

Survey of Biblical History – Part 1: Creation to Christ

#22 - THE PASSION WEEK, PART 4: RESURRECTION & ASCENSION

Sunday - The Resurrection of Christ (Matt. 28:1-8, 11-15; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10)

Early on Sunday morning, before dawn, an unusual earthquake occurred and an angel suddenly appeared to roll the stone away from the tomb. The guards saw this angel and fainted out of fright. Shortly afterward, several of the women came to visit the tomb bringing more spices to anoint the body. As they arrived at the tomb they discovered the stone had been removed and the body was gone. Mary Magdalene ran back to the city to get John and Peter. Meanwhile, the other women stood at the tomb totally perplexed. Suddenly two angels now appeared to them (see Matt. 28:5-7). At this point the women fled from the tomb in fear. At first, they thought not to tell anyone what happened, and then apparently decided they needed to tell the other disciples who most likely stayed in Bethany east of Jerusalem. As soon as Mary Magdalene informed Peter and John they ran back to the tomb. Peter was dismayed, but John believed that a miracle had happened. While all this was taking place the frightened guards came to the Jewish leaders and reported what they had seen. The Jews bribed the guards to tell the story that the disciples had stolen the body in the middle of the night while they were asleep. The rumor persisted for a number of years, but obviously had no serious impact in contravening the truth.

The Post-Resurrection Appearances (Matt. 28:9-10; Luke 24:13-43; John 20:11-21:25)

Peter and John left the grave site while Mary Magdalene remained. Suddenly the two angels reappeared asking why she was weeping. She replied because they had taken her Lord away. Just then Jesus appeared to her and she worshipped Him. Shortly after this appearance Jesus appeared to the other women who were on their way to inform the other disciples of what the angels told them. Jesus appeared to Peter, to 2 followers on the road to Emmaus, and then later Sunday evening to the disciples in the place where they were staying for fear of the Jews. Thomas was not there, but Jesus appeared again 8 days later when he was. Thomas was overwhelmed and cried out in worship, "My Lord and my God!" Later Jesus appeared to the disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where He restored Peter who had earlier denied Jesus during His trials in Jerusalem. Paul said Jesus appeared to 500 others as well (1 Cor. 15:6).

Note what the first century Jewish historian (no friend of Christianity) said about Jesus and his resurrection in Book 18 of his work Jewish Antiquities (as recently re-translated by T. C. Schmidt):

"And in this time, there was a certain Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man, for he was a doer of incredible deeds, a teacher of men who receive truisms with pleasure. And he brought over many from amongst the Jews and many from amongst the Greeks. [*He was thought to be the Christ*]. And, when Pilate had condemned him to the cross at the accusation of the first men amongst us, those who at first were devoted to him did not cease to be so, [*for on the third day it seemed to them that he was alive again*] given that the divine prophets had spoken such things and thousands of other wonderful things about him. And up till now the tribe of the Christians, who were named from him, has not disappeared."

Note the *italicized* sections in brackets [] were previously thought to be inserted later by Christians. Schmidt has shown through manuscript evidence that this is very unlikely, but also his more careful study has shown it has been mistranslated. The more likely translation adds the underlined portions. Schmidt has also shown that Josephus had connections to the same religious leaders that had Jesus crucified and his half-brother James executed and therefore had reliable sources of information.

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Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus

- **Unbelieving Skeptical Scholars Agree:**
 - 1) *Jesus was a real public figure*
 - 2) *Jesus was publicly crucified*
 - 3) *Jesus' followers claimed he rose again*

- **Theories that Deny the Resurrection**
 - 1) *Swoon Theory*
 - 2) *Wrong Tomb Theory*
 - 3) *Mass Hallucination Theory*
 - 4) *Stolen Body Theory*
 - 5) *Faked Resurrection Theory*
 - 6) *Mythical Theory*

- **Best Evidences for Jesus' Resurrection:**
 - 1) ***Death and resurrection unexpected***

Reinforced by the shocking, violent, and ignoble nature of His death given His messianic claims.
 - 2) ***Jesus certainly died by crucifixion***

Given his unexpected claims to deity and reports of miraculous power this appears inexplicable if story is made up.
 - 3) ***The empty tomb***

First century Jewish burials were meticulously conducted and verified.
 - 4) ***Multiple claims to the resurrection***

