

*Jesus, Miracles
and
History*

Did He Really Work Wonders
and
Rise From the Dead?

Dr. Steven Waterhouse

Jesus, History, and Miracles

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Preface

This booklet is an extract from the book, *Jesus and History*, available in hardback (www.amazon.com) or free download at www.webtheology.com. The more complete research presents evidence that the four Gospels are genuine in authorship (not forgeries) and were written at an early date. *Jesus and History* also contains chapters on the historical accuracy of the people and places in the Gospel accounts. References to Gospel characters that are also mentioned in other ancient books or in archaeological inscriptions are discussed.

The material printed here aims to strengthen the faith of those who already trust in Christ and to persuade unbelievers that the Lord Jesus Christ can be trusted as Savior from our sins. His miracles and resurrection establish His claim to offer forgiveness and eternal life to anyone who places his or her faith in Him.

Jesus, Miracles and History

My philosophy professor with absolute certainty told us that there are no absolutes. He said we could not be certain that the desk he was sitting on was real or that he himself was real. I raised my hand to state I absolutely believed that a scrambled egg would not win the gold medal in the next Olympic pole vault competition. Furthermore, I was absolutely certain that everyone in the room possessed an attached head.

One should be skeptical about any claims to miracles. Only a fool believes everything. However, only a fool believes nothing. No amount of evidence can make faith in the Lord Jesus Christ unnecessary, but enough evidence exists to make faith reasonable.

While being skeptical about miracle claims is wise, it is not wise to rule out the miraculous simply based upon a closed worldview before checking out any evidence as to what happened. A final determination should be based on history not philosophy alone.

Bible critics have long placed faith in Jesus in a ðno-win situation.ö They *a priori* deny the miraculous regardless of changing philosophical trends over time. Worldviews morph over the generations but denial of the possibility of miracles remains constant.

The Newtonian view of the Universe was that it is regulated by natural laws. Though Newton himself was a Christian, many took natural law to shut out the miraculous. Nothing contrary to normal rules of the Universe could ever happen.

However, in the modern world of Einstein's relativity, critics of Christianity now rule out the miraculous because everything is relative.³⁵⁷ Why? Assuming natural laws, one should posit a Lawgiver. Assuming relativity, then anything, including miracles could happen. If for the sake of argument, we concede there are no absolutes, this actually opens the door to the possibility of the miraculous. Lutheran theologian and historian John Warwick Montgomery made the connection between relativity and the possibility of miracles:

But can the modern man accept a "miracle" such as the resurrection? The answer is a surprising one: The Resurrection has to be accepted by us just because we are modern men — men living in the Einsteinian-relativistic age. For us, unlike people of the Newtonian epoch, the universe is no longer a tight, safe, predictable playing field in which we know all the rules. Since Einstein, no modern has had the right to rule out the possibility of events because of prior knowledge of "natural law." The only way we can know whether an event *can* occur is to see whether in fact it *has* occurred. The problem of "miracles," then, must be solved in the realm of historical investigation, not in the realm of philosophical speculation. And note that a historian, in facing an alleged "miracle," is really facing nothing new. All historical events are unique, and the test of their facticity can only be the accepted documentary approach that we have followed here. No historian has a right to a closed system of natural causation, for as the Cornell logician Max Black has shown in a recent essay, the very concept of cause is "a peculiar, unsystematic, and erratic notion," and therefore "any attempt to state a universal law of causation must prove futile."³⁵⁸

An open mind involves not ruling out miracles before examining the historical evidence for them. Jesus of Nazareth is a unique person. While faith is necessary, in the end many conclude it is unreasonable and contrary to the evidence to deny Jesus' claims whereas it is reasonable to trust Him as Savior.

Hostile Witnesses to Jesus' Miracles

A college student was moping in the library after a class with the above mentioned philosophy professor. She said his lecture had just destroyed her faith in Jesus' miracles. My response was to say that it is odd a teacher 2,000 years later can assert Jesus had no power. His enemies at the time admitted He did. They just claimed Jesus' power came from Satan not God.

We cannot now review the previous arguments for authorship, early date, and general historical reliability of the Gospels. It has already been established that the Gospels are authentic as to authorship.

They were written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses of Jesus. They are not mythology but trustworthy in general historical matters where they can be checked.

Given the early dates for the composition of the Gospels, fascinating questions arise about miracle claims. If untrue, how did the Gospel authors ever get away with asserting Jesus' enemies believed He could do miracles? It would have been one thing for the Gospels to invent stories that Jesus' followers claimed He had powers. It is a different matter to assert confidently **those who hated Him agreed He had such supernatural powers**. If untrue, this would have been easily discredited a lie. If true, what does this say about Jesus?

Time after time the New Testament lists Jesus' enemies as hostile witnesses that He could perform miracles. High Priest Caiaphas advised the council of chief priests and Pharisees that Jesus be killed due to His popularity as a miracle worker. "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs" (John 11:47, see also 11:47-53). Herod Antipas seems to have worried the miracle-working Jesus might be John the Baptist returned to haunt or punish him. "And King Herod heard of it [i.e. the miracles, see 6:13], for His name had become well known . . . that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him" (Mark 6:14, see also Luke 23:8). Nicodemus prior to his conversion said, ". . . Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). The apostolic preaching assumes Jesus' opponents concede His miracles (Acts 2:22, 4:16, 10:37-38, 26:26).

