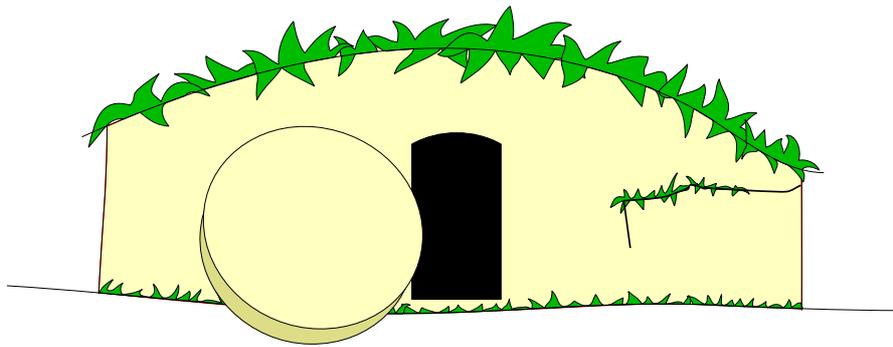


# **The Resurrection of Jesus Christ a fact of history**



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## **Summary**

The Resurrection of Jesus is fundamentally important to Christianity. If Jesus rose from the dead then he is approved by God and his claims and his teachings are true. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is simply a big mistake.

These notes take a look at the evidence for the truth of the resurrection. They consider the facts of crucifixion, the empty tomb and the human witnesses. The notes also look at the various explanations of the events that have been proposed through the ages.

Essentially, the evidence for truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is overwhelming. Once one has heard the evidence, it is difficult to ignore it. To read an account of the resurrection of Jesus and to think about it carefully is to examine one's entire world view.

These notes are intended to help you do exactly that.

So if you wish to come face to face with the most important event in the history of mankind, read on.

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## The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

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The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is arguably the most important event since the creation of the world. This is the event at which Jesus, who had been put to death a few days before, was raised to life. The event is controversial. It is the official teaching of almost every Christian church, but it is denied by Atheists, Jews and Muslims, among others.

The point about the resurrection of Jesus is that it is of fundamental importance to one's world view. To consider the evidence for the resurrection is to risk a complete change in the way that the world is seen. The evidence for the resurrection is compelling. It is very difficult to consider it and to deny that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

### What Happened

The accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus appear in many sources, but by far the most detailed of these accounts are the four parallel accounts of the New Testament Gospels. These accounts are by no means copies of a single original document. Many writers, attempting to put the events together into a single chronological narrative, have failed to do so because of the differences between the narratives. This alone shows the independence of the different accounts. However, in spite of these difficulties, it is perfectly feasible to put together the narrative into a single account, and with no essential problems in harmonising the accounts. The essential point to bear in mind when putting the accounts together is that Jewish days, the ones considered in the Gospel Records start at sunset, which was close to 6 p.m. on the day of the crucifixion.

The day begins in the evening when the disciples start to ask Jesus about the Passover. Soon afterwards they go to a guest-room in the house of a secret disciple. This room is above the ground floor and is known as "The Upper Room". Here they have a meal, known afterwards as "The Last Supper" in which they share a loaf of bread and a cup of wine in memory of Jesus. This has become the centre of Christian celebration of Jesus ever since.

After this supper Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane where he was arrested by a force of the Temple Police and the retinue of the High Priest. He then underwent a series of trials and quasi-judicial proceedings, being examined through the night at the house of the High Priest, condemned at daybreak by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court) and then taken to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate to have the death sentence confirmed and carried out.

### Chronology of Events

The bulk of the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus took place within a single day. The death of Jesus on the cross took place less than 24 hours after the Last Supper. The resurrection of Jesus happened in the early morning of the following Sunday. This is an approximate chronology of events:-

#### Thursday

- 18:00 The disciples follow someone with a water jar to the upper room
- 20:00 The Last Supper begins
- 23:00 Jesus and the disciples leave for Gethsemane

#### Friday

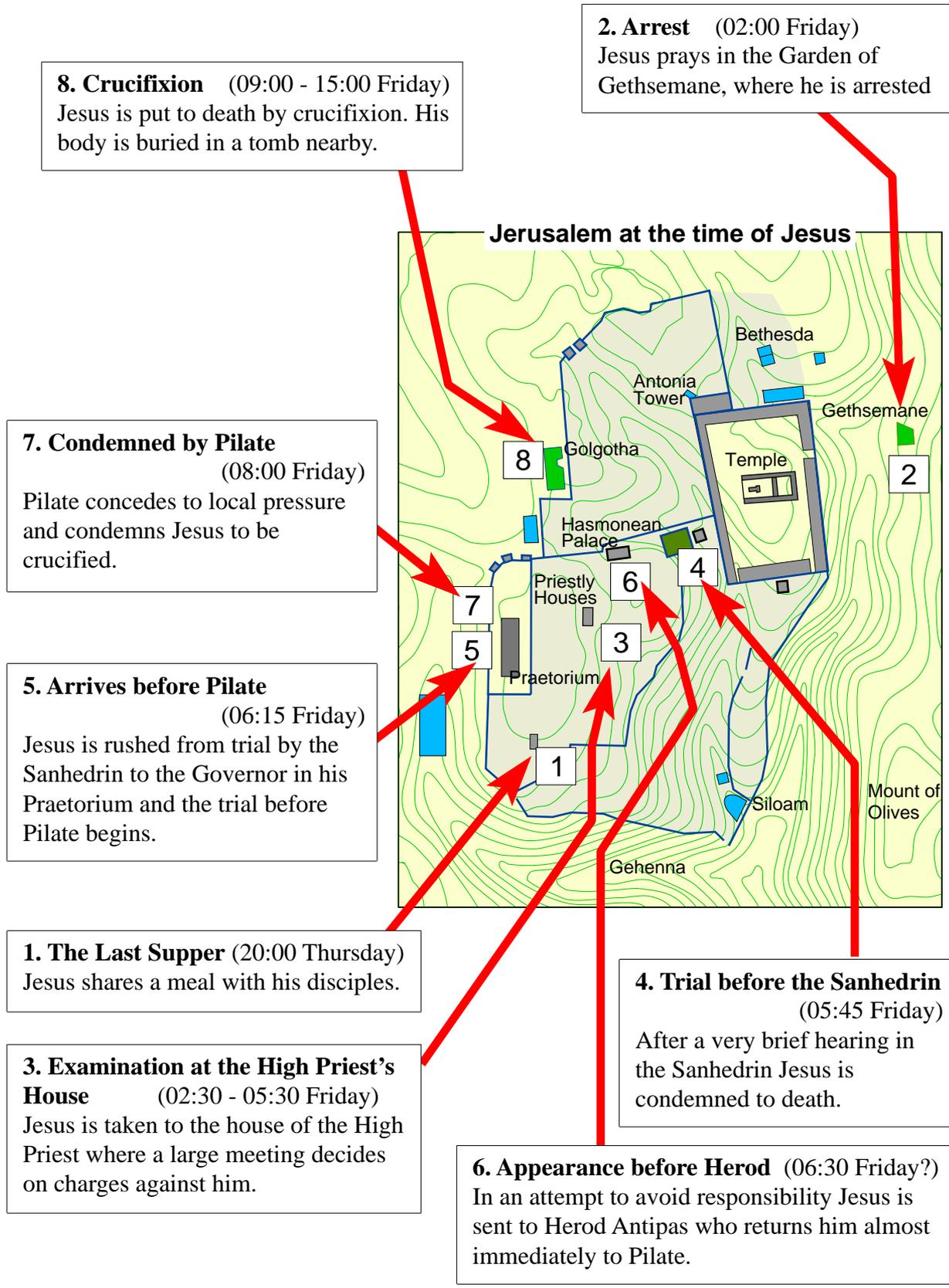
- 02:00 Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and taken to the house of the High Priest where there is a pre-trial hearing to decide charges.
- 05:45 Jesus is taken before the Sanhedrin
- 06:00 Jesus, condemned by the Sanhedrin, is taken to Pilate
- 06:15 Jesus begins his trial before Pilate
- 06:30 Jesus is sent to Herod Antipas and returned
- 07:00 Pilate begins his trial of Jesus
- 08:00 Pilate sends Jesus for crucifixion
- 09:00 The crucifixion begins
- 12:00 There is darkness over all the land
- 15:00 Jesus dies soon after this
- 16:00 Pilate gives Joseph permission to bury Jesus
- 17:00 Jesus is taken down from the cross and buried

