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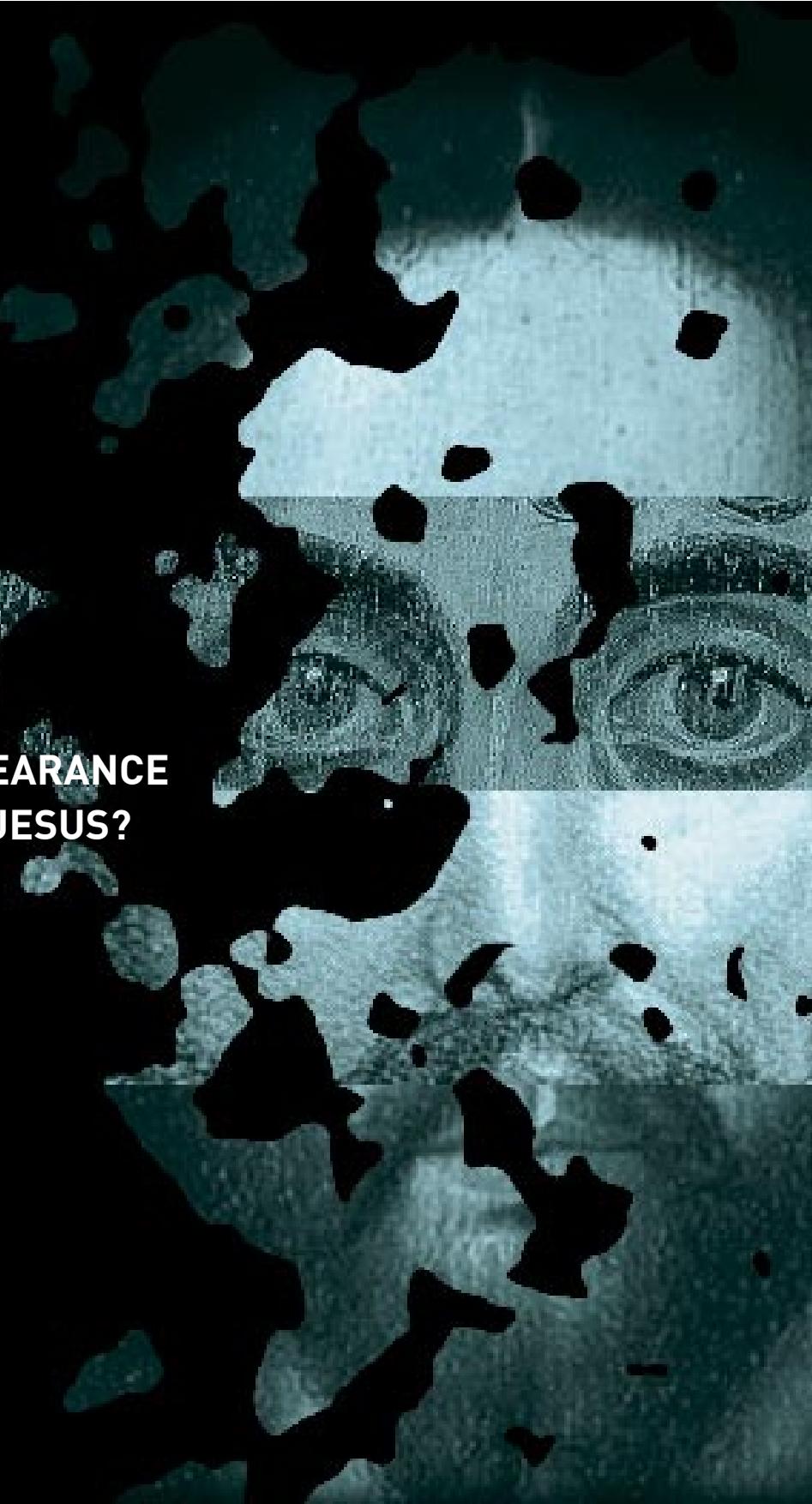
VOLUME TWO

Y-JESUS

ARTICLE 6:

BODY COUNT

EXPLAINING THE DISAPPEARANCE
AND REAPPEARANCE OF JESUS?