Those who hated Jesus still believed He could do miracles. After an exorcism in which a blind and mute man was healed, the crowds concluded Jesus must be "the Son of David," that is the coming Messiah. The opposition does not even try to argue that this miracle is a fraud. Instead, they challenge the power source by which the miracle was done. According to them, Jesus' power comes from "Beelzebul, the ruler of demons" (Matthew 12:22-24, see also Mark 3:22).³⁵⁹

Other passages give the same pattern. There is a split over Jesus' source of power, but everyone agrees that He had the ability to work miracles:

After the demon was cast out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed, and were saying, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." But the Pharisees were saying, "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons" (Matthew 9:33-34).

The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who seeks to kill You?" (John 7:20).

The Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me" (John 8:48-49).

A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words. Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?" (John 10:19-21).

It is astounding that hostile witnesses concede Jesus' powers. Such evidence as exists outside the Bible points in the same direction. The enemies of Christianity in earlier times agreed He could do miracles. They just put Him in the category of a "magician" or "sorcerer." In order not to disrupt the flow of argument here, possible sources outside the Bible placing Jesus in the magician category will be relegated to the footnotes for those with interest.³⁶⁰

The opposition provides strong proof Jesus could do miracles, but Jesus' followers were witnesses with great proven integrity.

The Character of Christ's Disciples

The early Christians would make credible witnesses in any court. They were raised with Jewish convictions against bearing "false witness" (Exodus 20:16). Many of them died brutally still asserting Jesus is the Son of God (confirmed by miracles) and that He rose from the dead. More studies about the disciples as credible witnesses will come in the following material on the greatest miracle of all, the Resurrection. (See also pp. 77-81 for discussion of John the Baptist)

doubts and Jesusø claim to miracles as being authentic judged by the principle of embarrassing statements being true statements.)

JesusøMiracles: Public and Involving Proven Cases of Need

Other miracle claims often involve only private encounters. Allah gave private revelations to Mohammed. The angel revealed golden plates to Joseph Smith. In many instances, one can challenge whether the recipient of the miracle was even really sick. He or she could be a fake planted in the crowd to give the appearance of a miracle, or both òsicknessö and òrecoveryö are entirely psychological.

Many of the miracle stories in the Gospels do not allow these challenges. They are entirely public. Mass numbers of people, friends and foes, could easily tell whether the miracle did or did not take place. The miracle accounts of Jesus also involve people who were demonstrably infirm. There are numerous examples of public miracles for those with proven needs:

1. Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37:

In a public synagogue meeting, Jesus cast out a demon. òImmediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galileeö (Mark 1:28).

2. Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16:

With òlarge crowdsö observing, Jesus touched a leper (a startling thing to do when the man had an obvious problem). The result of the healing was that large crowds gathered and Jesus òcould no longer publicly enter a city . . . they were coming to Him from everywhereö (Mark 1:45).

3. Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26:

Because the crowds were blocking the entrance, friends of a paralyzed man lowered him through a hole in the roof.

4. John 5:1-9:

At a public pool with a multitude around it, Jesus healed a lame man òwho had been thirty-eight years in his sicknessö (John 5:5). The man had not been a disciple. He did not even know Jesus

(John 5:13). He certainly had not pretended to be handicapped for 38 years just to get some attention.

5. Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11:

During a synagogue service, Jesus healed a man with a ōwithered hand.ö This was another public occasion involving a man with an undeniable problem.

6. Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10:

Jewish elders request that Jesus heal a centurionø's servant because the officer had donated to build the synagogue in Capernaum. He was obviously a well-known person.

7. Luke 7:11-17:

Jesus encountered a funeral procession with a ōsizeable crowd from the city.ö He raised the widowø's son from the coffin. öThis report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding districtsö (Luke 7:17).

8. Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39:

The demon-possessed man who lived in a cemetery was undeniably sick. The people of the region had tried to restrict him with chains. His change of character and the loss of 2,000 swine would have been noticed by a large number of people in the area.

9. Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56:

While the raising of Jairusø's daughter from the dead was witnessed by a limited group, everyone outside the house knew this girl was dead. öThis news spread throughout all that landö (Matthew 9:26).

10. Matthew 9:27-35:

Two blind men are healed and öspread the news about Him throughout all that landö (Matthew 9:31, see also 9:33-35).

11. Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15:

The crowd of 5,000 men plus women and children believed Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish. They were convinced

enough to come and take Him by force to make Him king . . . (John 6:15).

12. Mark 7:31-37:

The crowd brings a deaf man to Jesus. Though he tells the group not to tell anyone they continued to proclaim it . . . saying "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak" (Mark 7:36-37).

13. Regarding public miracles Matthew 15:29-31 says: "Departing from there, Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up on the mountain, He was sitting there. And large crowds came to Him, bringing with them those who were lame, crippled, blind, mute, and many others, and they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them. So the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel."

14. Matthew 15:32-38; Mark 8:1-9:

Another group of 4,000 men plus women and children witnessed the multiplication of loaves and fish.

15. Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43:

Crowds observed the failure of the disciples to help a boy brought by his father, but Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy and gave him back to his father (Luke 9:42).

16. John Chapter 9:

Jesus heals a man born blind who is identified by his parents. Neither the man nor his parents had been followers of Jesus. He had not faked blindness since birth.