#### Sunday

- 06:00 The women go to the tomb and find it empty

The chronology of the resurrection appearances is much more difficult to calculate; some appearances happened on the day of Jesus' resurrection. Others occurred much later on, and for the later appearances one does not know the date to within a few days. All one can be certain of is the order in which they happened.

## From the Last Supper to the Crucifixion



### **The Main Elements of the Resurrection Accounts**

These are the elements of the crucifixion and resurrection accounts that appear in all witnesses.

#### **1. Crucifixion and Burial**

- Jesus was put to death by crucifixion.
- Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus.
- The body is wrapped in linen cloths and laid in Joseph's new tomb.
- The tomb was closed with a stone and sealed.

#### **2. The Discovery of the Tomb**

- Various women visit the tomb and find it empty.
- Mary Magdalene is prominent among these women.
- Jesus appears to the women, who take the news of his resurrection back to the disciples.
- Peter and John are the first two disciples to see the empty tomb.

#### **3. The Resurrection Appearances**

- There is a series of occasions in which Jesus appears to various people, starting with Peter in Jerusalem, and including a group of over 500 men in Galilee.
- The final appearance of the sequence is when Jesus ascends to heaven.

Jesus was then flogged and taken to Golgotha to be crucified. Here he spent six hours on the cross before dying. His body was taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb belonging to a minor member of the sanhedrin by name of Joseph of Arimathea. The tomb was closed by having a stone rolled across the entrance; this was sealed and a guard set on it.

On the first day of the week, Sunday, being the third day after Jesus' crucifixion, he was raised from the dead. There was an earthquake and the stone was rolled back from the tomb. The guards fled from the scene. Some women supporters of Jesus who had come to finish the process of laying out the body, found the tomb empty and returned to the disciples reporting that they had seen angels at the tomb who had told them that Jesus was raised from the dead.

There were then a number of occasions when Jesus met with his disciples, both in Jerusalem and in Galilee, where he met over 500 men at one time. These appearances were what convinced most disciples that Jesus was alive and they form an important part of the evidence for the resurrection.

He then ascended to heaven, forty days after his resurrection. The disciples started to make a public proclamation of his message, including the

resurrection, at Pentecost, ten days after the ascension and Jesus appeared to Paul less than three years after the resurrection.

The accounts of the trials, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are thoroughly consistent, even down to tiny details. The places where Jesus went are accurately described in the Gospels, and archaeology has confirmed this (although the traditional tourist places in Jerusalem are often in the wrong locations).

### **The Crucifixion Tomb**

In 1968 a tomb was discovered in Givat Hamivtar which contained ossuaries filled with the bones of several victims. Among them were the bones of a crucifixion victim. One of the heel bones was still pierced by a nail; this had been bent at the end which prevented it from being removed immediately after the time of death.

Other bones from the same skeleton had scratches which showed where other nails had been used (but removed after death). These showed that the victim had been nailed by the wrists as well as by the feet. The hands had been fastened with the palms towards the cross.

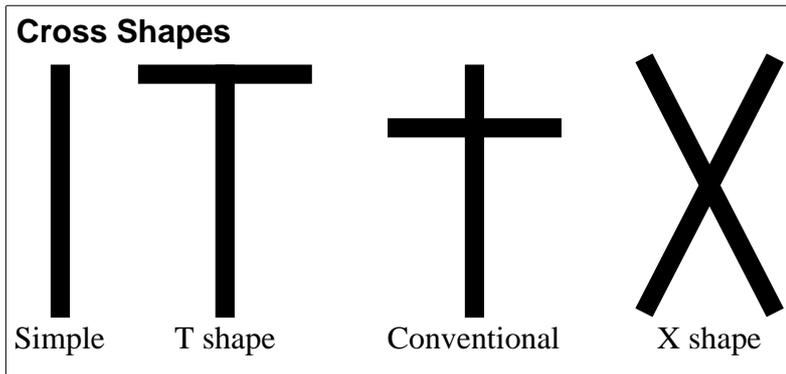
The existence of a crucifixion victim in a family tomb shows that the bodies of crucifixion victims could be released to others for burial at the end of the execution.

### **Crucifixion**

Crucifixion was a common method of execution in the Roman world. It had been developed by the Medes and Persians in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and had been taken up by first the Seleucid successors to Alexander the Great and then the Romans, who took to it with some enthusiasm.

