

A STUDY ON THE LIFE OF CHRIST IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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COLLATERAL READING ASSIGNMENT TEXTBOOK

JESUS the MESSIAH
A SURVEY OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST

By Robert H. Stein

Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996

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A Review of the book *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ*

Professor Robert H. Stein's book provides an excellent basis for the initiation in a deeper historical study of the life of Jesus Christ. Though he maintains a supernatural and biblical approach to the study of this subject, Stein does an excellent job in discussing many of the nonsupernatural, pagan, and Jewish points of view, affording the reader the opportunity to further investigate the various claims and sources regarding the several aspects of Jesus' life, ministry, and mission. One foundational truth that Stein establishes is that of presupposition; explaining that not only does one's present orientation predetermine one's view of the material to be studied, it also shapes the student's final conclusions. "Where a person starts powerfully shapes where he or she finishes" (Stein 1996, 17). Stein supports a historic approach regarding the study of the life of Jesus, which presupposes the miraculous. Contrary to this approach is the historical-critical method, which posits that a proper study of history is closed to the supernatural. In the prologue to his book, *A History of Christianity*, Paul Johnson (1976) references Ernst Troeltsch's argument that "... skeptical and critical methods of historical research were incompatible with Christian belief; ..." (1). In other words, one cannot approach a study of Christian history with faith if the study is to be objective. The dilemma of presupposition challenges this statement, as an approach that denies the supernatural argues against objectivity. Stein's argument is that one cannot approach a study of history without having some sort of presupposition. One either believes in the possibility of the supernatural or not. Objectivity seems then to be relatively impossible. Stein (1996) asserts "a person cannot come to terms with the life of Jesus without coming to terms with the issue of miracles" (18). I agree with this position, for divorcing the miraculous from a study of the life of Christ would present a Jesus whose impact on the Christian faith and world history would seem ridiculous.

In his book, Stein begins his first chapter by discussing the supernatural and nonsupernatural approaches to the study of history as they pertain to the study of the life of Christ. Once defining the different methods, Stein does an excellent job in defending his reasoning that a study of the life of Christ must be open to the supernatural. In chapters one through three, Stein covers the dilemmas and challenges associated with a historical study of the life of Christ. He discusses different methods of historical study, the various non-Christian and Christian sources that are available today, and assesses their veracity. Next, Stein tackles the dilemma of chronology and the approach each Gospel author adopts in his narrative. Moving on from there, Stein covers the Gospel narratives of Jesus' life from the miraculous conception to the resurrection and ascension of Christ, carefully covering all of the aspects of Jesus' life, ministry, and mission. Each chapter contains the study of the subject matter, non-biblical and biblical support, contrasting arguments with response, and a final conclusion.

Ernst Troeltsch's Principles of Historical Investigation and the Resurrection

Using the historical-critical method, Ernst Troeltsch's first two principles of historical investigation posit a provisional history that presupposes a nonsupernatural interpretation. The first principle, the principle of criticism, presupposes that "... historical enquiry can establish only probabilities, which are always open to revision" (Rowe 1998, under "The problem of history"). When analyzing a resurrection document, this principle challenges the historical veracity of the account by asserting that new information could arise that would challenge the credibility of the current historical account of the resurrection. The second principle is the principle of analogy, which assumes that past experiences of historical accounts must be based on the present non-miraculous experience in nature. This however can only be based on the assumption that miracles do not occur in present experience. With these first two principles in

mind, the liberal theologian would assert the following: First, because new information could come to light, the resurrection account may or may not be accurate and thus, potentially unreliable. Second, concluding that the true story of Christ's body being absent from the tomb must have an explanation that is within the limits of the laws of nature, the account of miracles in the resurrection story are mythical at best.

According to Stein (1996), when determining how the resurrection faith of the disciples came about, if one were to apply Troeltsch's third principle of correlation to a study of the resurrection, a dilemma is created because "... the presupposition one brings to the study predetermines the conclusion to the question ..." (21). The liberal theologian would then approach the resurrection account found in Luke's Gospel by determining the sources used such as Mark, the mysterious Q source, and the oral traditions. By assessing Mark's account and comparing the Matthean account, the historian would determine material Luke added that are unique to his account. Once determining this, the liberal theologian would assess how Luke may have weaved a theological message within his account by reviewing material in the entire Gospel. Once completing this exercise, the liberal theologian would eliminate material added to Luke's Gospel that is determined not to be an accurate account of the historical record.