17. Luke 11:14:

Jesus heals a mute person, and the crowds were amazed.

18. Luke 13:10-17:

In a public synagogue service, Jesus healed a woman who had been bent over double for 18 years. It is unlikely she faked it for 18 years.

19. Luke 14:1-6:

At a Pharisee's house Jesus heals a man with *ōdropsy*. This refers to body swelling by retention of liquid, another obvious need that was clearly not a fraud.

20. Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43:

With a large crowd observing, Jesus healed some blind men including Bartimaeus.

This list is by no means complete. John 20:30-31 and 21:25 assert many miracles were not recorded in the Gospels. Many were public and involved people who could not have feigned illness in order to gain attention. Perhaps the most astounding miracle, outside of Jesus' own resurrection, is the raising of Lazarus.

In John 11 Lazarus died and had a public funeral. With witnesses Jesus requested that the tomb be opened, and He called Lazarus forth. This resulted in some of the witnesses accepting Jesus as Savior. However, others ran to the opposition to report the miracle. They did not believe in Jesus, but they did believe He had raised Lazarus. This is the context for the admission by the chief priests, Pharisees and possibly even Caiaphas himself that Jesus could do miracles (John 11:46-50).

These things are astounding, but perhaps the most telling point in the narrative comes in John 12:9-11, and 17-19:

ōThe large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus (John 12:9-11).

ōSo the people who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify about Him. For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He has performed this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, -You see that you are not doing any good: look, the world has gone after him (John 12:17-19).

The Gospel of John not only claims that Lazarus died and had a public funeral, but that Lazarus later showed up in Jerusalem to testify about Jesus. If untrue, this assertion could easily be refuted. In addition, verse 17 says that people who witnessed the raising of Lazarus were testifying to Jesus' ability to do miracles during the Palm Sunday parade. If untrue, this also could easily be discredited.

If Lazarus never appeared alive and healthy in the city or, if no one in the procession ever testified to Lazarus' restoration to life, then the rest of the story also collapses.

If the Gospel witnesses were just making up stories, why take the risk of including features like this if they never happened? Yet, if they did happen, what does it say about Jesus that Lazarus appeared in the city after his own funeral or that witnesses to Lazarus' exit from the tomb were testifying and pointing to Jesus along the parade route!

Evidently, the opposition gave up on trying to counter the evidence. Instead of refuting Lazarus or the witnesses, they conceded Jesus' ability to work miracles and decided both Jesus and Lazarus would have to die so they could preserve their religious authority. Yet, not far from the Palm Sunday account, John 12:42 says, "many even of the rulers believed in Him."

Many of Jesus' miracles were public. They involved people who had proven infirmities with little or no possibility they could be frauds. The apostles could run around preaching that the opposition had witnessed the miracles just as much as believers did.

"But many of the crowd believed in Him; and they were saying, 'When the Christ comes, He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He?' (John 7:31).

"But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him (John 12:37).

"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know - (Acts 2:22).

ō . . . saying, ÷What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny itø ö (Acts 4:16).

ō*You know of* Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Himö (Acts 10:38).

ōFor the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a cornerö (Acts 26:26).

Jesus was a great teacher. Yet, the cause for His popularity must be found by another explanation. The masses followed Him because they believed He demonstrated His claims. The historical rise of Christianity against all odds is best explained by His ability to confirm His teachings by His powers.

Conclusion on JesusøMiracles

Certain facts should be admitted by all people, Christian or non-Christian. The New Testament comes from the first century and has not been altered to any significant degree. It contains the witness of people who were ethical and sincere. It would be contrary to human nature for them to suffer death for something they knew to be a hoax, especially when there could be no hope for earthly gain. The New Testament also contains the astounding claim that many of Christø **enemies** believed He could do miracles. It would be the ultimate in stupidity to make such claims if they were false. Everyone in 1st century Israel would have known whether such public miracles took place or not, and the authorities could have easily discredited Christian writings if the opposition did not in fact concede that Jesus could do miracles.

However, it is also an historical fact that thousands of people became Christians even though it meant persecution and horrible death.

They were in a position to know if these miracles took place, and yet, they decided to believe Jesus was sent from God.

Persecution which attempts to change people's long cherished beliefs is often met with resistance. However, persecution that attempts to keep people in an entrenched belief that they have adhered to all their lives is hardly ever necessary. Such would be expected to be totally effective. If a dedicated Moslem, for example, were in a situation where he would face death to become a Jewish rabbi, one would expect very few devoted Moslems to ever suddenly convert to Judaism. Likewise, the Jewish people of the 1st century would have been expected to remain committed Jews even without any persecution whatsoever. Persecution when applied with such severity as faced the early Christians would have been expected to be virtually 100% successful in keeping people in the heritage into which they were born and raised. This is particularly true if they could tell the claims about Christ's public miracles were totally fraudulent (Remember the nature of the claims is such that they would have been able to know with ease if they were false.)