Crucifixion consists of fastening a human being to a cross by their hands and their feet and then lifting them to hang by their arms and legs with restricted movement. This continued until the victim died. The cross itself could be one of several different shapes. It could be a single vertical pillar, or a T

shape, a conventional cross shape or even an X shape. In the case of Jesus' crucifixion the X shape can be eliminated because a notice was fastened over Jesus' head, which would have been difficult if there was no wood there to which it could be attached.



A tomb containing the bones of a crucifixion victim has been found at Givat Hamivtar, north of Jerusalem. The tomb contained an ossuary in which were the bones of the victim. One of the heel bones still had a nail in it; this had bent so that it could not be extracted. Examining the skeleton showed that there had, indeed been nails also in the wrists; the hands had been nailed to the cross with the palms towards the wood.

The possible causes of death for a crucifixion victim are discussed in some detail by an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA Vol 255, No 11, 1986 pp 1455-1463). This explains how a person hung on a cross would suffer, mainly due to the strain placed on the chest due to the weight of the body suspended from the arms. There were three possible reasons for death:-

- **Pulmonary Oedema:** As the victim hangs from their arms this places a very great strain on the intercostal muscles (the muscles around the lungs) which causes them to weep tissue fluid into the lungs. As the lungs fill with fluid they become less efficient and the victim finds it more and more difficult to breathe. Finally the victim drowns in their own tissue fluid. When Jesus was dead his body was pierced by a spear and out came "blood and water" (John 19:34). The "water" would probably be the tissue fluid which filled the lungs (or possibly from the cavity around the heart, which would also collect tissue fluid).
- **Hypovolemic Shock:** The loss of tissue fluid is made up by blood plasma, which causes a reduction in the volume of blood available to carry oxygen and nutrients to the tissues. This in turn means that the vital organs are unable to find enough energy to continue to function properly and the body gradually shuts down as it tries to preserve the most important organs of all, the brain, the lungs and the heart. As the blood becomes less and less able to supply the organs the body slows down until in the end it is unable to keep on working and life simply ebbs away. As Jesus shouted out loudly at about the time of his death this is not a likely cause of death in his case.
- **Congestive Heart Failure:** As the volume of blood is reduced by bleeding and the leaking out of blood plasma into the lungs and pericardium, the blood becomes thicker and thicker and hence it becomes more and more difficult for the heart to pump it around the circulatory system. This puts

### Josephus and Jotapata

There is only one recorded occasion when any person has been said to survive crucifixion. This occasion is recorded by the Romano-Jewish historian Josephus in his autobiography.

Josephus was present at the siege of Jotapata after he had surrendered to Vespasian, the Roman commander in chief. After the siege many of the captives were crucified. As the crucifixion began Josephus recognised three of his companions who were immediately brought down from their crosses. However, in spite of the fact that the men had only been on their crosses for minutes, and that they were given the best medical treatment available in the Roman world, two of them died.

This event is sometimes listed as a reason for believing that Jesus might have survived the cross; in fact the reverse is true. The fact that the death rate was so high after only a few minutes shows that no-one could have survived a proper crucifixion like that of Jesus.

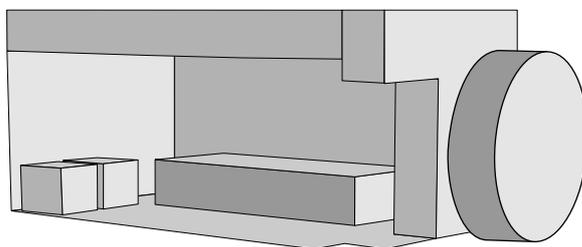
an excessive strain on the heart, which in the end cannot cope and simply ceases to function, at which point the victim dies fairly suddenly.

The most likely cause of death for Jesus was the last of these, congestive heart failure. The description of the death of Jesus is completely consistent with the known physiology of crucifixion. Jesus was extremely thirsty, which is consistent with the loss of body fluids, he shouted suddenly at his death, which is consistent with a congestive heart failure, and the spear wound shortly after death produced both blood and a clear fluid, consistent with the release of blood and tissue fluid from a punctured thorax.

At the end of the crucifixion Jesus was pierced in the side by a soldier with a spear. John's Gospel records that "water and blood" issued from the wound. The "water" would have been tissue fluid, the blood the residue of blood coming from internal organs. The issue of both of these fluids from the wound shows that the spear thrust pierced the lungs or the pericardium (the membrane around the heart). This means that it was a serious wound. If the victim was not already dead, a wound like this might be immediately fatal. Even with modern medical attention a wound like this would be extremely severe and one would not expect the victim to survive for long. With the medicine available in the first century it would certainly be fatal.

Experiments carried out in the 1990s show that if a human body is suspended from the arms alone in a cruciform position then death can be expected to follow in little over a quarter of an hour. The

### First Century Tombs



Tombs from the time of Jesus tended to be built in the same manner as one another. The tomb would be cut into a rock face and enlarged into a cave. Inside there would be a shelf on which a body was placed until it had decayed. The bones would then be placed in a box (known as an ossuary - there are two in this drawing). The entrance was sealed by a large disc-shaped stone, which would weigh several tonnes. The tomb of Jesus would have been like this.

### Wednesday or Friday?

The day of Jesus' crucifixion has traditionally been considered to be a Friday. Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54 and John 19:31 all tell us that the day after the crucifixion was a sabbath, which would seem to imply that Jesus was crucified on a Friday (the Sabbath is Saturday).

However, certain days in the Jewish calendar were specified as holy convocations on which no work should be done, and the Passover was one of these (Leviticus 23:5-7; Numbers 28:16-18). Rabbinic custom was to refer to these as sabbaths, and it is possible that this is what is referred to in the accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. Combined with the saying that Jesus was three days and three nights in the tomb (Matthew 12:40; Mark 8:31) some have interpreted this to mean that Jesus was crucified on a Wednesday (Thursday is impossible because the Jewish calendar never had a feast day and a Sabbath on consecutive days).

However, a Friday crucifixion seems more likely. There are many passages where Jesus says that he would be raised on the third day, and it seems odd that the women would go to the tomb to finish the preparation of the body on the Sunday if they could have gone on the Friday.

Counting both the last and the first day in a period as part of the period was a common Old Testament practice which is probably being carried on in the description of the period as three days.

nailing of the feet gave some further support and allowed the victim to prolong his life by resting his weight on the feet, but this would be extremely painful and would require considerable effort. If the victim lost consciousness death would follow very quickly. After his death Jesus was left on the cross for a considerable time while Joseph of Arimathea arranged for the burial of the body; this alone would have ensured the death of Jesus, had he not already been dead.