The problem that arises by using Troeltsch's principles occurs when dealing with the issue of the supernatural aspects of the account and the source of the resurrection faith of the disciples. The questions regarding oral tradition based on eyewitness accounts and the unwavering faith of the disciples creates a dilemma that cannot be resolved by Troeltsch's method. Stein discusses this dilemma as follows:

If a person accepts an unqualified version of the principal of analogy as taught by Troeltsch and incorporated in the historical-critical method, he or she must conclude that whatever gave rise to the faith of the disciples, it cannot be the miracle of the resurrection. Although never stating this quite so bluntly, an investigator of Matthew's

resurrection account using the historical-critical method is essentially saying, “Let’s investigate what we can learn about the history of this account, but we must of course agree at the start that Jesus did not rise from the dead!” (Stein 1996, 21)

As stated a few times in this essay, the dilemma is presupposition. One cannot approach a historical document that deals with an account such as the resurrection without some assumptions. Either the supernatural can occur or it cannot. As a result, one’s orientation will determine where one finishes when approaching a historical document like the account of the resurrection.

Evaluating Literary Sources Pertaining to a Study of the Life of Christ

To prove historically the existence of Jesus Christ, a man upon whom the Christian church was built and who has affected history in an impactful way, is not difficult. As far back as the first century AD, we find the Roman Empire, an empire that tolerated the religions and beliefs of its conquered cultures, reacting to Jesus’ disciples in drastic form. J.B. Bury’s edited work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by eighteenth century historian Edward Gibbon, mentions the following:

If, on the other hand, we recollect the universal toleration of Polytheism, as it was invariably maintained by the faith of the people, the incredulity of philosophers, and the policy of the Roman senate and emperors, we are at a loss to discover what new offence the Christians had committed, what new provocation could exasperate the mild indifference of antiquity, and what new motives could urge the Roman princes, who beheld without concern a thousand forms of religion subsisting in peace under their gentle sway, to inflict a severe punishment on any part of their subjects, who had chosen for themselves a singular but an inoffensive mode of faith and worship. (Gibbon 1946, 401)

To argue against the existence of this Jesus whose followers impacted the most powerful empire the world had ever known is an exercise that many have attempted unsuccessfully. Historical sources are available that prove the existence of Jesus, but what of his life? According to Stein (1996), “The primary sources can be divided into pagan and Jewish; and Christian

sources, which divide into extrabiblical and biblical” (25). Non-Christian sources pertaining to the life of Christ are sparse and give us general information of the historicity of Christ, who lived in first century Palestine and whose teachings made both positive and negative impacts on the common man and the Jewish and Roman authorities. Nonbiblical Christian sources range from apocryphal works to writings from the early church fathers and historians. The value of these works is best assessed when supporting statements made in the canonized Gospels.

Of all sources extant relating to the life of Christ, the most descriptive and informative are found in the New Testament; specifically the Gospels. Though none of the Gospel writers focused on a chronology of events, when viewed together, the four accounts provide a clear picture of Christ’s life, message, mission, and ministry from the annunciation of the virgin birth to his crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Of the four accounts, the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke provide an excellent side-by-side comparison that compliment one another in detail, geography, and chronological indicators. Where the synoptic accounts are silent, the Gospel of John provides detail, such as the account of the first year of Jesus’ ministry. Because these accounts were written during a time when the majority of Christ’s followers were still alive and the supporting extra-biblical documents of the early church fathers and historians attest to their authenticity, the Gospel accounts in the New Testament are the most reliable and informative source of information that exists regarding the life of Jesus Christ.

