

THE THIRD REASON

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Introductory Comment

Belief in the resurrection does not wholly depend on the evidence for one unique event. That event ties into other matters that anticipated it in prophecy and issued from it in history. To a significant extent, accepting Jesus as Messiah depended on the Jews' proper understanding of Old Testament anticipations for the Messiah. This web of evidence increases exponentially the power of the data. A different understanding of Messiah and his kingdom, however, predisposed most patriotic Jews to reject him on doctrinal grounds. Nevertheless, as Gamaliel's presentation shows in Acts 5, the argument from the very existence of the church tended to short-circuit that doctrinal objection sufficiently to force a re-evaluation of prophetic interpretation and current policy toward Jesus' disciples.

Arguing from the empty tomb and the appearances of the resurrected Jesus depends on the reliability of the records. The argument from the existence of the church, however, more loosely depends on the New Testament accounts; the historical details would not have to be accurate in every respect for the argument to have force. Even a cursory reading of the New Testament shows that the early Christians staked the claim of the church on whether Jesus came forth alive from his tomb in Jerusalem after he had been crucified (1 Corinthians 15:14; cp. 1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Fundamental Proposition: A person-centered system disintegrates at the death of the central person. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth plausibly explains the continuation of his movement after his death (Acts 5:34-42).

When Jewish authorities arrested the apostles and were of a mind to execute them for preaching Jesus as Messiah, Gamaliel restrained the Sanhedrin by observing that this movement was not following the pattern of false Messianic movements. In the cases of Judas and Theudas, the natural consequence came about: the death of the leader led to the disintegration of his movement. In the case of Jesus, his death not only failed to stop the movement; the movement gained impetus afterwards. His resurrection could explain this unexpected pattern, and so the council heeded Gamaliel's advice to "*let them alone*" and to "*let them go for a little while*."

We must enter the contemporary Jewish mind-set to sense the power of Gamaliel's argument. Instead of supposing that this doctor of the law simply used the occasion to score a point against the Sadducees in the council (a secondary motivation, perhaps), we propose that his argument had enough cogency in the context that it relaxed the persecution sufficiently to multiply disciples in Jerusalem and convert a great number of priests (Acts 6:7). Only after an indeterminate period of time, did Gamaliel's student, Saul of Tarsus, initiate a wave of persecution beginning with the martyrdom of Stephen that lasted until Saul himself was converted in Damascus.

I. The first element in the picture is that Messiah is eternal. During the ministry of Jesus this idea surfaced as one “stumbling block” for the multitude when Jesus publicly intimated that he would die by crucifixion (John 12:34; Matthew 26:35). Out of the law the people had learned that Messiah was to abide forever. Typical passages include Daniel 7:14; Isaiah 9:7; Ezekiel 37:25; and Psalm 110:4. Since there can be only one universal eternal kingdom (as per Daniel 7:13-14; Psalm 89), any prophetic passage dealing with either a universal or eternal kingdom would likely refer to the Messiah and his kingdom. Especially under the pressure of Roman domination, the Jewish mind had fixed on permanent liberation and salvation. For a Messiah to claim that he would die was doubly unthinkable: the prophets had said he would abide forever, and the people needed him to deliver them permanently from political oppression. Jews would not follow a Hebrew Messiah they knew was dead.

Not only did the masses subscribe to this understanding, but the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples assumed it. At his disclosure that he would have to go to Jerusalem, suffer, and die, Peter promptly took him aside and rebuked him, not seeming to hear the further comments that death would not prevail against establishing the kingdom because he would arise the third day (Matthew 16:13-28). Before the resurrection the disciples followed the expected pattern of fear (John 20:19) and dispersal that later turned to atypical boldness and power.

For the Jewish leaders, there was one practical consequence of the Messiah’s eternality: the very fact that they could kill him meant he was not the Messiah. The incredible behavior of the passersby, the soldiers, the rulers of the people, and even those who died with him takes on at least a modicum of reason with this observation (Matthew 27:29-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-37). Before his crucifixion the two Emmaus residents “*had hoped that he was the one that would redeem Israel*” (Luke 24:21). Now that he was dead, the chief priests could confidently call him “that deceiver” (Matthew 27:63). He did not abide forever; he was not the Messiah.