The medical analysis of crucifixion is clear. The Gospel accounts were written by people who had observed a death by crucifixion and there is no doubt that the victim was killed by the

### **Matthew 28:11-15**

This passage records the earliest Jewish response to the empty tomb and claims of the resurrection of Jesus. That response was the claim that the disciples of Jesus stole the body from the tomb while the guards were asleep. The passage ends “*And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.*” (Matthew 28:15).

This must have been one of the easiest passages in the Bible to check on. All that an early reader of the Gospel had to do was to find a member of the Jewish community and ask them about the resurrection of Jesus. The fact that the account is in Matthew’s Gospel means that Jewish sources were claiming that the disciples had stolen the body in the middle of the first century AD.

The issue that needs to be faced when considering this passage is whether the account is believable. Certainly there are shortcomings in it as an explanation. If the guards were asleep, then how did they know who stole the body? How did the disciples manage to open a tomb without disturbing the guards (the stone would have weighed more than two tonnes).

The question of whether the disciples were capable of opening a tomb guarded by some of the best soldiers in the ancient world is also useful, as is the question of whether the disciples behaved like people who knew where the body of Jesus was, and hence knew that the story of the resurrection was untrue.

The disciples allowed themselves to be put to death rather than deny the resurrection. This indicates that they knew that the account of the resurrection was true.

crucifixion. For Jesus to have survived crucifixion would have taken a miracle as great as the resurrection.

### **The Empty Tomb**

After the crucifixion Jesus was taken from his cross and buried. The tomb of Jesus must have existed; his body did not simply evaporate at the end of the crucifixion. Not only that, but as Jesus was crucified immediately before a feast day the tomb would have needed to have been near Jerusalem. The tomb of Joseph of Arimathea fulfilled this condition, being in the same place as the crucifixion (John 19:41,42).

On the first day of the week this tomb was empty.

We know that this was the case because there were - and are - very many witnesses to the fact. Not only does the New Testament refer to the empty tomb (all four Gospels refer to it) but so do many apostolic fathers (members of the early Christian Church) and Jewish sources felt compelled to try to explain why the tomb was empty. As late as the middle of the second century AD Jewish sources were referring to the

empty tomb. Justin Martyr replies to this argument in his “Dialogue with Trypho” (chapter 107), written at exactly this time. There would have been little point in taking trouble to account for an empty tomb if the body of Jesus was still within it.

In fact the new Christian church had many opponents, among the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and also among the Romans. It would have been easy for either of these groups to have brought an end to Christianity by producing the body of Jesus, or at any rate the tomb of Jesus with his body still in it. This never happened. Again the obvious reason is that there was no such tomb. The tomb of Jesus was empty.

A final, and overwhelming, witness to the emptiness of Jesus’ tomb is the existence of the early church in Jerusalem. The first of congregation of the new Christianity was in Jerusalem and thousands of people became Christians there, some moving on to towns all over the ancient world. The tomb of Jesus was very near Jerusalem. It would have been extremely easy for anyone in Jerusalem to have walked to the tomb of Jesus to verify if it was empty or not. The fact that there were thousands of baptisms in Jerusalem, and that Jerusalem continued to be the most important centre of Christianity until the Romano-Jewish war of 66-73AD shows beyond any possible doubt that the tomb was empty.

## The Human Witnesses

The other main kind of evidence of the resurrection comes from human eyewitnesses. The resurrection of Jesus had many such witnesses, people who met Jesus alive after he had risen from the tomb. The number of witnesses is large, and the quality of their witness is impressive.

### *The number of witnesses*

The New Testament gives accounts of at least 11 occasions where Jesus met his disciples after his resurrection (there may be more: the list on page 3 puts together any two accounts that could possibly be the same appearance as a single appearance - some of these may have been more than one real occasion). The largest number of witnesses on any of these appearances is recorded as “*More than five hundred brethren at one time*” (1 Corinthians 15:6). 1 Corinthians tells us that the majority of these witnesses were still alive in 55AD when the letter was written. There would be no point in Paul writing this unless he expected the Christians of Corinth to be able to ask them questions, which means that they were travelling around testifying to what they had seen.

Five hundred is a large number of witnesses. It is very difficult to ignore a witness of this scale. One has to conclude that Jesus was really alive after his resurrection.

### *Peter the Apostle*

One of the first witnesses to the resurrection was the Apostle Peter. It seems that Jesus met Peter while he was on his own, before Jesus met the eleven disciples together. Peter was present at many of the other resurrection appearances of Jesus. We have his witness in his letters to the congregations in Asia Minor. In these he refers to the resurrection of Jesus (1 Peter 1:3; 3:21).

#### **1 Corinthians 15**

1 Corinthians 15:5-8 contains a list of people who met Jesus alive after his resurrection and were witnesses to it:-

- 5 and that he [Jesus] appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve.
- 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.
- 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.
- 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

(1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

This list of witnesses was written in the spring of 55AD as Paul prepared to leave Ephesus on a journey into Europe, hoping to visit Corinth.

Paul is delivering a list of people of whom he knows, and who the Corinthians could rely on as witnesses. The witness was to the Corinthians, but now it is also a witness to us.

There is also an account of Peter’s words on the subject written in the book of Acts. Speaking for all the disciples he said:-

*This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.* (Acts 2:32)

and

*and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.* (Acts 3:15)

Note that Acts was written in 62AD, two years before Peter wrote his first letter. It is quite clear that Peter was convinced by his encounters with the risen Jesus. As Peter had walked with Jesus for three and a half years before the resurrection, it would have been difficult for him to have been mistaken.

## James the Brother of Jesus

James was one of Jesus’ four brothers (the family is listed in Matthew 13:55). During Jesus’ ministry his brothers were hostile to him. The Gospel of John notes “*For not even his brothers believed in him.*” (John 7:5). However, we find that after the resurrection James the brother of Jesus becomes one of the chief apostles; he became the chief apostle in Jerusalem and was put to death for his faith in 62AD during a period when there was no Roman governor.