The Virginal Conception and Birth of Jesus Christ

There are several events associated with the birth of Jesus. I will cover five here in somewhat chronological order. Prior to the annunciation to Mary, Luke’s Gospel records the annunciation and conception of John the Baptist, who was prophesied to be the forerunner of Jesus. Luke writes in his Gospel, “He will also go before him in the spirit and power of

Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17, NKJV). Six months after the conception of John the Baptist, an angel of the Lord appears to Mary, identified in Luke’s account as Gabriel, who announces her virginal conception. Some time after this, the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph to assure him that the child Mary was carrying was “... of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20). During this time, Luke records that Caesar Augustus decrees a census, causing Joseph to take Mary and go to Bethlehem. It is here in Bethlehem that Jesus is born and the announcement to the Shepherds is made. Luke records this account as follows:

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:8-14)

Among the criticisms regarding the virginal conception of Jesus is the argument against supernatural occurrence within nature. Ernst Troeltsch’s principal of analogy within the historical critical method asserts uniformity in nature. This line of thinking asserts that as present-day experience in nature is non-miraculous, the true account of the conception of Jesus cannot be miraculous and therefore not virginal. Using this principle one must approach such a study under the presupposition that miracles do not occur. In other words, in order to explain away the miraculous or at the very least, ignore its possibility, one must believe that we live in a non-miraculous world. Such an orientation will ignore the possibility of miracles and therefore approach a subject with eyes closed to any data that opposes this view. Another popular argument that exists is that of parallel pagan accounts of miraculous conceptions. The argument

is that because these stories pre-date Christ, the account of the virginal birth of Jesus has its roots in these accounts. B.R. Burton points out in his paper, *Pagan Parallels to the Virgin Birth*, anti-missionaries, a Jewish movement that focuses on countering Christian evangelism efforts within the Jewish community "... love the pagan 'parallel' argument" (Burton, under "Anti missionaries" para. 1). These parallels are unfounded, as the accounts generally involve intercourse between a deity and a mortal woman. A third argument is that Mary, the mother of Jesus, had been unfaithful to Joseph. Stein (1996) points out that within Judaism, the explanation was that Jesus was the "... illegitimate offspring between Mary and a soldier named Panthera" (67). This argument is based on the manipulation of the Greek word, *parthenos*, for virgin as the name of the Roman soldier, Panthera. Stein (1996) points out that this explanation "... has no historical evidence in its support" (67). Finally, there is really no thorough and adequate explanation regarding the New Testament accounts of the virgin birth. Within its pages, Stein (1996) argues, "... the Bible does not say that the incarnation was through a virginal conception" (79). However, the Old Testament does contain allusions to the fact. One example is found in the Genesis account. God says to the serpent, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed ..." (Genesis 3:15). If one studies the Bible, he or she will find that when referred to offspring, the seed in the Old Testament is mentioned in relation to the man and not the woman. However, in this particular account, God is addressing the woman and not the man. Though one cannot assert this to be the case, it does at least raise the question of allusion.

It is safe to say that one's interpretation of the virginal conception is based on orientation or presupposition. If the miraculous does not occur in nature, then the virginal conception cannot occur. If however, miracles are possible, the virginal conception is as well. As the arguments

mentioned above are debatable and I believe that God is able to invade natural law to fulfill His purposes, I believe in the virginal conception of Jesus Christ and hold fast to understanding that "... faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, KJV).

Analyzing the Baptism and Temptation of Jesus Christ

Speaking of Jesus in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that "... He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us ..." (2 Corinthians 5:21, NKJV). If this is so, why did Jesus submit to John the Baptist's baptism of repentance? Jesus' response to John gives us a clue; "But Jesus answered and said to him, 'Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he allowed Him" (Matthew 3:15, KJV). John's ministry was that of the forerunner of Jesus Christ and he preached the baptism of repentance to prepare the hearts of the people for His coming. In submitting to the baptism of John, Jesus identified with John's ministry and with sinful man. Secondly, the baptism marks a turning point in the life of Jesus from living a quiet life as a carpenter to beginning His public ministry. Finally, McClafin (2013) states, "His baptism pointed to His death, burial, and resurrection ..." (117-118).