Body Count

Click on the e-article title for contents

EXPLAINING THE DISAPPEARANCE AND REAPPEARANCE OF JESUS?	Page 6
CYNICS AND SKEPTICS	Page 6
SELF-PROPHECY	Page 9
WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE END OF THE STORY	Page 9
SOMETHING HAPPENED	Page 10
WAS JESUS DEAD?	Page 10
THE MATTER OF AN EMPTY TOMB	Page 11
FRANK MORISON AND THE EXPOSE' THAT NEVER WAS GRAVE ROBBING?	Page 11
CONSISTENT TO THE END	Page 12
A BAD TRIP?	Page 13
FROM LIE TO LEGEND?	Page 13
WHY DID CHRISTIANITY WIN?	Page 14
A SURPRISE CONCLUSION	Page 14
ENDNOTES	Page 15
A STUNNED PROFESSOR	Page 15

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Larry Chapman

BODY COUNT

EXPLAINING THE DISAPPEARANCE AND REAPPEARANCE OF JESUS?



Atheist Bertrand Russell, who doubted Jesus' very existence, assumed that the resurrection of the body was impossible. In 1926, Russell wrote, "I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my own ego will survive."¹ Well, that's cheerful. Russell clearly bordered on the morose, but we've all wondered, with perhaps more optimism, what will happen to us when we die.

**"BUDDHA IS DEAD.
MOHAMMAD IS DEAD.
MOSES IS DEAD.
CONFUCIUS IS DEAD.
BUT ACCORDING TO
CHRISTIANITY...
CHRIST IS ALIVE."**

R. C. SPROUL.

Death has been called "the great equalizer." Thousands of stone markers surrounded by spacious green lawns tell the stories. Nobel Prize winners. Beauty queens. Billionaires. Presidents. All die. Someday it will be our turn. Are we to despair with Russell, or is there hope? According to the New Testa-

ment, Jesus' resurrection has given us hope for eternal life beyond the grave. All of Christianity hinges on that one promise.

Theologian R. C. Sproul has stated, "The claim of resurrection is vital to Christianity. If Christ has been raised from the dead by God, then He has the credentials and certification that no other religious leader possesses. Buddha is dead. Mohammad is dead. Moses is dead. Confucius is dead. But, according to ... Christianity, Christ is alive."²

So different and so abnormal is all this that a part of us would like to dismiss it as myth. But is the resurrection to be relegated to a Sunday school story—or is there evidence?

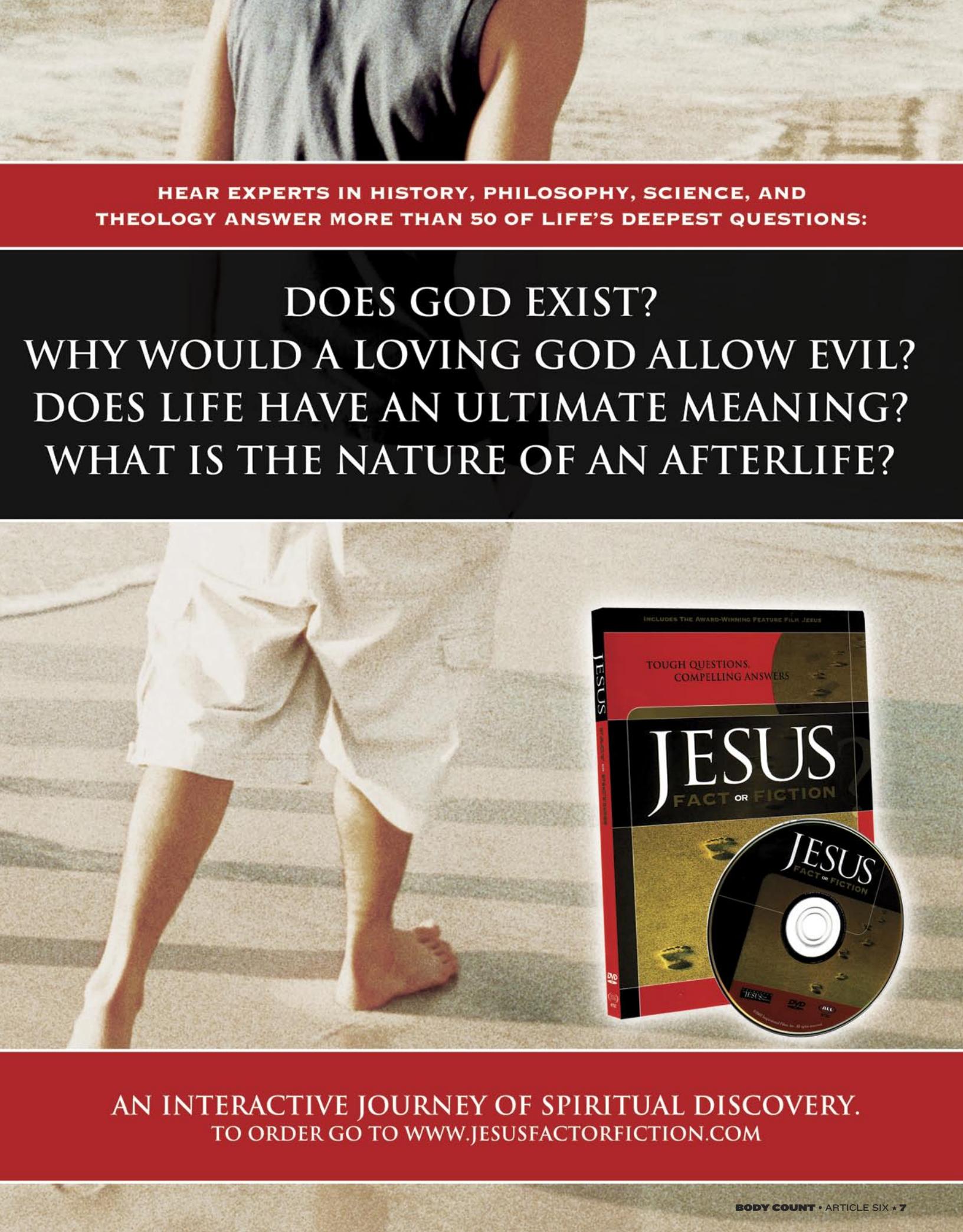
Researcher Josh McDowell said, "After more than seven hundred hours of studying this subject and thoroughly investigating its foundation, I have come to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men, OR it is the most fantastic fact of history."³ Right. So which is it?