### The Resurrection Appearances

1. To Mary Magdalene Mk 16:9; Jn 20:14
2. To women returning from the tomb  
Mt 28:9,10
3. To Peter Lk 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5
4. To the disciples on the road to Emmaus  
Lk 24:13-33
5. To the disciples without Thomas  
Lk 24:34; Jn 20:19-24
6. To the disciples including Thomas  
Jn 20:26-29
7. To the seven by Lake Tiberias Jn 21:1-23
8. To more than 500 on a hill in Galilee  
1 Cor 15:6
9. To James the brother of Jesus 1 Cor 15:7
10. To the eleven Mt 28:16-20;  
Mk 16:14-20;  
Lk 24:33-52; Acts 1:3-12
11. At the ascension Acts 1:3-12
12. To Paul on the road to Damascus  
Acts 9:3-6; 1 Cor 15:8

Clearly something had happened to change James from being a complete sceptic about Jesus to being one of his main followers. 1 Corinthians explains why it did: It tells us that Jesus appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). Faced by the risen Jesus it was clear that the resurrection really had happened. James was forced to change sides and proclaim the risen Christ.

### Paul

An even bigger change happened in the case of the Apostle Paul. Soon after the resurrection Paul was among those who persecuted the new Church and attempted to root out Christianity (as it was to be called later). Paul himself writes about his earlier persecution of the church in his letter to the Galatians:-

*For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.*

(Galatians 1:13)

There is no doubt that Paul originally persecuted the Church and that he was therefore no believer in the message of Jesus, or in his resurrection.

However, Paul's ideas changed. Paul became a man who took the message of Christ Jesus throughout the ancient world, from Jerusalem to Rome. He wrote 13 letters explaining the Gospel which are included in the New Testament and we can see his faith shining from these letters. There is no doubt that Paul understood that Jesus had risen from the dead.

It is reasonable to ask why Paul changed his mind. What turned him from his career as a prominent Pharisee to become a supporter of the message of Jesus and the resurrection? Paul's own answer is that he met the risen Christ Jesus on the road to Damascus.

### Conclusion

The list of witnesses to the risen Jesus contains many people who bore an unflinching message to the ancient world that Jesus was alive, even though he had been put to death by crucifixion. The list contains references to over five hundred people, some of whom had originally been hostile to Jesus and would not therefore be predisposed to believe his message.

### Persecution

The next question that one might reasonably ask is whether the witnesses gained by their testimony. It might be possible that someone would dress up a convenient truth in an allegory of death and resurrection which was attached to Jesus, provided that there was some gain in doing so. In fact there was no material benefit from being a follower of Jesus. Jesus was put to death by people who could not face up to his message. It is not, therefore, surprising that the persecution of Christians followed on very quickly after his resurrection.

## The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

The largest Roman persecution of Jesus began in 64AD after the fire of Rome. Rumours spread to the effect that Nero had ordered the start of the fire himself to clear a portion of the city and allow him to build a vast and luxurious palace for himself on the ruins. To divert the blame away from himself Nero claimed that the fire had been started by Christians, whom he declared to possess a “hatred of the human race”. As a consequence Christianity became not only an illegal religion, but public enemy number one. Christians were rounded up and a macabre slaughter of them began.

The persecution under Nero was described by the Roman historian Tacitus:-

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

(Tacitus, Annals 15:44)

In spite of this horrific persecution, Christians did not abandon their faith in the resurrection. On the contrary, they continued to proclaim it and the Christian community spread even further across the Roman world. In Bithynia, Pliny the younger complained that the number of Christians in the areas was growing to the point where it threatened the viability of pagan worship in the province - temples were deserted, there was no market for sacrificial animals and pagan ceremonies were falling into disuse.

However, before Nero’s persecution began Christians had already suffered a significant persecution from the Jerusalem religious authorities. From the start those who proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus were imprisoned (Acts 4:1-3). The first to be killed for his faith was Stephen, probably in about AD32, before the conversion of Paul (Acts 7:57-60). James the brother of John, one of Jesus’ disciples, was put to death by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2) and James the brother of Jesus was killed in 62AD (according to Josephus). All over the Roman world, Jewish communities were persecuting the new Christians. Being a follower of Jesus Christ was not an easy option, even as early as two months after the resurrection.

The persecution of the time is captured in the Letter to the Hebrews:-

*But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.*

(Hebrews 10:32-34)

### Roman Persecution



Up to the reign of Nero, Christianity was considered by Romans to be a part of the Jewish religion and was generally ignored by officials. However, Nero declared Christianity to be illegal and began a concerted persecution. This continued on and off to 313AD in the reign of Constantine.

The Colosseum (picture) was built after the start of this persecution, but as one of the more popular methods of killing Christians was to throw them to the animals in the arena many tens or even hundreds of thousands died in it for their faith.

### Witnesses Outside the Bible

Besides the witnesses to the resurrection in the Bible, there are various writings from the late first century and early second century which also refer to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These include:-

- **Apostolic Fathers:** Various writers produced documents towards the end of the first century AD or in the early years of the second century. These men were Christians, and they wrote letters to others in the Church. They include:-
  - Clement of Rome: writes in 96AD
  - Ignatius of Antioch: writes around the end of the first century AD
  - Polycarp of Smyrna: writes in the very early second century AD.
  - The Didache: An anonymous document of the first century AD.
- **Roman Historians:** These writers describe the growth of the Christian Church rather than the person of Jesus, but nevertheless they include details of the crucifixion:-
  - Tacitus: Writing c117 AD he records the execution of Jesus under Pilate and the persecutions of Nero
  - Suetonius: Writing c120AD he describes the persecution of Christians.
- **Jewish Sources:** These confirm that Jesus was a teacher and healer, that he was put to death on the Passover eve, that his followers grew in numbers afterwards and that there was an empty tomb.

Not only were the followers of Jesus searched out themselves for persecution, but so were their associates. They might find themselves released from prison to find that all their property had been stolen, but were unable to seek redress as this would simply result in further imprisonment. Nevertheless the disciples did not cave in to pressure, but continued to proclaim the Gospel of the risen Jesus.

The fact of this persecution testifies to the character of the witnesses. It is clear that the Christians of the time, being in possession of the facts, were convinced of the resurrection of Jesus. Certainly none of the apostles who had been with Jesus and had claimed to have seen him alive after his execution ever gave in to the pressure of persecution. All continued to witness to the resurrection of Jesus to their deaths.

### The Reaction of Jesus' Opponents

The resurrection of Jesus could be expected to change the ideas of people who knew about it, and one would therefore expect some kind of reaction from the authorities, both Jewish and Roman. The Romans hardly reacted for some time, and it was not until the time of Nero that any major attempt was made to undermine the new Church. In general the Roman authorities were simply

bemused by the whole thing and considered it to be some squabble within Judaism.