In his Gospel account, Luke records, "When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, 'You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:21-22). A few unusual events occur in this account. The first event that occurs is that of the heavens being opened. The only other place in the New Testament that uses this terminology was at Jesus' crucifixion when "... the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (Mark 15:38). As the latter occurrence communicates to the believer in Christ that because of Jesus sacrifice, we have direct access to

God through Him, it would seem this initial act during the baptism communicates to all onlookers of His direct access to God. The voice speaking at Jesus' baptism is also highly significant. During the intertestamental period between Malachi and Matthew there is complete silence from God. However, at the baptism God speaks after about four hundred years, bearing witness to the Word that "... was made flesh ..." (John 1:14), thereby declaring His desire to communicate with the world and of His approval of Jesus and His ministry. Finally, the descending of the Spirit upon Jesus signifies the anointing of Christ for His ministry. Additionally, the descending of the Holy Spirit, the voice from heaven, and the presence of Jesus, give us a clear manifestation of the Trinity.

The three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness carry with them three unique and significant meanings. After fasting forty days and nights, Luke records that the enemy challenges Jesus to turn stones into bread; at which time Jesus responds, "... 'It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God'" (Luke 4:4 NKJV), signifying Jesus' faith in the Father to meet His needs during His ministry. As with the first temptation, the temptation at the pinnacle of the temple challenges Jesus' faith and dependence on the Father to care for Him. However, with this temptation, the enemy seems to up the ante by challenging Jesus to prove His faith, to which our Lord simply responds, "... It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God'" (Matthew 4:7). Stein (1996) points out that "such an act would not be one of faith but of unbelief" (108). Jesus responding to the enemy by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16 further signifies the sinfulness of such an act. Finally, Luke records that the devil takes Him up to a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, promising them to Jesus if He would but bow and worship him. This temptation is, as Stein (1996) puts it, "A crossless solution ..." (109). Jesus' response, "... Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall

worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.” (Luke 4:8), signifies Jesus’ submission to the Father and His will.

Jesus’ Teaching Methods

Jesus’ teaching methods were fluid. He had a strategy, but did not work from a prepared schedule of lessons or some organized syllabus. His teachings were weaved into life experiences with His disciples. Robert E. Coleman (1993) puts it best in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* when he writes, “His training classes were never dismissed. Everything which he said and did was a personal lesson in reality, and since the disciples were to notice it, they were learning practically every moment of their walking day” (76). Though fluid, Jesus did incorporate various teaching techniques. Parables covered a large part of His teachings but were not used in large part until His ministry had progressed. Stein (1996) mentions Jesus’ use of various kinds of “... poetic parallelism ...” (124) in His teaching. Rhetorical questioning and the question and answer method were also forms He used and weaved throughout His teachings. Of His various teaching techniques, McClafin (2013) writes, “... He favored a method that we refer to as ‘learning by doing’” (195). Coleman (1993) writes, “All the disciples had to teach them was a teacher who practiced with them what he expected them to learn” (74). In other words, Jesus greatly incorporated activity throughout His ministry that provided opportunities to impart truth to His disciples in real-world scenarios.

Regarding the content of His teaching, the Kingdom of God was of the utmost importance and covered much of His lessons. Regarding a new order, Jesus responds to the disciples of John, “No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old

wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved” (Matthew 9:16-17).

Other lessons regarding the Kingdom of God were that of the future and present aspects of the Kingdom. In these lessons, Jesus taught that the Kingdom had come in some form but that its full manifestation would not be realized until His second advent. Jesus’ unique relationship to the Father was clearly seen in His teachings. The use of the word *abba* is a clear indicator of Jesus’ unique relationship with the Father. The term *abba* represents a relationship of intimacy between a father and child. According to the *International Standards Encyclopedia*, *abba*, as a form of address was extremely uncommon in Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period. Jesus’ frequent use of Father to communicate an intimate and unique relationship was clear. Aside from Jesus’ use of the possessive phrase, “My Father...” (John 10:29) in the New Testament, it is not seen anywhere in Scripture in this form as a relationship with God. Jesus’ frequent assertion to His unique relationship with God as His Father, established an authority that the Old Testament prophets, or any contemporary teacher could not claim. Matthew records, “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28-29).

Jesus’ lessons on the ethics of the Kingdom are also weaved throughout His teaching ministry. Stein (1996) points out that Jesus’ ethical teachings “... begin with a call to decision” (134). From challenging one who would be a follower of Jesus to “... deny himself and take up his cross ...” (Matthew 14:24), to the call to compassion in the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus presents His hearers with lessons that challenged the status quo of religion and the natural leanings of the sinful human heart.