The earliest record of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-7) is widely accepted by historical scholars.
 - 5) ***The testimony of women***

Female eye-witnesses were regarded as unreliable, thus inadmissible in court.
 - 6) ***Transformation of disciples***

Before the resurrection they were fearful. Afterward, they were filled with confident hope.
 - 7) ***The conversion of Paul***

One of the most notorious and unlikely converts in the early church.
 - 8) ***Rapid spread of Christianity***

Given the widespread beliefs concerning the deity and resurrection of Christ (contrary to other messianic figures) under the threat of persecution, it's unlikely Christians would've died for a lie.
 - 9) ***No corrections to apparent gospel discrepancies.***

Each of the four gospels have apparent discrepancies that on the surface make the story of the resurrection seem implausible (e.g., one angel versus two angels, a hysterical woman as a primary witness, etc.). The second century skeptic Celsus (AD 175-181) and the third century skeptic Porphyry (AD 232-303) raised these concerns. Some apocryphal books like the gospel of Peter sought to address such criticisms, but the church never accepted these books, nor did they seek to alter the gospels to iron out apparent discrepancies.

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Jesus' Last Instructions for His Disciples

1. The Command to Make Disciples and Baptize Them (Matt. 28:16-20)

Jesus was now ready to ascend back into heaven and resume His rightful place at the right hand of the throne of the Father. But before doing so, He needed to give His disciples some last-minute instructions, the most important they would hear from Him. Jesus had already made clear that He was going to establish the Church, the newly organized people of God that would include both Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:3-6). No longer would God's program of redemption be restricted to the Jewish people. Rather in accordance with His promise to Abraham, God was now bringing blessing upon all the nations of the earth (see Gal. 3:8). Gone was the whole Old Testament system of worship with its highly regulated laws and ceremonies. Jesus had fulfilled what these pointed to in His death and resurrection. With this in mind, Jesus issues a new command we call the Great Commission (see Matt. 28:18-20). Along with the establishment of the Lord's Supper the night before Jesus died, Baptism becomes the second ordinance Jesus gives to the Church to celebrate. These two ordinances replace the OT ordinances and focus the believer's attention upon the work of Christ. Baptism in particular, speaks of the renewing and cleansing power of the Holy Spirit. The waters of baptism signify the washing away of one's sins through the death of Christ (Titus 3:5-6). Furthermore, it signifies the believer's being joined together with Christ in His death and resurrection. The believer has died to his old life of sin and is regenerated to an eternal life of spiritual abundance (Rom. 6:1-11).

2. The Command to be Witnesses to the Whole World (Acts 1:1-8)

For 40 days Jesus continued to instruct the disciples about the kingdom of God. When the disciples thought of the kingdom of God they were thinking strictly of the messianic kingdom promised in the OT. What they did not realize is that kingdom had deeper and fuller implications than they imagined. They were thinking that it had significance only for the nation of Israel, but Jesus has been indicating that it has significance for the whole world. Knowing that something important is about to happen, the disciples ask Jesus if He is going to restore the kingdom to Israel. They already know that He is the Messiah. They are beginning to understand the significance of His death and resurrection and now they assume that He will establish the geo-political kingdom for the Jewish people. It is important to realize that Jesus does not suggest that the disciples are mistaken about the establishment of such a kingdom (see Acts 1:7-8). Jesus is acknowledging that in some undisclosed time in the future God will restore the kingdom for Israel, but right now the kingdom is for the nations via the gospel they themselves are to spread. Jesus in essence is establishing the kingdom through them, but only in a limited way. The kingdom is being inaugurated with the imminent arrival of the Holy Spirit, but its greater consummation awaits the future. Jesus is forming the spiritual dimension of the kingdom through the Church right now. When He returns again, He will establish it in its fullness including all the promises given to Israel. Jesus will reign upon the earth on the throne of David in the city of Jerusalem. He will restore the geo-political promises to Israel coupled with her experience of all the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant. The Church however, experiences the blessings of the New Covenant in the present age. Israel as a nation will experience them in the future.

The Ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:9-11)

After His last instructions, Jesus ascends into heaven from the Mount of Olives as the disciples look on. Angels inform them that He will return in just the same way (Zech. 14:4). At that time, He will consummate the kingdom, restoring Israel and fulfilling the rest of Biblical prophecy.