The Jewish authorities attempted to explain the facts of the resurrection by the claim that the body of Jesus had been stolen by the disciples. This picture appears in the Gospel of Matthew, which shows that it was already the general response in the middle of the first century AD (even the critics have to concede this point). The picture appears in Jewish tradition in the second century and is argued about in Justin's dialogue with Trypho the Jew, written shortly after 150AD. The idea that the disciples stole the body then continues in Jewish literature and turns up in the *Toledoth Jesu* which is a collection of anti-Christian traditions made in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The important point here is that neither the Romans nor the Jewish authorities ever denied the existence of the empty tomb. Both of these had a vested interest in stopping the new Christianity movement, and either could have done so by producing the body of Jesus. The fact that they could not do so proves that the tomb was empty and that the authorities did not know where the body was.

### The Evidence and the Case

The evidence examined so far falls into four main points:-

### The Minimal Evidence Case

The resurrection of Jesus can easily be found in the New Testament. However, the aim of this paper is to establish the case for the resurrection using only a minimum of evidence.

The case for the resurrection does not require one to accept the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament as being anything more than a set of reports of events from some decades afterwards. It makes no requirement for anyone to believe that they are wholly accurate or that they are inspired, although in reality both of these statements are true.

The intention is to produce a paper where the conclusion that Jesus was raised from the dead is made with evidence that can easily be verified without the need for a major study.

This evidence includes:-

- The fact of the empty tomb
- The fact of the resurrection appearances
- The fact that no-one ever produced the body
- The known facts of crucifixion

•**Medical evidence of Crucifixion:** This proves little on its own, but shows the condition of a crucifixion victim during and at the end of the process.

•**The evidence of the empty tomb:** There is no doubt that the tomb of Jesus was empty. The tomb was in Jerusalem. Anyone who wished to know the truth of the matter could go to visit it in an hour or less. The authorities spent a considerable amount of effort attempting to convince people that the body had been stolen; this would have been pointless if the body was still within the tomb. Neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities in Jerusalem managed to produce the body. This alone shows that the tomb was empty. Habermas (2006) has carried out a survey of learned articles on the resurrection and states that “Only a minority of scholars doubts the empty tomb”.

- **The Resurrection Appearances:** There are direct reports of 10 different occasions when Jesus was seen alive after his crucifixion, with the implication that there were other occasions which are not reported. Jesus was seen alive by hundreds of people. He allowed some of these to touch him and he showed himself solid by eating food. It is sometimes noted that everyone who saw him alive afterwards believed in the resurrection. This is not an objection; the experience was so convincing that even people like James the brother of Jesus and Saul of Tarsus were convinced by it.
- **The Behaviour of the Disciples:** Before they met the risen Jesus the disciples were frightened men. They fled from the arresting party and met behind closed doors for fear of what might happen to them. At Pentecost they were prepared to go out and proclaim the Gospel and from then on they continued to do so in the face of persecution which was often severe. None of them ever recanted. Habermas’ survey of publications on this concludes: “The substantial unanimous verdict of contemporary critical scholars is that Jesus’ disciples, at least, believed that Jesus was alive, resurrected from the dead”.
- **The Reaction of the Authorities:** The authorities were never able to provide a convincing alternative description of what happened. They failed to produce the body of Jesus, and instead they proclaimed the story that it had been stolen by the disciples. Apart from this their only answer was to persecute Christians.

There are two kinds of evidence for any ordinary event. These are physical, forensic evidence, and human witnesses. In the case of the resurrection the physical evidence is the empty tomb and the witness evidence is the accounts of the people who met Jesus alive afterwards. Any theory of what happened must satisfy at least these two points, and must also coincide with the supporting evidence of the behaviour of the disciples, the statements of the authorities and the physiology of crucifixion.

The only clear conclusion that can be drawn is that Jesus rose from the dead.

### **Alternative Attempts at Explanations**

A book on the resurrection of Jesus written by the influential Jewish scholar Geza Vermes identifies six alternative explanations for the events which the Gospels report as the resurrection. These are not new ideas - the oldest goes back to the date the resurrection itself - but his book is a convenient summary of the different claims.

Here we consider each of these attempted explanations against the known evidence. The majority of the attempted explanations do not meet the obvious two pieces of evidence, the existence of an empty tomb and the resurrection appearances. Occasionally other items of evidence from the above are needed.

#### *Stolen by the Disciples*

This is the oldest of the alternative explanations. It appears in Matthew's Gospel and was the standard explanation of the empty tomb by Jewish sources from the first century AD to the middle ages.

The theory of the stolen body is that the disciples came to the tomb of Jesus at night, opened it up and stole the body which they then buried somewhere else. Having buried the body they then claimed that Jesus had appeared to them. A large number of people believed the disciples and this brought about the Christian Church.

#### **Answer**

1. The theory requires that all the disciples conspired together to remove the body, and that no-one ever confessed to the act. The disciples did not gain from the claim; on the contrary they suffered a persecution which began almost immediately in Jerusalem (which was where the disciples were) and continued to the point where Nero had people killed with extreme cruelty. In spite of the persecution no disciple ever abandoned their message that Jesus had been raised from the dead; had they done so the opponents of Christianity would have made great capital from it and the fact would have been known throughout the ancient world and would still be known today.
2. The number of people who claimed to have seen Jesus alive after the resurrection is much larger than the remaining eleven disciples. It includes the two on the road to Emmaus, several women, James the brother of Jesus, more than five hundred men in Galilee and the Apostle Paul, who continued to persecute the original disciples for some time after the resurrection. It is not conceivable, let alone likely, that all these people were in the conspiracy.
3. The act of stealing the body would not have been a simple matter. The tomb was sealed by a stone which, if it had covered a hole large enough to accommodate people carrying a body, must have weighed upwards of two tonnes. The accounts of the disciples' theft also includes the existence of a guard; the soldiers in the guard would have had to be breathtakingly incompetent not to have been disturbed by a group of men moving a two tonne rock around in their general vicinity.
4. The resurrection changed the entire demeanour of the disciples from frightened fugitives to confident proclaimers of the Gospel. It is difficult to see how the theft of the body would have achieved this.

To summarise, the theory that the body was stolen by the disciples fails to satisfy the evidence of the appearances of Jesus (at least the large number of people outside the eleven who saw the living Christ), and fails to explain the behaviour of the disciples in the next few years.

### *The Body Removed*

A second theory is that the body of Jesus was removed from the tomb by some other agency than the disciples. The tomb was thus empty and the disciples were deceived into believing that Jesus had risen from the dead.