Jesus’ Understanding of Himself and His Role

From an early age, Jesus did not only understand His special relationship with the Father, but also His role as the Son of God. At the age of twelve, when Mary and Joseph found Him in the temple after searching for Him for three days, He responded, "... 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'" (Luke 2:49, ESV). Scripture is clear regarding Jesus' understanding of Himself and His role through His actions, statements, and the titles He accepted. Both the action and statements He made regarding the forgiving of sins was a clear demonstration of His authority and role. In the account of Jesus healing the paralyzed man, He responds first by saying, "... 'Son, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5, NIV). The reaction of some of the teachers of the law gives us an understanding that both the action and declaration were accepted as reserved for God alone. Stein (1996) writes, "The Gospel accounts clearly portray Jesus as consciously exercising a divine prerogative" (142). Through His miracles, Jesus also demonstrates His understanding of who He was. One of the most graphic pictures in Scripture of Christ exercising such authority is found on the Sea of Galilee in Mark chapter four. In this account, Jesus stands and with a few words, calms a tempest, to which the disciples respond, "... 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" (Mark 4:41). Jesus' response to John's question via his disciples, as to whether or not He was the promised Messiah, best sums up His understanding of His role and person. Matthew records, "Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me'" (Matthew 11:4-6).

Through His teaching, Jesus demonstrated a unique authority over the Word of God. In Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes declarations that no teacher could

make. Sayings such as, “You have heard that it was said.... But I tell you ...” (Matthew 5:38-39), and, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine ...” (Matthew 7:24), shows a uniqueness, as He “taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 2:29). The Gospels also show us that through word and deed, Jesus understood the importance of His role as Messiah. Regarding His mission, Luke records that Jesus “... steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51, NKJV). Mark chapter ten records Jesus predicting His death and resurrection. In the same chapter, He reveals the reason for His mission, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Of titles Jesus used or accepted, there are three that according to Stein (1996) “... play the largest role in Jesus’ self-understanding” (146). The title *Son of Man*, was one Jesus used frequently in reference to Himself. Though used in the Old Testament, the designation is found mostly in Ezekiel when God is addressing the prophet. Jesus however, used this title more than any other, as a self-designation. Scripture does not give us a clear understanding of the use of this title. However, in his book, *Every Name of God in the Bible*, Larry Richards states insightfully, “It would be difficult to exhaust the significance of the title ‘Son of Man.’ But surely it is intended to draw our attention to Jesus as fully human, to make us aware of Jesus’ sufferings for us, and to awaken wonder that the eternal Son of God truly entered the world to bring us, victorious, to His eternal glory” (Richards 2001, 171-172).

Another significant title used in reference to Jesus is *Son of God*. Used even by the enemy during the temptation in the desert, this gives us an understanding that this title was not used in the general term as a son, but *The Son*. Though not plainly spelled out, Jesus' use terminology of His unique relationship as the Son of God. As stated previously, the use of the

possessive, *My Father* (John 10:29 and Matthew 24:26), shows Jesus understanding of this relationship.

The title of Christ or Messiah is another very significant and important title associated to Jesus. Though used as a self-designation by Jesus and assigned to Him by others, Stein (1996) points out that, “Because of the political and militaristic connotations associated with this title, however, Jesus avoided using it openly” (147). The most significant use of this title is found at Caesarea Philippi when Peter makes the declaration, “... You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). It is noteworthy to point out that Jesus did not only accept Peter’s declaration, but commended him for making it.

Who then is Jesus? Besides the Holy Scriptures, entire volumes have been written to answer this question. For those who believe on Him, He is “...the eternally blessed God ...” (Romans 9:5) who “... became flesh and dwelt among us ...” (John 1:14). He gave His life as a sacrifice on the cross of Calvary and became “... the sacrifice that atones for our sins – and not only our sins, but the sins of all the world” (1 John 2:2, NLT). Having died at Calvary, “... we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace ...” (Ephesians 1:7, NKJV). Through His resurrection, we have been given the promise of heaven and He has “begotten us again to a living hope.... an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven ...” (1 Peter 1:3-4). So then, who is He? According to Scripture and to my own personal experience, He is my God, Savior, and King. And one day I shall be with Him in eternity. Expressing the wonderful expectation of the believer, Paul writes, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then

we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The Events at Caesarea Philippi