Yet, it is a fact that Christianity arose against brutality and martyrdom. People gave up their ancestral and cherished beliefs to become Christians and faced great political and social pressures, even the likelihood of death. The only explanation for their unwavering faith is that the miracles of Christ were so convincing they gladly forsook Judaism to follow Him. All history is based upon probability. The same facts, which should be acknowledged by all, make it reasonable to conclude that Christ's miracles actually happened, and make it unreasonable to conclude they did not. The literary integrity of the Gospels, the ethical and psychological character of the disciples, the claims of public miracles witnessed by friends and foe alike, and the mass exodus of people into Christianity despite the horrors of persecution are best explained by the historicity of Christ's miracles. In fact, the only satisfactory way to explain these things is to believe Christ was a miracle worker.

Of course, the resurrection of Jesus Himself is the greatest miracle of all. If Jesus rose from the dead, then we must all pay close attention to what He teaches. The historical evidence is compelling that He did in fact defeat death.

The Resurrection

The tomb of Jesus was empty on the first Easter morning. If not, His opponents could and would have turned the sepulcher into an exhibit or loaded His body on a wagon to display it for all of Jerusalem to see. Either would have effectively eliminated the rise of Christianity. The question facing us is no different than 2,000 years ago. Jesus' tomb was empty. How did this happen? Incredibly, none of the natural explanations make sense. Factual circumstances box one into the resurrection being the best explanation of the undeniably empty tomb.³⁶¹

Public Events

The Gospels record certain public events that had to be true in order for the preaching and writings of the early Christians to be credible. The trials of Jesus involving the Sanhedrin, Caiaphas, Herod Antipas and Pilate must have occurred. References in Josephus and Tacitus (see Chapter 9) grant Jesus' trial and crucifixion as historical. The procession of the cross through the streets, Jesus' public execution by a busy road, Joseph of Arimathea's visit with Pilate to request Jesus' body for burial, and the posting of guards at the tomb, all must have been credible. If not, the gospel accounts would have been easy to dismiss.

Matthew 27:45, 51-54, 28:1-6 give specific and startling details (darkness for three hours [noon to 3:00pm], an earthquake, the veil in the Temple being torn in two). If creating fiction, it would not be safe to include such public details unless all would agree they happened. Many would know if they were true or fraudulent, but if true, what does this say for the rest of the account in the Gospels? Those in that day would have every social incentive not to become Christians. Yet, shortly the apostles would preach Christ's trial, death, and the empty tomb as undeniable facts to those in Jerusalem (e.g., Acts 3:13-15). Such evidence as does exist outside the Gospels confirms these public events, even darkness in the middle of a spring day.³⁶²

Public events surrounding the "Passion Week" must have been true in order for Christianity to get started. If there had been no trial, crucifixion, request for Jesus' body, guards, darkness, earthquake, or

torn veil, why would anyone believe the rest of the story? Most important, the empty tomb should be included in any list of known facts (for reasons explained below). The only question is how did Jesusøbody exit this tomb?

The Swoon Theory

Was the tomb empty because Jesus never died on the cross? Perhaps He merely fainted. Later He was able to recover and leave the tomb.

The soldiers, whose task was execution, knew a corpse when they saw one. After Joseph of Arimathea (a Sanhedrin member) asked Pilate for Jesusøbody, öPilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already deadö (Mark 15:44). The centurion affirmed Jesusødeath. John 19:34 adds that the on-site execution detail ösaw that He was already dead,ö but to be certain öone of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear.ö

John, who solemnly affirms to his readers that he was an eyewitness, affirms as an incidental comment that he observed blood and water flow from Jesusø wounded side. *The Journal of the American Medical Association* published a detailed study *On the Physical Death of Jesus* co-authored by a pathologist, a medical graphics artist (both from Mayo Clinic) and a pastor. Water flowing from Jesusøside was probably öpericardial fluid . . . in the setting of í impending acute heart failure . . .ö³⁶³

The swoon theory can not overcome the historical and medical facts that Jesus died on the cross.

öClearly, the weight of the historical and medical evidence indicates 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.ö³⁶⁴

The Wrong Tomb Theory

If the women and then the disciples went to the wrong tomb, they may have discovered it empty and in hysteria started the resurrection rumor.

Based upon the principle of embarrassment statements likely to produce embarrassment would not be creative fiction but true. If merely composing stories, the Gospel authors would not have begun the Easter narrative with *women* discovering anything, nor would they portray the disciples' initial reaction of disbelief.

The wrong tomb theory miserably fails to explain the known facts. If the disciples had gone to the wrong tomb, then the Jewish and Roman authorities were still guarding the right tomb and would have had access to Jesus' body. They could have stopped the spread of Christianity by turning the real tomb into an exhibit or by parading Jesus' body on a wagon through Jerusalem. The authorities could not demonstrate that the disciples were deluded because they knew well that the genuine Jesus' tomb was indeed empty. This same logic destroys the objection that the disciples were having hallucinations. If they were merely seeing things, then the enemies still had Jesus' body in the tomb.

The Hallucination Theory

The hallucination view encounters the same objection that the wrong tomb explanation faces. If the disciples were hallucinating, then the authorities could have utterly discredited the apostolic preaching of the resurrection. All they would need to have done is to direct the public to the tomb and body of Jesus.

Furthermore, a corporate hallucination of over 500 people at one time is ridiculous. Over 500 people claimed to see the risen Lord on one occasion (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Also, something beyond hallucinations by followers is needed to explain the turnaround of those who had not believed in Jesus during His earthly ministry. These would not have been impressed or persuaded by the mere hallucinations of people they did not at all

respect at the time. Most notably James, the Lord's half-brother thought Jesus was out of His mind (Mark 3:21; John 7:5) until after he had seen Jesus back from the grave (1 Corinthians 15:7). The same logic applies to Saul's conversion to a belief he had formerly hated. James and Saul believed they had actually seen the risen Jesus for themselves. Hallucinations by others could never explain their change.