This theory is a recent development which was not produced until the 1970s. Nevertheless it has achieved some currency in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are two variants of this theory. In one the body was removed by the family of Jesus and in the other it was moved by the Jewish authorities.

### **Answer**

1. The body of Jesus was placed in the tomb shortly before sunset on a Friday; the tomb was discovered to be empty on the Sunday morning. In between the tomb was guarded and the Jewish Sabbath was in force (indeed it was a special Sabbath). This does not leave much in the way of freedom for someone to move the body of Jesus. No law-abiding Jew would consider moving Jesus' body in the available time.
2. If the body of Jesus was moved by the Jewish authorities (or for that matter by the Romans) they would have known where it was. Similarly, if the family of Jesus had decided to move the body then they would have known where it was. When the disciples started to proclaim the resurrection the location of the body would rapidly have come to light. If the authorities had the body then they would have been able to produce it. If the family of Jesus had the body they would at least have made the fact known to the authorities when the resurrection became the major element of the Christian agenda. If nothing else, James the brother of Jesus would never have become a Christian.
3. There is not way in which the removal of the body from the tomb would produce the resurrection appearances.

Again, this theory fails in that it cannot account for the resurrection appearances and it is unlikely that whoever moved the body would keep quiet about it once the Christian community began to grow (within a couple of months after the crucifixion). In addition, the time-scale is too short for the movement of the body to have been arranged.

### *The Wrong Tomb*

This is the theory that the disciples did not visit the correct tomb, but went to a different tomb nearby. Finding the tomb empty they jumped to the conclusion that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They then went on to proclaim the resurrection and founded a world religion.

### **Answer**

1. The theory assumes that no-one ever identified the correct tomb. It assumes that none of the disciples identified the correct tomb, that the Jewish authorities could not identify the tomb, and even that Joseph of Arimathea never recognised his own tomb.
2. A mistaken tomb would never have produced the resurrection appearances.

This theory fails completely because it fails to account for all the evidence (the resurrection appearances) and because it assumes that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were all completely incapable of recognising the correct tomb.

### *The Swoon Theory*

This is the theory that Jesus was placed in the tomb in a coma, but that he then revived in the tomb and was thought to have been raised from the dead.

This theory was common in the 1970s but has generally been discounted since. However some Muslims use this as their answer to the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. The Muslim variant, however, includes the idea that God miraculously held Jesus on the edge of death for three days and then revived him.

### **Answer**

1. Crucifixion is thorough and damaging. It was virtually never the case that crucifixion failed to kill; even where the victim was brought down immediately and given the best medical treatment available at the time the survival rate was not encouraging. In the case of Jesus he was not only crucified, but also flogged and stabbed with a spear which penetrated deeply into his body. It is extremely difficult to believe that Jesus would survive this, but had he done so he would have succumbed to septicaemia soon after he was taken down from the cross. Even with a modern intensive care unit it would have been difficult to revive him.

In the case of Jesus there was a gap between the time he was considered dead by the guards and the time he was taken down from the cross. This would have been at least half an hour, and may very well have been more than an hour. Anyone unconscious on a cross for this length of time would certainly die.

2. Suppose that Jesus did recover in the tomb he would then have been extremely weak. He would have been unable to move aside a massive stone from the wrong side (this would have weighed a minimum of two tonnes), fought his way through a guard and then walked seven miles to Emmaus on feet pierced by nails. This is superman, not Jesus.
3. Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples after the resurrection. During this time he would have had ample opportunity to explain to them what had happened to him.
4. For Muslims, one can see that the idea that Jesus was crucified but survived is not compatible with the Qur'an.

This theory is too fantastic in the behaviour required of a man who had suffered the intense physiological stress of crucifixion. There is no possibility that a crucified man could have behaved as Jesus did in his resurrection appearances.

### **The Crucifixion Accounts**

The Crucifixion is referred to by many ancient writers from within a century of the event. These include Roman Historians, the Jewish Talmud and Christian writers from just after the completion of the New Testament (see box above).

However, the earliest and most detailed accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus appear in the New Testament. Almost the first words of the New Testament include a reference to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead:

*Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—* (Galatians 1:1)

This verse is the opening verse of the first of Paul's letters to be written. It was written in the early spring of 48 AD, less than 20 years after the event. The Apostle Paul makes many references to the resurrection of Jesus, as does the Apostle Peter (for example 1 Peter 1:3).

The fullest accounts are, of course, the accounts in the four New Testament Gospels. These accounts are marked by a great deal of detail and by a complete independence of content and wording.

In some places the Gospels use very similar wording to describe an event. This probably reflects a single witness who is being quoted by more than one Gospel. In the accounts of the Crucifixion and resurrection there is no overlap of wording. Even where the English translation appears to be the same for two or more Gospel records, the underlying Greek is different. The Gospel accounts are independent.

In spite of this there are considerable numbers of undesigned coincidences in the crucifixion accounts. They can be relied on to be accurate.

### **Vital Questions**

The following is a list of questions on the resurrection of Jesus. They are serious questions which need to be answered by anyone who does not wish to believe that Jesus was ever raised from the dead.

- If Jesus was buried in Judea or Galilee, then why did the authorities never produce his body?
- If Jesus did not rise, then what changed the disciples from frightened men in hiding to bold proclaimers of the resurrection?
- If Jesus was not raised, then why were the disciples willing to allow themselves to be put to death in unpleasant ways rather than deny their faith in the risen Jesus?
- If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, then he was a fraud. Why should the disciples continue to follow such a person? Why follow a dead man who had lied to them and been exposed?
- If Jesus was never raised then why did so many people convert to belief in the risen Christ in Jerusalem, where the evidence was clear? Even if the biblical accounts are exaggerated there must still have been thousands of baptisms in Jerusalem.
- Why did James the brother of Jesus change his mind and decide to become a follower of Jesus? - according to Josephus, James was put to death because of his faith in Christ Jesus.
- How did Saul of Tarsus become an Apostle if he never met the risen Jesus? The other Apostles were extremely suspicious of him even after his conversion.

### *The Migrant Jesus*

This is the theory promulgated by Ahmadiyya Muslims that Jesus did not die on the cross but migrated to Kashmir instead. A variant of it is proposed by Thiering, who suggests that Jesus travelled instead to Rome.