Let's look at the evidence.

CYNICS AND SKEPTICS

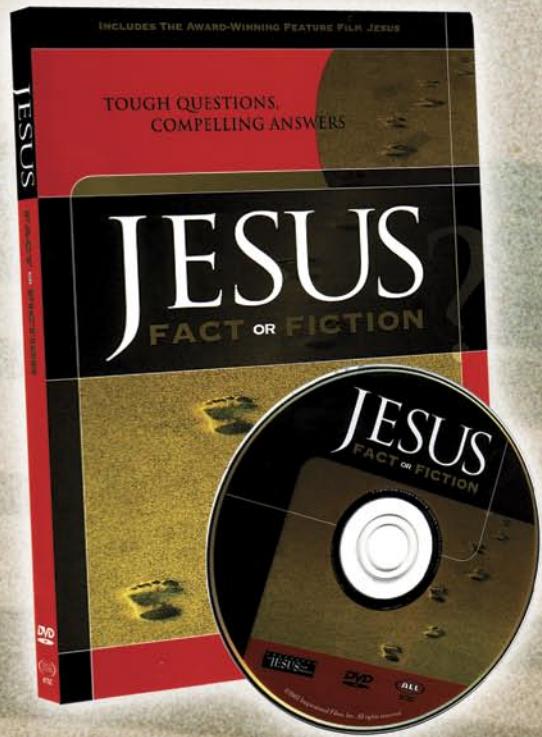
But not everyone is willing to fairly examine the evidence. Bertrand Russell admits his take on Jesus was "not concerned" with historical facts.⁴ Historian Joseph Campbell, without citing evidence, calmly told his PBS television audience that the resurrection of Jesus is not a factual event.⁵ Other scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar, agree with him.⁶ None of these skeptics present any evidence for their views.

To be honest, the thought that anyone could be dead for three days, and then come back to life is cause for a strong dose of skepticism. But whereas cynics are closed minded to the facts, according to *Skeptic* magazine, true skeptics always keep their minds open to the evidence. An editorial in the magazine states, "When we say we are 'skeptical,' we mean that we must see compelling evidence before we believe."⁷



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As our cold case of Jesus' resurrection gets underway, let's put ourselves in the role of a skeptic who needs compelling evidence before we will believe such an incredible event really occurred.