There are several suggestions that attempt to explain the significance of Jesus’ trip to Caesarea Philippi. Stein (1996) writes, “Several suggestions have been made: to preach the gospel to the Gentiles; to find privacy and rest; to reflect on the success of his ministry; to escape the hostility of Herod Antipas; to teach his disciples” (156). Of these suggestions, some are speculative, while others contradict Gospel accounts. The explanation that seems most reasonable is that of Jesus teaching and preparing His disciples for future events. During the later period of Christ’s greater Galilean ministry, Jesus spent more time alone with the twelve than any other period. It is here that the visit to Caesarea Philippi takes place, where Jesus asks His disciples the most significant question, “... ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’” (Matthew 16:13), at which point the disciples list a few examples. Following this, Jesus asks the most significant follow up question, “... ‘But who do you say that I am?’” (Matthew 16:15). Here we have a turning point in Christ’s ministry. As His greater Galilean ministry comes to an end and His focus shifts to the events in Jerusalem that will lead to Calvary, after spending nearly three years with Him, learning from Him, witnessing miracles and observing His life, Jesus asks them a question that one may paraphrase by saying, “Who have you concluded that I am?”. In response to this question we read, “Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the son of the living God’” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus’ response to Peter gives us a strong indication of the significance of this declaration, for it would become the foundation upon which the Church would be built; “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

During this period and very immediately, Jesus teaching focuses on His arrest, death, and resurrection to prepare the disciples for what lay ahead. There is a significant moment during Jesus' teaching that reveals the disciples lack of understanding regarding His greater mission and purpose. As Jesus explains the events that lay ahead, "... Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You'" (Matthew 16:22). We read that following this Jesus rebukes Peter, "... 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matthew 16:23), exposing the satanic contradiction to scripture that the declaration contained.

The events on the Mount of Transfiguration seem to carry two significant points. There is much debate over geography, the meaning of the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and why Jesus chose Peter, James and John to go with Him. However, that the event occurred not long after Jesus' rebuke to Peter is noteworthy. At the transfiguration, Peter makes yet another mistaken declaration and as he was speaking, "... a voice came out of the cloud, saying 'This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!'" (Luke 9:35). Additionally, Peter's unwarranted suggestion that three tabernacles be made; "... one for You one for Moses, and one for Elijah ..." (Luke 9:33), is also answered in this single declaration by the voice that spoke, signifying that it is Jesus and His words that the disciples are to harken. Secondly, this event served as a testimony to the disciples of Jesus future glory that would later be written down by Peter as a witness to his readers:

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18)

The Crucifixion

Jesus' intentions to die as an act of atonement are clear in Scripture. At the tomb, after His death, the angels remind the women who came on the first day of the week of their Lord's prediction, "... Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again'" (Luke 24:6-7). Matthew records that Jesus told His disciples that he must, "... go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed ..." (Mark 8:31). Explaining the means by which He would die, Matthew records Jesus saying, "You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Based on these texts, which are only a few where Jesus speaks of His death and the means whereby it would be carried out, we can see that Jesus was fully aware of His future. Additionally, the purpose of His death was also evident in His words and actions. At the onset of His ministry, Jesus, understanding the role of the lamb that is given in sacrifice for the sins of God's people, receives John's declaration before all who were present; "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Matthew records Jesus predicting His death in chapters sixteen, seventeen, and twenty and adds in the third prediction that His purpose in coming was to "give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Furthermore, Jesus actions at the Last Supper, makes clear His understanding of His role as the Lamb of God whose blood would atone for sin. As He lifted the cup He said to His disciples, "... this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

Both Scripture and historical data give strong evidence that the crucifixion was indeed carried out and Jesus did in fact die. John records the visit of Joseph of Arimathea to Pontius Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus. In this account, Pilate is surprised that Jesus had died so quickly and even has it confirmed. Mark records this as follows: "Pilate marveled that He was

already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph” (Mark 15:44-45). It is also noteworthy to point out Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Throughout this letter, Paul speaks of Jesus crucifixion and in chapter fifteen he discusses the resurrection:

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)

To establish the veracity of this miraculous event Paul mentions that many of those who witnessed it were still alive. If Paul had written anything false regarding Jesus’ death and the means by which it was carried out, it is safe to say that documentation would have existed to refute Paul’s claims regarding the resurrection. If this is true, one can easily reach the conclusion that such a challenge regarding the means by which Jesus died, would also have existed.