The disciples were so confident that they had seen the risen Lord that they died for their faith. None of them had doubts or second thoughts about the resurrection. It can scarcely be denied that they sincerely believed they had seen Jesus.

The Stolen Body Theory/Before Burial

The official story to explain the empty tomb was that the disciples stole Jesus's body while the guards slept. The choice of this explanation is itself evidence that everyone at the time believed Jesus's body had been buried in the tomb.³⁶⁵

Some in modern times have maintained that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus from the cross but never placed it in the grave. By contrast, Jewish authorities were convinced that the body was buried in the tomb. If they had believed that Joseph and Nicodemus did not bury Jesus, they would not have requested Pilate for a detachment of guards to protect a particular gravesite. The fact that they knew the location of the tomb implies that they had directly or indirectly observed the burial. They were suspicious that the disciples would steal the body. They would not have taken the disciples word alone as truth. Therefore, it may be safely concluded that the Jewish authorities had independent confirmation and had good reason to believe the body was buried in a specific tomb when they asked Pilate for a guard and when the guard was posted. The disciples also knew the body was in the grave. The women were going to a known location to complete burial customs on Sunday morning. Finally, the Roman soldiers guarded the area believing the body was within the tomb. Their story subsequent to the resurrection was that the body had been stolen as they were guarding it. Thus, no one ever questioned or denied the body was in the tomb when the soldiers arrived and secured it with a seal.

The Stolen Body Theory ó After Burial

The chief priests and elders bribed the soldiers who had guarded the tomb (Matthew 28:11-15). They obviously believed they had been guarding Jesus' real tomb and that Jesus' body was inside. The religious elite told the soldiers "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble" (Matthew 28:13-14). (The very choice of this tactic helps rule out modern explanations about Jesus' empty tomb: the swoon theory, the wrong-tomb theory, the hallucination theory, or any body theft before entombment.)

It is highly unlikely that Pilate never eventually heard about the early Christian claim to the resurrection of Jesus. Both apostolic preaching and the rapid numerical growth of Christianity (Acts 2:41, 3,000 in one day; Acts 4:4, 5,000 men; Acts 6:1,7) would likely have drawn Pilate's attention. The Nazareth decree may have been the Roman response to the empty tomb.³⁶⁶

An important undeniable fact regarding the charge that the disciples stole Jesus' body from the tomb is that no court ever prosecuted or tried the disciples for doing so. If Pilate heard this accusation (and he probably did), he never believed there was any basis for a case regarding this serious charge. At the least, the Jewish authorities who crucified Jesus for being a deceiver never even tried to convict the disciples of robbing the grave and then preaching the ultimate apostasy and deception. No such trials (or even continuing charges of grave-robbery) are recorded in the book of Acts. The most serious charge of stealing Jesus' body is quickly dropped. Why? There was no prosecution for grave robbing because there was no case against the disciples. This was true for a number of obvious reasons.

First, guards did not sleep. It was possibly a death penalty offense to fail on a night watch. "If it was not apparent which soldier had failed in duty, then lots were drawn to see who would be punished with death for the guard unit's failure."³⁶⁷ One possible punishment would be to be stripped naked and burned (including burned to death).³⁶⁸

Sleeping on guard duty would have been highly unlikely. Even more improbable would be the entire squad dosing off on such an important assignment. The involvement of the chief priests and the governor, as well as, the official seal over the tomb shows the importance of their military assignment. In addition, had they slept, no one could have possibly slept through all the racket required to steal the body of Jesus.

The stone over the entrance to the tomb may have weighed as much as 3,000-4,000 pounds.³⁶⁹ Think of a thick stone about 5 or 6 feet in diameter. This was likely rolled down a slope and blocked with a wedge to seal Jesus' tomb. Then a seal was affixed over both the stone and the sepulcher wall to prevent and warn against any tampering.

Any sleeping guards would have been stone deaf not to awaken during the efforts it would have taken to open the sepulcher in the darkness. Some combination of lamps, ropes, animals, and team of men with tools would have roused any sleeping guards.

Furthermore, according to John 20:7, the linen wrappings were left behind as was the face-cloth rolled up in a place by itself. Just from the arrangement of these cloths, John believed in the resurrection. Evidently, to accept the grave-robbing theory one must not only accept that the guards slept through the commotion but that the disciples took the time to unwind the wrappings, perhaps fold them, and in general tidy up the place before making off with a body under the threat of attack!

Guards on such an important duty facing severe penalties for dereliction would not sleep. They could not possibly have slept during any grave robbing.

Finally, sleeping people do not make reliable witnesses to anything. Those who claim to identify criminals that they saw while they were asleep would not help any prosecutor's case. No arrests were made because there was no evidence whatsoever of guilt.

The Disciples as Criminals

The disciples do not fit the profile of criminals. It would have been psychologically and ethically improbable, and physically impossible for them to have robbed the grave (either by overpowering the guards or doing so without waking them).