SELF-PROPHETY

In advance of his death, Jesus told his disciples that he would be betrayed, arrested, and crucified and that he would come back to life three days later. That's a strange plan! What was behind it? Jesus was no entertainer willing to perform for others on demand; instead, he promised that his death and resurrection would prove to people (if their minds and hearts were open) that he was indeed the Messiah.

Bible scholar Wilbur Smith remarked about Jesus,

When he said that He himself would rise again from the dead, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say, if He expected longer the devotion of any disciples—unless He was sure He was going to rise. No founder of any world

religion known to men ever dared say a thing like that.⁸

In other words, since Jesus had clearly told his disciples that he would rise again after his death, failure to keep that promise would expose him as a fraud.

So let's begin our skeptical inquiry of the resurrection with the events surrounding Jesus' death and burial.

WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE END OF THE STORY

You know what Jesus' last hours of earthly life were like if you watched the movie *By Road Warrior/Braveheart* Mel Gibson. If you missed parts of *The Passion of the Christ* because you were shielding your eyes (it would have been easier to simply shoot the movie with a red filter on the camera), just flip to the back pages of any Gospel in your New Testament to find out what you missed.

As Jesus predicted, he was betrayed by one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot, and was arrested. In a mock trial under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, he was

convicted of treason and condemned to die on a wooden cross. Prior to being nailed to the cross, Jesus was brutally beaten with a Roman cat-o'-nine-tails, a whip with bits of bone and metal that would rip flesh. He was punched repeatedly, kicked, and spit upon.

Then, using mallets, the Roman executioners pounded the heavy wrought-iron nails into Jesus' wrists and feet. Finally they dropped the cross in a hole in the ground between two other crosses bearing convicted thieves.

Jesus hung there for approximately six hours. Then, at 3:00 in the afternoon—that is, at exactly the same time the Passover lamb was being sacrificed as a sin offering—Jesus cried out, “It is finished” (in Aramaic), and died. Suddenly the sky went dark and an earthquake shook the land.⁹

Pilate wanted verification that Jesus was dead before allowing his crucified body to be buried. So a Roman guard thrust a spear into Jesus' side. The mixture of blood and water that flowed out was a clear indication that Jesus was dead. Jesus' body was then taken down from the cross and buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Roman

“THE SILENCE OF HISTORY IS DEAFENING WHEN IT COMES TO THE TESTIMONY AGAINST THE RESURRECTION.”

**TOM ANDERSON
FORMER PRESIDENT,
CALIFORNIA TRIAL LAWYERS
ASSOCIATION**



guards next sealed the tomb and secured it with a 24-hour watch.

Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples were in shock. Dr. J. P. Moreland writes of their mental state.

"They no longer had confidence that Jesus had been sent by God. They also had been taught that God would not let his Messiah suffer death. So they dispersed. The Jesus movement was all but stopped in its tracks."¹⁰

SOMETHING HAPPENED

But it wasn't the end. The Jesus movement did not disappear (obviously), and in fact Christianity exists today as the world's largest religion. Therefore, we've got to know what happened after Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb.

In a *New York Times* article, Peter Steinfels cites the startling events that occurred three days after Jesus' death: "Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanized from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened... But exactly what?"¹¹ That's the question we have to answer with an investigation into the facts.

There are only five plausible explanations for Jesus' alleged resurrection, as portrayed in the New Testament:

1. Jesus didn't really die on the cross.
2. The "resurrection" was a conspiracy.
3. The disciples were hallucinating.
4. The account is legendary.
5. It really happened.

Let's work our way through these options and see which one best fits the facts.

WAS JESUS DEAD?

"Marley was deader than a doornail, of that there was no doubt." So begins Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, the author not wanting anyone to be mistaken as to the supernatural character of what is soon to take place. In the same way, before we take on the role of CSI and piece together evidence for a resurrection, we must first establish that there was, in fact, a corpse. After all, occasionally the newspapers will report on some "corpse" in a morgue who was found stirring and recovered. Could something like that have happened with Jesus?

Some have proposed that Jesus lived through the crucifixion and was revived by the cool, damp air in the tomb—"Whoa, how long was I out for?" But that theory doesn't seem to square with the medical evidence. An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* explains why this so-called "swoon theory" is untenable: "Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicated that Jesus was dead. ... 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."¹² But skepticism of this verdict may be in order, as this case has been cold for 2,000 years. At the very least, we need a second opinion.