II. The second element in the picture is that the Messianic kingdom is a person-centered system. By virtue of eternality, Messiah’s kingdom accentuates the person-centered character of the normal kingdom model; here the same person—not just his dynasty—would be king forever. As a result, there exists no real parallel to the Messiah and his kingdom. Naturally, a person-centered system disintegrates when the personal center is removed. It is this point that Gamaliel makes when he contrasts the present case to previous ones that had followed the pattern natural to Messianism.

A. What is affirmed here differs from an ideology-centered system. Communism did not die with the death of Karl Marx. The movement of a charismatic leader will sometimes disintegrate with his death even though the movement is an ideology-centered one. A case in point is Adolf Hitler and his doctrine of the supremacy of the “Aryan” race. The cause lost an articulate and forceful leader and for that and other reasons fell apart, but it did not in the nature of things have to do so. An ideology does not depend on a person for its existence, because the concept may move to someone else and continue to operate. If the ideology is somehow proved false scientifically, historically, or philosophically, the movement centered around it likewise dissolves. An ideology-centered movement dies when its ideological center “dies” in the same way that a person-centered one dies if its person dies. The Christ was not the dead founder of a religious movement; he is the living Lord of an eternal kingdom.

B. What is affirmed here must also differ from sin's tendency to self-destruct. Sin does tend to self-destruct because it is out of keeping with the nature of the situation; when the entity conducts itself contrary to its nature, natural selection removes it from the competition. Sin's self-destruction may involve generations whereas the subject in Gamaliel's speech is "a little while."

C. Later, during the preaching about the resurrection, these men had their lives endangered, they were beaten, many were killed. Had their claims for Jesus' resurrection been false, they would surely not have died for a (1) known (2) falsehood that was (3) contrary to their convictions as Jews.

D. From an ethical standpoint, a person finds it difficult to believe that so high a moral standard as the believers advocated (and demonstrated in many other particulars) would allow for perpetrating such a fraud.

When the rabbi affirmed, "*if this counsel is from people, it will be overthrown,*" he did not mean it as a universal principle in history, but as a principle applicable to the particular matter at hand: the concept of Messiah and his kingdom during Roman domination. That Jesus had resurrected, Gamaliel could accept in principle since he was a Pharisee. Besides, Jesus' resurrection not only (1) explained the peculiarity of the case, but it also (2) provided a way of joining together the suffering and glory motifs in Old Testament prophecy. It (3) tied in with Jesus' prediction of his resurrection and (4) fit with his miraculous ministry, especially the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-53), which had been a particularly embarrassing sign performed right "under the rulers' noses." The resurrection (5) accounted for the disappearance of Jesus' body and (6) made sense of the disciples' indomitable spirit. It likewise (7) was consonant with continued miracles like that of healing the well-known lame man at Gate Beautiful (Acts 3-4). The cumulative force of these considerations made Gamaliel's caution a wise one.

Summary Analysis of Gamaliel's Speech

1. Political. "*It came to nothing*" means that (1) the Romans will take care of this as they did Theudas and Judas; we need not get involved. (2) "*Minded to execute them*" relates to the fact that Rome had withdrawn the Jewish right to exercise capital punishment (except when the temple precincts were being desecrated). Gamaliel's suggestion kept them from ill-advised action that could bring worse trouble on the religious leaders than Jesus' Messianic movement was bringing.

2. Theological. The Pharisee Gamaliel is willing to use this observation to score a point against the Sadducees.

3. Practical. You have to admit that the resurrection the disciples were proclaiming would explain the different direction this Messianic movement was taking after its leader's death.

Concluding Comment

The existence of the church and the fact that Jesus resurrected stand or fall together. The church would not have come into existence without Messiah's resurrection; the church exists; so the resurrection must have occurred as claimed. Resurrection is the kind of event that does not

happen without supernatural agency and therefore divine approval of Jesus as what he claimed to be: "*dead men don't resurrect.*" The resurrection powerfully declared Jesus of Nazareth to be the Son of God (Romans 1:1-4). Consequently, the church legitimately exists, which says that we can legitimately accept Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, Son of the living God.

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