Regarding psychology, something transformed the disciples from wimps to champions of a Jesus who returned from the grave. It is obvious the disciples sincerely believed Jesus arose from the dead. They willingly died horrible deaths for their faith without the slightest hope of earthly reward or recognition. If they had stolen the body, then they knew their message was a lie. People have died for lies, but it is against human nature to die for a known lie unless there is the possibility of great gain by taking the risk. If the disciples knew their claim of the resurrection was false, it becomes very difficult to find a motivation that explains their willingness to suffer torture and death. If they stole the body, then they knew they were lying; but their dramatic turnabout from cowardice to bold courage demonstrates at least that they sincerely believed they had seen Jesus alive. If anything, it would have taken even greater proof that Jesus was alive to change those who formerly disbelieved Him (such as half-brothers James and Jude or Saul of Tarsus).

Next we must consider ethics and culture. The disciples taught the world its highest system of ethics. Were they all liars? Would they have told lies which they knew would lead innocent people to martyrdom without standing to gain any earthly advantage? Could they have held this conspiracy together without anyone caving in to reveal the ðrealö truth of grave-robbing? Yet, despite all obstacles they gave a unified front that their witness to a risen Christ was the truth. They were highly ethical and credible witnesses.³⁷⁰

Something convincing must have also changed them to alter their inherited culture. They changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday to commemorate the resurrection. They believed Jesus was God in the flesh and worshipped Him believing this was not a violation of the commandment ðYou shall fear **only** the Lord your God, and you shall worship Him . . .ö (Deuteronomy 6:13).

It was physically impossible for a timid band of disciples to overpower the guards (let alone remove the body) without alarm. Any attempt by these men to challenge the guards would have likely resulted in casualties.

Psychology, ethics, and culture, all cause one to reject the disciples as lying criminals. On the contrary, these factors show it would have taken strong proof for the disciples to first believe in the resurrection and then later to sacrifice all in order to preach the resurrected Jesus as God's Son and Savior.

Jesus Rose from the Dead!

Jesus's tomb was undeniably empty on the first Easter morning. Natural explanations are all dead-ends which fail to satisfy various concrete facts of the situation.

If His body had remained in the tomb, the authorities would have drawn public attention to the remains, and thus expose the early Christians as liars. If they could have done so, they most certainly would have produced Jesus's corpse.

The tomb was empty but the swoon theory will not work. Jesus definitely died. The wrong-tomb theory and hallucination theories likewise fail because then the body would have remained in the real tomb, and the guards would never have made up any grave-robbing explanation for the empty tomb. Obviously, their story itself concedes the point the tomb was empty.

Finally, the grave robbing charge fails to explain the undeniably empty tomb. These guards would not have slept fearing penalties and failure for an assignment given by the top rulers in the province. Had they slept, then no one could have plundered the grave without disturbing them. Also, had they slept they could not have identified anyone as a criminal. This was a ridiculous story that never resulted in any prosecution for Christians. Meanwhile, they kept running around making fools of the authorities by preaching the risen Jesus. Even 2,000 years later, on strictly historical and logical grounds, the far best explanation for the undeniably empty tomb is that the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead!³⁷¹

A Response to the “Historical Jesus”

Historical evidence alone does not eliminate a need for faith. Yet, a personal trust in Jesus as Savior is a reasonable step. Contrary to a skeptical conclusion, faith in Jesus Christ is not a foolish leap into the dark; it is a reasonable step in the direction indicated by strong evidence that He did miracles, defeated death, and would never lie by making any false claims.

In the Bible Christ claims to be God the Son who died for our sins on the cross and rose again. By dying on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sins. He calls us to personal faith in Him promising to give forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus Himself said, “For this is the will of My Father that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I myself will raise Him up on the last day” (John 6:40). He also made the bold assertion, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the father but by Me” (John 14:6).

Please respond to Jesus’ offer by placing your faith in Him as Savior. You can best do this in a prayer that expresses faith in Him and His death on the cross. “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13).

Endnotes

357. Dr. John Whitcomb told me that when he was a student at Princeton Albert Einstein attended all the showings and discussions of the Moody science films about creation.

358. John Warwick Montgomery, *Where Is History Going: A Christian Response to Secular Philosophies of History* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc., 1969) p. 71; see also John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded Upon Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978, pp. 43-73.

359. After this Jesus countered with the logic quoted by Abraham Lincoln, "A house divided against itself can not stand" (Matthew 12:25; Mark 3:25). Satan would not be the power source for exorcisms and healings.