One place to find that is in the reports of non-Christian historians from around the time when Jesus lived. Three of these historians mentioned the death of Jesus.

- Lucian (c. 120–after 180 A.D.) referred to Jesus as a crucified sophist (philosopher).¹³
- Josephus (c. 37–c. 100 A.D.) wrote, "At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of amazing deeds. When Pilate condemned him to the cross, the leading men among us, having accused him, those who loved him did not cease to do so."¹⁴
- Tacitus (c. 56–c. 120 A.D.) wrote, "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty ... at the hands of our procurator Pontius Pilate."¹⁵



This is a bit like going into the archives and finding that on one spring day in the first century *The Jerusalem Post* ran a front-page story saying that Jesus was crucified and dead. Not bad detective work, and fairly conclusive.

In fact, there is no historical account from Christians, Romans, or Jews that disputes either Jesus' death or his burial. Even Crossan, a skeptic of the resurrection, agrees that Jesus really lived and died: "That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be."¹⁶ In light of such evidence, we seem to be on good grounds for dismissing the first of our five options. Jesus was clearly dead, "of that there was no doubt."

THE MATTER OF AN EMPTY TOMB

No serious historian really doubts Jesus was dead when he was taken down from the cross. However, many have questioned how Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb. English journalist Dr. Frank Morison initially thought the resurrection was either

FRANK MORISON AND THE EXPOSE THAT NEVER WAS

In the early 1900s, German criticism of the Bible and the rationalist movement were sweeping over Western Europe and the United States, carrying with them the belief that nothing can happen apart from natural laws. With that naturalistic belief came a skepticism toward the resurrection of Christianity—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One who was greatly influenced by such skepticism was English journalist Frank Morison, who came to believe that the story of Jesus rising from the dead was nothing more than a fairy tale for adults.

I wanted to take this last phase of the life of Jesus, with all its quick and pulsating drama, its sharp, clear-cut background of antiquity, and its tremendous psychological and human interest—to strip it of its overgrowth of primitive beliefs and dogmatic suppositions, and to see this supremely great Person as He really was.¹⁷

But Morison was stunned by what he discovered. He exclaimed, "The book as it was originally planned was left high and dry."¹⁸ Morison's book—Who Moved the Stone?—did finally get written, but it had an entirely different ending than he had intended.

of holes, missing evidence, and illogical conclusions. He then would write a book exposing the myth. This notable journalist wrote of his intent:



a myth or a hoax, and he began research to write a book refuting it.¹⁹ The book became famous but for reasons other than its original intent, as we'll see.

Morison began by attempting to solve the case of the empty tomb. The tomb belonged to a member of the Sanhedrin Council, Joseph of Arimathea. In Israel at that time, to be on the council was to be a rock star. Everyone knew who was on the council. Joseph must have been a real person. Otherwise, the Jewish leaders would have exposed the story as a fraud in their attempt to disprove the resurrection. Also, Joseph's tomb would have been at a well-known location and easily identifiable, so any thoughts of Jesus being "lost in the graveyard" would need to be dismissed.

Morison wondered why Jesus' enemies would have allowed the "empty tomb myth" to persist if it wasn't true. The discovery of Jesus' body would have instantly killed the entire plot.

And what is known historically of Jesus' enemies is that they accused Jesus' disciples of stealing the body, an accusation clearly predicated on a shared belief that the tomb was empty.

Dr. Paul L. Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, similarly stated, "If all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable ... to conclude that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered ... that would disprove this statement."²⁰

The Jewish leaders were stunned and accused the disciples of stealing Jesus' body. But the Romans had assigned a 24-hour watch at the tomb with a trained guard unit (from 4 to 12 soldiers). Morison asked, "How could these professionals have let Jesus' body be vandalized?" It would have been impossible for anyone to have slipped by the Roman guards and to have moved a two-ton stone. Yet the stone was moved away and the body of Jesus was missing.

If Jesus' body was anywhere to be found, his enemies would have quickly exposed the resurrection as a fraud. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association, summarizes the strength of this argument:

With an event so well publicized, don't you think that it's reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ's body? ... The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.²¹

So, with no body of evidence, and with a known tomb clearly empty, Morison accepted the evidence as solid that Jesus' body had somehow disappeared from the tomb.

GRAVE ROBBING?

