these prophecies. Although the calculation is somewhat ad hoc, the chance of just eight of these prophecies being fulfilled by coincidence has been estimated to be approximately one in 10 to the 17th power.

The major implications of this fulfillment is that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was the one God had chosen to save humanity from sin. Jesus said that he "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). The prophecies show clearly that Jesus was the one who God used to bring salvation to mankind. However the fulfillment of these also suggest that there is a divine intent behind the old and new Testaments and renders the Bible more credible- even divinely inspired.

Objection: The prophecies may have been written after the time of Jesus.

Response: (1) The completion of the Old Testament is generally dated to approximately 450BC although some scholars believe portions of it may have been written as late as the second century BC. The Hebrew Scriptures were very important to the Jews and the copying of manuscripts was done with great accuracy. Even the Old Testaments the Jews use contain these prophecies about the Messiah. (2) The Dead Sea Scrolls dates from the third century BC to the first century AD. They include the complete book of Isaiah and thousands of fragments which together represent every Old Testament book except Esther. They furthermore confirm the accuracy with which the Old Testament manuscripts were copied. (3) The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) was probably begun sometime in the third century BC. Scholars believe this to have been completed late in the second century BC. (4) A final piece of evidence that the prophecies were not added to the Old Testament after the life of Christ is the gospel of Matthew. Matthew again and again quotes Old Testament Scripture in his gospel and goes on to describe how each prophecy was fulfilled in Christ. Neither Matthew nor the Christian movement as a whole could have modified all existing Old Testament texts. Matthew would not have quoted the prophecies if they were not in the Old Testament texts for otherwise his quotations would have been shown to be false by both Jews and Christians.

\*Objection: The gospel writers may have fabricated details to make it appear that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies.

Response: We have argued above that the gospels are generally historically reliable. Nevertheless a few comments are worth mentioning: (1) When the gospels were being circulated there were some people still living who had been around when the events involving Jesus took place. If one of the gospel writers fabricated details known to contradict history, it is likely that some member of the Christian community would have corrected this. (2) It is also unclear why Matthew would have fabricated fulfilled prophecies and then willingly allowed himself to be put to death for following someone who he secretly knew was really not who he had claimed. (3) The Jewish community would have wanted to take any opportunity to discredit the gospel accounts. There were Jews alive who had witnessed the events concerning Jesus when the gospels were being circulated. Even though the Jewish Talmud refers to Jesus in derogatory ways, it never once makes the claim that the fulfillment of prophecies was falsified. (4) Some of the prophecies are shown to have been fulfilled by historical sources other than the gospel accounts. We noted the secular sources concerning darkness at Jesus' death. Also noted above was the reference by Josephus to the crucifixion (again a prophecy). These are perhaps two of the more impressive prophecies.

\*Objection: Jesus may have intentionally tried to fulfil the prophecies.

Response: It is possible that Jesus intentionally tried to fulfil some prophecies such as the prophecy that he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. However the fulfillment of many prophecies were well beyond his control: his place and time of birth, his lineage, his betrayal, the darkness, his resurrection etc.

Summary: Jesus fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah which were well beyond his control. The chance that these fulfillments were a coincidence is very small. The fulfillments show that Jesus was the Messiah: God had chosen Jesus as the one through whom he would save mankind.

## PART IV: CONCLUSION

It has been argued above that because Jesus claimed to be God he was either Lord, a liar, or a lunatic. Since latter two options seem extremely implausible, the only reasonable conclusion appears to be that Jesus is Lord and God and thus, furthermore, that what he taught was true. It was also argued from the disciple's transformation, the evidence of the empty tomb, and Paul's conversation that God did indeed raise Jesus from the dead. This resurrection furthermore validated Jesus' claims and teaching concerning himself and us. Finally, from Jesus' life and fulfillment of prophecy it was argued that Jesus was in fact the Messiah- that God had chosen Jesus as the one through whom he would save mankind.

The arguments above are certainly not a conclusive proof. Being a Christian does involve a degree of faith. The arguments above do, however, present a strong case for the truth of the basic Christian message: that Jesus is the Messiah and that if you trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior you will be saved. This salvation includes the forgiveness by God for the evil we have done; a right relationship with God under his rule; power to love one's neighbor and carry out God's commandments; and finally everlasting life with God.

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