360. Early extra-biblical sources often classify Jesus as a sorcerer or magician. At the very least, this means Jesus could dazzle people with wonders and tricks. Using the Gospels as a guide these may also be intended as hints that ancient non-Christian people conceded the point that Jesus had supernatural abilities. They still did not believe His power came from God. Believing Jesus' name has magic powers, one ancient pagan exorcism formula contained the phrase, "I conjure you by the God of the Hebrews, Jesus" (see Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, p. 157). Josephus in the Greek textual tradition calls Jesus "the achiever of extraordinary deeds" (*Antiquities*, 18.63, Maier translation, p. 265). If we adopt the Arabic textual tradition, then the same passage may still contain a reference to Jesus' ability to amaze people, "concerning whom the prophets have reported wonders." This can easily mean that a comparison of Jesus' life to the "wonders" predicted by the prophets would make people think (including Josephus) "he was perhaps the Messiah." Several passages in the Talmud charge Jesus with sorcery. Jesus "practiced sorcery and led Israel astray" (*Sanhedrin* 43a). For this reason Jesus was executed on Passover Eve. Evans writes, "Finally, even in rabbinic tradition recorded in the Talmud, we find discussion over the legitimacy of being healed in the name of Jesus. Evidently, some rabbis believed it was better to die than to be healed in the name of Jesus. A discussion such as this attests to the ongoing reputation of Jesus as healer and exorcist" (p. 157). Pagan authors as well often placed Jesus in the category of magician. Suetonius in *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero 6.16 calls Christianity a "superstition" (*superstitionis novae ac maleficae*). This refers to those who work evil magic. In countering the Jew Trypho, Christian Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165) gave the Jewish position regarding Jesus and miracles. "But though they saw such works, they asserted it was magic art. For they dared to call

Him a magician, and a deceiver of the peopleö (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 69, *ANF* 1:233). In *The First Apology of Justin* 30, Justin counters the pagan view of Christ and miracles. This writing addressed to Roman Emperor Antonius Pius answers the critical question of the day. öWhat should prevent that He whom we call Christ, being a man born of men, **performed what we call His mighty works by magical art**, and by this appeared to be the Son of God?ö (See *ANF* 1:172.) Justin then answers the false view that Jesus was a sorcerer.

Later Origen wrote a defense of Christianity in rebuttal to Celsus who had attacked Christianity in about A.D. 150. öAnd he [Celsus] next proceeds to bring a charge against the Savior Himself, **alleging that it was by means of sorcery that He was able to accomplish the wonders which He performed**ö (*Contra Celsum*, 6, *ANF* 4:399). In Chapter 38 Origen quotes Celsusö book which had claimed Jesus learned magic arts while a boy in Egypt. ö. . . that he (Jesus), having been brought up as an illegitimate child, and having served for hire in Egypt, and then coming to the knowledge of certain miraculous powers, returned from thence to his own country, and by means of these powers proclaimed himself a god.ö Origen goes on to argue that it is inconsistent to concede Christ and the apostles did miracles but attribute them to evil. öBut if they indeed wrought miracles, then how can it be believed that magicians exposed themselves to such hazards to introduce a doctrine which forbade the practice of magic?ö (Both quotes *ANF* 4:413) The same pagan view of miracles is given in Chapter 68 of *Contra Celsum*. Quoting the pagan Celsus, Origen writes, öAnd he asks, since, then, these persons can perform such feats, shall we of necessity conclude that they are sons of Godø or must we admit that they are the proceedings of wicked men under the influence of an evil spirit?ø ö Origen continues his refutation that Jesus was a sorcerer, öYou see that by these expressions he allows, as it were, the existence of magic . . . he compares the (miracles) related of Jesus to the results produced by magicö (*ANF* 4:427). Finally, in 2:68, Origen says, öCelsus, moreover, unable to resist the miracles which Jesus is recorded to have performed, has already on several occasions spoken of them slanderously as works of sorcery, and we also on several occasions have, to the best of our ability, replied to his statementsö (*ANF* 4:449). In addition to the above, see notations on Lucian and Porphyry in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1:95 and Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 5.3 (*ANF* 7:138-139). Schaff said, öThe heathen opponents of Christianity, Lucian, Celsus, Porphyry and Julian the Apostate, etc. presupposed the principal facts of gospel history, even the miracles of Jesus, but they mostly derive them, like the Jewish adversaries from evil spirits.ö

It seems that the ancient enemies of Christ concede the point he could do magic and miracles. They just attribute it to a false and evil source of power. According to Quadratus, some healed by Jesus lived into his own

times (see Eusebius, *HE*, 4.3.2., *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 1:175.). Their testimony would have countered denials of the miracles long after Jesus' earthly ministry.

361. For additional studies on this important subject see Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor*; Paul Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, Chapters 23 and 24; and Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, pp. 101-155.

362. See endnote 206 for details on Thallus and Plegon admitting the darkness in the daytime.

363. *JAMA* 1986; 255: 1455-1463. Quote from page 1463.

364. *Ibid.*

365. Maier in *The Fullness of Time*, p. 194 comments:

õAdmittedly, there was indeed a period of time when the sepulcher was unguarded: the approximately twelve or thirteen hours between the burial of Jesus on Friday evening and the priests' request for a guard from Pilate early Saturday morning. A raiding party *could* have removed the body Friday night while everyone was sleeping off wine from the Passover Seder. Although the New Testament does not record whether or not the guard first rolled back the stone on Saturday morning to make sure the body of Jesus was still inside before sealing it, the most primitive logic would have dictated that they do just that. They would hardly have sealed and guarded an empty tomb. That they did in fact open the grave can easily be concluded from the reaction of the priests when the shaken guards reported the missing body to them: "You must say," they were instructed, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep" (Matt. 28:13). Obviously they would have had a *much* better excuse had they found the tomb empty already on Saturday morning which would not have compromised the soldiers.õ

366. See Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, pp. 202-203.

õProvincial governors in the Roman Empire had to dispatch *acta* annual reports of their activities to the emperor, and Justin Martyr claims that Pilate mentioned the case of Jesus in his records prepared for Tiberius. But these have never been found, possibly due to the destruction of government archives in the great fire of Rome in 64 A.D.