As Morison continued his investigation, he began to examine the motives of Jesus' followers. Maybe the supposed resurrection was actually a stolen body. But if so, how does one account for all the reported appearances of a resurrected Jesus? Historian Paul Johnson, in *History of the Jews*, wrote, "What mattered was not the circumstances

of his death but the fact that he was widely and obstinately believed, by an expanding circle of people, to have risen again."²² The tomb was indeed empty. But it wasn't the mere absence of a body that could have galvanized Jesus' followers (especially if they had been the ones who had stolen it). Something extraordinary must have happened, for the followers of Jesus ceased mourning, ceased hiding, and began fearlessly proclaiming that they had seen Jesus alive.

Each eyewitness account reports that Jesus suddenly appeared bodily to his followers, the women first. Morison wondered why conspirators would make women central to its plot. In the first century, women had virtually no rights, personhood, or status. If the plot was to succeed, Morison reasoned, the conspirators would have portrayed men, not women, as the first to see Jesus alive. And yet we hear that women touched him, spoke with him, and were the first to find the empty tomb.

Later, according to the eyewitness accounts, all the disciples saw Jesus on more than ten separate occasions. They wrote that he showed them his hands and feet and told them to touch him. And he reportedly ate with them and later appeared alive to more than 500 followers on one occasion.

Legal scholar John Warwick Montgomery stated, "In 56 A.D. [the apostle] Paul wrote that over 500 people had seen the risen Jesus and that most of them were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6ff.). It passes the bounds of credibility that the early Christians could have manufactured such a tale and then preached it among those who might easily have refuted it simply by producing the body of Jesus."²³

"THE APPEARANCES OF JESUS ARE AS WELL AUTHENTICATED AS ANYTHING IN ANTIQUITY....THERE CAN BE NO RATIONAL DOUBT THAT THEY OCCURRED."
MICHAEL GREEN, BRITISH BIBLE SCHOLAR

Bible scholars Geisler and Turek agree. "If the Resurrection had not occurred, why would the apostle Paul give such a list of supposed eyewitnesses? He would immediately lose all credibility with his Corinthian readers by lying so blatantly."²⁴

British Bible scholar Michael Green remarked, "The appearances of Jesus are as well authenticated as anything in antiquity. ... There can be no rational doubt that they occurred."²⁵

CONSISTENT TO THE END

As if the eyewitness reports were not enough to challenge Morison's skepticism, he was also baffled by the disciples' behavior. A fact of history that has stumped historians, psychologists, and skeptics alike is that these 11 former cowards were suddenly willing to suffer humiliation, torture, and death. All but one of Jesus' disciples were slain as martyrs. Would they have done so much for a lie, knowing they had taken the body?

The Islamic martyrs on September 11 proved that some will die for a false cause they believe in. Yet to be a willing martyr for a known lie is insanity. As Paul Little wrote, "Men will die for what they believe to be true, though it may actually be false. They do not, however, die for what they know is a lie."²⁶ Jesus' disciples behaved in a manner consistent with a genuine belief that their leader was alive.

No one has adequately explained why the disciples would have been willing to die for a known lie. But even if they all conspired to lie about Jesus' resurrection, how could they have kept the conspiracy going for decades without at least one of them selling out for money or position? Moreland wrote, "Those who lie for personal gain do not stick together very long, especially when hardship decreases the benefits."²⁷

Chuck Colson, implicated in the Watergate scandal, pointed out the difficulty of several people maintaining a lie for an extended period of time.

I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world—and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.²⁸

Something happened that changed everything for these men and women. Morison acknowledged, "Whoever comes to this problem has sooner or later to confront a fact that

cannot be explained away. ... This fact is that ... a profound conviction came to the little group of people—a change that attests to the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave."²⁹

A BAD TRIP?

Sometimes certain people can "see" things they want to, things that aren't really there. And that's why some have claimed that the disciples were so distraught over the crucifixion that their desire to see Jesus alive caused mass hallucination. Plausible?

Psychologist Gary Collins, former president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, was asked about the possibility that hallucinations were behind the disciples' radically changed behavior. Collins remarked, "Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren't something which can be seen by a group of people."³⁰

Hallucination is not even a remote possibility, according to psychologist Thomas J. Thorburn. "It is absolutely inconceivable that ... five hundred persons, of average soundness of mind ... should experience all kinds of sensuous impressions—visual, auditory, tactual—and that all these ... experiences should rest entirely upon ... hallucination."³¹

FROM LIE TO LEGEND?