Historical non-biblical material also exists that testify of the crucifixion of Jesus. In the middle to late first century, Tacitus records in *The Annals*, “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus ...” (Tacitus 62-65, under “Such indeed were the precautions”). During the period of Roman history, the extreme penalty that was carried out was crucifixion. Josephus also records Jesus’ crucifixion in *The Antiquities of the Jews*. In his article, Matt Slik of CARM mentions the research of historian, Dr. Edwin Yamauchi regarding Josephus, and records a piece of Josephus’ writing on the crucifixion:

“About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man [if indeed one ought to call him a man.] For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. [He was the Christ.] When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not

give up their affection for him. [On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him.] And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.” (Slik, under, “Two researchers”, para. 4)

Though there is some debate as to whether or not Josephus actually recorded this piece in his original document, it is at least noteworthy to point out that along with Tacitus and other historical documentation, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was accepted as the means by which he died.

The Resurrection and the Empty Tomb

Though there have always been deniers of the resurrection, the challenges have become more prominent over time. From the Jesus Seminars to the rise of antitheism, acceptance of the veracity of the Gospel accounts regarding Jesus’ resurrection have come under heavy scrutiny. However, it seems the arguments though more vociferous, are unchanged.

To approach a study of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is necessary to start at the accounts of the empty tomb. It is important to point out that before embarking on such a study, the issue of presupposition must be addressed. If one approaches the resurrection from the orientation that miracles do not occur in nature, as per Ernst Troeltsch’s principle of analogy, such a position would necessitate an alternate explanation of the empty tomb. One explanation is that Jesus never really died, but simply passed out. As such, the tomb would be empty. This explanation would contradict Pilate’s reaction to Jesus expiring so soon when his death was reported to him. Additionally, that the Gospel accounts state that Jesus legs were not broken, as is the custom when removing the crucified that were still alive, also speaks to His dying on the cross. Another explanation is that when the women had come the day after the Sabbath to anoint Jesus body, they went to the wrong tomb. This explanation has several holes. First, Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man and as a result, his family tomb would have been easy to locate.

Second, upon reporting that the tomb was empty, a verification of the tomb's location to insure they were not mistaken would have been undertaken by Jesus' disciples and His deniers. Third, it would seem unlikely to miss the only tomb that had Roman soldiers guarding it. A third explanation is that the disciples had stolen the body away. This explanation would have to explain how a group of men came to a tomb that was being guarded by professional soldiers, and somehow moved a very heavy stone from the opening without making a sound, and then stolen Jesus' body before the guards noticed.

Setting aside the unqualified explanations regarding the empty tomb, one must approach the issue of the actual resurrection and assess probability based on evidence. Outside of scripture, there is really no sufficient data regarding evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, the eyewitness accounts are overwhelming. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that the resurrected Jesus "... was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:5-7). In this text alone, we have the record of individual eyewitness accounts in addition to over five hundred others. In fact, between the Gospels and Acts, twelve sightings of the resurrected Christ occur if Paul's experience is counted. That these events were not simple mysterious apparitions of a ghost, but all include witnesses also speaking with, and sometimes touching Jesus, gives the accounts even greater credence. If the resurrection account was in fact a fabrication, the undertaking to get over five hundred people to collaborate in upholding such a lie would be massive indeed. Additionally, if the resurrection did in fact not occur, documentation from first century believers who walked with the Lord would exist that refuted the accounts.

Furthermore, the Gospel accounts record several different events and scenarios of eyewitness accounts, which compliment each other. There has been argument that because the Gospel accounts vary, they are unreliable. In the encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics, Dr. Norman Geisler states, "Closer scrutiny reveals that the descriptions are saying the same things from different perspectives; they do harmonize when closely compared" (2002, 657). In other words, each Gospel writer presented the life of Christ from different perspectives and for different audiences. As such, it is reasonable that the resurrection accounts vary based on perspective and emphasis of accounts and give us a complete picture of the resurrection of Jesus Christ when viewed together.

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