Some scholars think that Pilate *may* have included in his *acta* a reference to the empty sepulcher along with a natural explanation for it — Jesus's body having been stolen — because a fascinating inscription was found in Nazareth on a 15 by 24 inch marble slab that might have been promoted by Tiberius's reply to Pilate. The inscription is an edict against grave robbery, and was written in Greek (*italics added*):

—Ordinance of Caesar. It is my pleasure that graves and tombs remain perpetually undisturbed for those who have made them for the cult of their ancestors or children or members of their house. If, however, anyone charges that another has either demolished them, or has in any other way *extracted the buried, or has maliciously transferred them to other places in order to wrong them, or has displaced the sealing or other stones*, against such a one I order that a trial be instituted, as in respect of the gods, so in regard to the cult of mortals. For it shall be much more obligatory to honor the buried. Let it be absolutely forbidden for any one to disturb them. In case of violation I desire that the offender be sentenced to capital punishment on charge of violation of sepulture.

All previous Roman edicts concerning grave violation set only a large fine, and one wonders what presumed serious infraction could have led the Roman government to stiffen the penalty precisely in Palestine and to erect a notice regarding it specifically in Nazareth or vicinity. If only the —Caesar— had identified himself, but most scholars conclude — from the style of lettering in the inscription — that the edict derives from Tiberius or Claudius, either of whom *might* have reacted to tidings of the Easter enigma in Jerusalem. Nothing conclusive, however, has thus far been discovered from Roman sources.

367. See Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor*, p. 69; or *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 235-240.

368. Ibid. Revelation 16:15 refers to a sleeping guard who has his clothes removed for shame. This seems to have been the Jewish penalty whereas the Roman army allowed the death penalty for failure on guard duty.

369. See McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor*, p. 67 or *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 231-235.

370. See Simon Greenleaf as quoted by John Warwick Montgomery in *The Law Above the Law* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1975) pp. 120-121. Greenleaf, 19th century professor at Harvard Law School, gave a lengthy analysis of the Gospel authors as to whether they would be credible witnesses

in a court of law. The entire essay is valuable. We will be content with Greenleaf's conclusions:

“Yet their lives do show them to have been men like all others of our race; swayed by the same motives, animated by the same hopes, affected by the same joys, subdued by the same sorrows, agitated by the same fears, and subject to the same passions, temptations and infirmities, as ourselves. And their writings show them to have been men of vigorous understandings. If then their testimony was not true, here was no possible motive for this fabrication. It would also have been irreconcilable with the fact that they were good men. But it is impossible to read their writings, and not feel that we are conversing with men eminently holy, and of tender consciences, with men acting under an abiding sense of the presence and omniscience of God, and of their accountability to him, living in his fear, and walking in his ways. Now, though, in a single instance, a good man may fall, when under strong temptations, yet he is not found persisting, for years, in deliberate falsehood, asserted with the most solemn appeals to God, without the slightest temptation or motive, and against all the opposing interests which reign in the human breast. If, on the contrary, they are supposed to have been bad men, it is incredible that such men should have chosen this form of imposture; enjoining, as it does, unfeigned repentance, the utter forsaking and abhorrence of all falsehood and of every other sin, the practice of daily self-denial, self-abasement and self-sacrifice, the crucifixion of the flesh with all its earthly appetites and desires, indifference to the honors, and the hearty contempt of the vanities of the world; and inculcating perfect purity of heart and life, and intercourse of the soul with heaven. It is incredible, that bad men should invent falsehoods, to promote the religion of the God of truth. The supposition is suicidal. If they did believe in a future state of retribution, a heaven and a hell hereafter, they took the most certain course, if false witnesses, to secure the latter for their portion. And if, still being bad men, they did not believe in future punishment, how came they to invent falsehoods the direct and certain tendency of which was to destroy all their prospects of worldly honor and happiness, and to insure their misery in this life? From these absurdities there is no escape, but in the perfect conviction and admission that they were good men, testifying to that which they had carefully observed and considered, and well knew to be true.”

371. For study on the sensational claim that Jesus' tomb has been discovered see Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, pp. 193-213; Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, pp. 148-151; Paul L. Maier, *The Jesus Family Tomb*, an open letter on Dr. Maier's website dated, February 27, 2007; James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible*, pp. 164-165. Those

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who originally discovered the ðJesusö ossuary such as Amos Kloner and Joe Zias concluded that there is virtually no chance the ðJesusö name on the ossuary refers to the Jesus of Nazareth. Maier calls the documentary of this tomb ðmore junk on Jesusö and ðmedia fraud.ö

Jesus or *Yeshua* in Hebrew (Joshua) was a very common name (one in eleven men were named Joshua, Strobel p. 148). Other names such as Mary (one in four or five) or Joseph (one in seven) were also common. Josephus' writings contain references to 21 different *Yeshuas*. This does not count all those thousands who lived without making the pages of a history book. Bock estimates more than 76,000 men named Jesusølived during this time period (p. 207). There is no reason whatsoever to equate the Mariamme in this burial plot with Mary Magdalene.

Given the common occurrences of such names, they can not be identified with Bible characters. The important fact is that the tomb of Jesus being guarded by the soldiers after His death was undeniably empty on the first Easter morning. The best explanation is that Jesus rose from the dead.