Some unconvinced skeptics attribute the resurrection story to a legend on a par with King Arthur's round table, or Robin Hood.

But there are three major problems with that theory.

1. Legends rarely develop while multiple eyewitnesses are alive to refute them. One historian of ancient Rome and Greece, A. N. Sherwin-White, argued that the resurrection news spread too soon and too quickly for it to have been a legend.³²
2. Legends develop by oral tradition and don't come with contemporary historical documents that can be verified. Yet the Gospels were written within three decades of the resurrection.³³
3. The legend theory doesn't adequately explain either the fact of the empty tomb or the historically verified conviction of the apostles that Jesus was alive.³⁴

WHY DID CHRISTIANITY WIN?

Morison was bewildered by the fact that "a tiny insignificant movement was able to prevail over the cunning grip of the Jewish establishment, as well as the might of Rome." Why did it win, in the face of all those odds against it?

He wrote, "Within twenty years the claim of these Galilean peasants had disrupted the Jewish church. ... In less than fifty years it had begun to threaten the peace of the Roman Empire. When we have said everything that can be said ... we stand confronted with the greatest mystery of all. Why did it win?"³⁵

By all rights, Christianity should have died out at the cross when the disciples fled for their lives. But the apostles went on to establish a growing Christian movement.

J. N. D. Anderson wrote, "Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence—and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication. ... That simply wouldn't make sense."³⁶

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ABLE TO PREVAIL OVER THE CUNNING
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AS WELL AS THE MIGHT OF ROME....WE
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MYSTERY OF ALL. WHY DID IT WIN?"**
FRANK MORISON, ENGLISH JOURNALIST

Many scholars believe (in the words of an ancient commentator) that "the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church." Historian Will Durant observed, "Caesar and Christ had met in the arena and Christ had won."³⁷

A SURPRISE CONCLUSION

Morison became convinced that his preconceived bias against Jesus Christ's resurrection had been wrong. He began writing a different book—entitled *Who Moved the Stone?*—to detail his new conclusions. Morison simply followed the trail of evidence, clue by clue, until the truth of the case seemed clear to him. His surprise was that the evidence led to a belief in the resurrection. He writes, "It was as though a man set out to cross a forest by a familiar and well-beaten track and came out suddenly where he did not expect to come out."³⁸

Morison is not alone. Countless other skeptics have examined the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, and accepted it as the most astounding fact in all of human history. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ brings us back to the question: What does the fact that Jesus defeated death have to do with my life? The answer to that question is what New Testament Christianity is all about. (See article 7)



ENDNOTES

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² R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1982), 44.

³ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1999), 203.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 16.

⁵ Joseph Campbell, an interview with Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, PBS TV special, 1988.

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds, *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 2.

⁷ "What Is a Skeptic?" editorial in *Skeptic*, vol 11, no. 2), 5.

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²⁴ Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 243.

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²⁷ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 172.

²⁸ Charles Colson, "The Paradox of Power," Power to Change, www.powertochange.ie/changed/index_Leaders.

²⁹ Morison, 104.

³⁰ Quoted in Strobel, 238.

³¹ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 274.

³² Quoted in *Jesus Under Fire*, 154.

³³ Habermas, 85.

³⁴ Habermas, 87.

³⁵ Morison, 115.

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³⁷ Durant, 652.

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⁴⁰ Quoted in McDowell 9.

A STUNNED PROFESSOR

A skeptic of the resurrection, Simon Greenleaf (1783–1853) helped to put the Harvard Law School on the map. He wrote *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, which is still regarded as one of the outstanding works on establishing legal evidence. Professor Greenleaf had stated to his Harvard law class that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a legend. In a rebuttal, three of his law students challenged him to apply his acclaimed rules of evidence to the resurrection account.

Greenleaf accepted the students' challenge. Yet this expert in evaluating evidence was unable to explain the dramatic change in the behavior of the disciples without assuming the truth of the resurrection. Greenleaf reasoned that no group of people could have maintained their story through such persecution unless they knew it was true.³⁹

After systematically evaluating the evidence, the Harvard law professor reversed his bias against the resurrection, concluding, "There is more evidence for the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ than for just about any other event in history."⁴⁰