### **Answer**

1. The problem with this theory is that it doesn't explain how Jesus escaped from the tomb. Nor does it explain the resurrection appearances. Instead it completely ignores all the evidence.
2. For Jesus to have migrated to Kashmir or Rome he would have had to have been alive. Given that Jesus was crucified and was then alive, a migration theory would require the resurrection of Jesus. Thus a second theory is also required to explain how Jesus rose from the dead. This is not a theory of the resurrection, it is an attempted replacement for the ascension.

It is difficult to take this theory seriously. Even Vermes doesn't manage to find a way of treating it as a serious explanation of the events following the crucifixion of Jesus.

**Spiritual Resurrection**

According to this theory Jesus did not really rise from the dead at all, but his disciples underwent personal conversions which they could only explain in terms of an encounter with a living Jesus. The convenient analogy of the resurrection found itself into Christian teaching, and from there into the Bible.

**Answer**

1. This theory begins with the idea that Jesus only appeared to his disciples. This is a misunderstanding of the situation. Some of the people to whom Jesus appeared were not his disciples before (for example James and Paul) but the appearances were convincing and as a result everyone who saw Jesus alive after the resurrection *became* a disciple as a result.
2. The disciples were prepared to be put to death rather than cease to declare their faith in the risen Jesus. If this was merely a convenient way of expressing a cosmic truth, then the disciples could have expressed their cosmic truth in some other way and hence avoided persecution. No doubt they would have done so.
3. No amount of spiritual experience and personal conversion will produce an empty tomb. The fact that the tomb was empty means that the resurrection was a physical truth and not only a spiritual one.

This theory breaks down on the fact of the empty tomb. A simply spiritual experience (or a hallucination) cannot produce an empty tomb.

**Summary of Alternative Theories**

This table contains a list of the various alternative theories for the resurrection, compared against five known facts of the crucifixion. The cell is marked with a tick (✓) if the theory accounts for the fact and a cross (✗) if the theory cannot account for the fact. No alternative theory accounts for all the known facts. Only the historical explanation that Jesus rose from the dead fits all of the facts.

| Theory                   | Crucifixion | Empty Tomb | Witnesses | Behaviour of disciples | Behaviour of authorities |
|--------------------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Stolen by disciples    | ✓           | ✓          |           | ✗                      | ✓                        |
| 2 Removed by others      | ✓           | ✓          | ✗         | ✗                      | ✗                        |
| 3 Wrong tomb             | ✓           | ✓          | ✗         | ✗                      | ✗                        |
| 4 Swoon theory           | ✗           | ✓          | ✗         | ✗                      |                          |
| 5 Migrant Jesus          | ✗           | ✗          | ✗         | ✗                      | ✗                        |
| 6 Spiritual Resurrection | ✓           | ✗          | ✓         | ✗                      | ✗                        |
| 7 Substitute             | ✗           | ✗          | ✗         | ?                      | ✗                        |
| 8 Legend                 | ✗           | ✗          |           | ✗                      | ✗                        |

### *The Substitute*

This is the more common of the theories propounded by Muslims (the other one being the swoon theory). This is the theory that it was not Jesus who was crucified but someone else who was made to look like him (some accounts suggest Judas Iscariot, others a volunteer disciple, yet others a Roman soldier).

### **Answer**

1. The crucifixion of Jesus is a matter of record from Christian, Jewish and Roman sources. It is difficult to think of a better attested event in ancient history.
2. The Gospels record Jesus as having been asked whether he was the Christ (eg. Mark 14:61) and answering in the affirmative. This is not the action of Judas Iscariot or a Roman Soldier.
3. Jesus continued to speak to the disciples for another forty days after the resurrection. It would have been strange if, having avoided death by a substitution, he did not tell the disciples.
4. The idea of a substitute does not explain the empty tomb. There is no doubt that this tomb existed; the person who was crucified was also raised to life. Why would God raise an ordinary person?

This theory, like so many of the others, fails because it cannot account for the empty tomb.

### *Legend*

The final attempt to provide an alternative explanation for the resurrection of Jesus is the one adopted for the main part by the nineteenth century critics. This is the idea that none of the events in the Gospels actually happened at all, including the resurrection, but that the accounts took shape much later, put together by creative communities who developed the accounts from decade to decade.

### **Answer**

1. The time-scale of events is too short for the critical development to take place. Christians were being expelled from Rome in 49AD, in the reign of Claudius, and underwent extreme persecution in the reign of Nero (64AD). The New Testament was complete before 66AD (with

### **What it Means**

The New Testament declared the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It also explains what the Resurrection means for those who choose to follow Jesus. The Resurrection is a startling event, with startling consequences. Here are four points which explain the importance of the Resurrection:-

#### **Jesus' Claims are Vindicated**

*and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,* (Romans 1:4)

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and hence to have a unique place in the universe and to declare God's truth to the people of the world. This claim is shown to be true by the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead.

#### **Death has been overcome**

*And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.* (1 Corinthians 6:14)

God has raised Jesus from the dead. This proves that the dead can be raised. If God can raise Jesus, he can also raise other people from the dead.

#### **Jesus is Judge**

*because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.* (Acts 17:31)

Jesus taught that he would return and judge the living and the dead. The faithful will be granted eternal life, while the wicked will be destroyed. The importance of Jesus as judge is underlined by the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead.

#### **Salvation is on offer**

*because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* (Romans 10:9)

Jesus died and rose again, and taught that his followers will be able to follow him from the grave in a resurrection. The fact that Jesus was raised underwrites this claim. Salvation from eternal death is offered to those who follow Jesus Christ, beginning with an acceptance of his resurrection from the dead.

the possible exception of the Revelation). The earliest reference to the resurrection of Jesus was written in 48AD (or, just possibly, in the late autumn of 47AD). There is simply insufficient time for the legend to have grown before it was written down.

2. The Church was prepared to face persecution without falling to bits. Some important event must have happened to cause them to endure persecution.
3. The empty tomb is not explained by this theory. The theory might account for Christians referring to an empty tomb, but it by no means explains why the Jewish authorities should refer to an empty tomb from the earliest times after the event.

This is yet another theory shot down by the fact of the empty tomb.

### **Conclusion**

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most important events of history. It shows that God has intervened in the world, that death has been overcome, and that Jesus Christ is approved by God. These matters are not only vital to Christianity, they are also vital to every person alive.

The evidence for the resurrection is so strong as to be essentially unassailable. The main evidence of the existence of an empty tomb, the statements of a large number of witnesses, the behaviour of the witnesses in the face of persecution and the statements of the authorities who opposed the new Christian movement can only be explained by a real resurrection. None of the alternatives ever proposed accounts for all of these basic facts.

Jesus is Risen.