

An Introduction to Historical Christian Evidences

The Case for Historic Christianity



*Reliability of the New Testament
The Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection*

by Edward C. Wharton

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THE CASE FOR HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY

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PREFACE

Historical Christian Evidences is an exciting approach to proving the claims of Christianity. This has been fairly well established in the enthusiasm which the subject has generated among an inquisitive and increasingly large public who wants to know if Christianity is hoax or history.

Be careful not to predict that the electricity of this “new approach” will power out soon after the newness is gone. Historical evidences for Christianity is not new; not at all. This particular method of producing faith in Christ is some two thousand years old. It is precisely the approach which was used by the Gospel writers and Paul and Peter to prove the claims of Christ to be the Son of God. The New Testament writers made no arguments from either philosophy or science for the sonship and deity of Jesus. Neither was their approach one of emotional subjectivism, that is, of following after their feelings as an evidence of their claims. But in the calm and objective style of men who knew from either eyewitness experience (as the apostles) or from painstaking research (as with Luke) that what they were recording were the facts in the case, they wrote their accounts in the verifiable context of history.

In point of fact, historical evidences is the case for Christianity which originated with the apostles. In an age which demands historical certitude we are but rediscovering the apostolic method of bringing the gospel to an unbelieving world. It is actually something of a wonder that the very method used by the New testament writers to prove the genuineness of the Christian religion has been so often relegated to a small and insignificant chapter.

Christianity is belief in Christ as the Son of God with power to raise the dead and judge the world. This belief rests squarely on Christ's own historic life and resurrection as presented in the New Testament. It is therefore necessary to view the New Testament as a reliable record of facts providing a credible ground of evidence for belief. I have thus attempted in this course to provide sufficient reason for accepting the New Testament as historically reliable (hopefully without becoming theologically heavy), and then by an appeal to the facts as they are recorded I have attempted by systematic reasoning to reproduce the apostles' case for belief.

With confidence I pursue this course in the hope that through my students, and those who urge this Biblical concept, the full significance of historical Christian evidences will eventually become the common possession of all who seek to know the certainty of Christianity.

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JESUS AND HISTORY

Christianity, far from being a philosophy or merely some ethical system, is pre-eminently a redemptive system. It is belief in Christ as the son of God who will redeem us from sin and raise us from the dead to an eternal judgment. Thus an investigation into the genuineness of the claims of the Christian religion must begin with the historical reality of Jesus, for apart from him, redemption from sin and a resurrection from the grave become mere “pie in the sky by and by.”

I. EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

A. FROM PAGAN SOURCES

1. *Thallus.* A Samaritan born historian named Thallus lived and worked in Rome about the middle of the first century (c. 52 AD). Though his works are lost to us, Julius Africanus, a writer of the early third century, was familiar with Thallus’ history of Greece. Africanus in commenting on the darkness which fell over the land during the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:33) said that, “Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun.”¹ Will Durant observed that Thallus’ “argument took the existence of Christ for granted.”² The chief point of this reference

to Thallus lies in the fact that a knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' death were well known in the imperial city of Rome as early as the middle of the first century. The fact of Christ's crucifixion was already common knowledge by that time, even to the extent that unbelievers like Thallus thought it necessary to explain the matter of the darkness as a natural phenomenon. But they never denied the darkness as a fact. Will Durant summed up the matter of Christ's historical existence by stating that it simply never occurred to the early opponents of Christianity to deny the existence of Jesus.³

2. *Mara-Bar-Serapion.* A manuscript in the British Museum preserves the text of a letter written some time after 73 AD. It was sent by a Syrian named Mara-Bar-Serapion to his son, Serapion. In prison at the time of the writing the father pleads for his son to be wise by illustrating the folly of persecuting such wise men as Socrates, Pythagoras, and Christ:

“What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians

died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given.”⁴

It is obvious that by the time of this writing, Jesus was already placed on an equal footing with the accepted wise men of the ancient world.

3. *Cornelius Tacitus.* Usually viewed as the greatest historian of Rome, Tacitus (born c. 52-54 AD) at about the age of sixty, while writing of the reign of Nero (54-68 AD), told how the Christians were made scapegoats for the Great Fire of 64 AD. It had been rumored that Nero himself started the fire in order to gain glory by rebuilding the city. Tacitus says,

“Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. 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...”⁵

To the pagan Tacitus, “Christus” was more than likely a proper name. Tacitus was in a

good position to learn of Christianity, being governor of Asia in 112 AD.

4. *C. Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Younger)*. Pliny, governor of Bithynia, often wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking his Imperial advice on how best to deal with the sect of the Christians which according to him were troubling his province. One letter (c. 112 AD) reveals information he extracted from some Christians by torture:

“They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed...after which it was their custom to separate, and then to meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”⁶

The innocence of the matter seemed to perplex the governor sufficiently to write to the Emperor about it.

5. *Suetonius*. During the reign of Hadrian, Suetonius was annalist and court official of the Imperial House. About 120 AD he wrote his Life of Claudius, from which is taken his most oft quoted reference:

“As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.”⁷

Since so many Jews had become Christians at Rome, Claudius probably equated the Jews

with Christians and thus expelled them from Rome by an Imperial decree. Luke, by the way, records this same event much earlier in Acts 18:1-2.

After referring to these same pagan writers as evidence of the historical Jesus, Will Durant says,

“These references prove the existence of Christians rather than of Christ; but unless we assume the latter we are driven to the improbable hypothesis that Jesus was invented in one generation; moreover, we must suppose that the Christian community in Rome had been established some years before 52, to merit the attention of an imperial decree.”⁸

This evidence, especially in company with such an historian as Tacitus and Roman officials of the stature of Pliny and Suetonius, make the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth as certain as that of any outstanding figure of antiquity. This evidence is worth considering.

B. FROM JEWISH SOURCES

1. *The Talmud.* There are two separate books of writings dealing with Jewish law. The first of these is the Mishnah which is the Jewish code of religious jurisprudence which began to be compiled sometime after 70 AD and completed about 200 AD. This great body of newly codified case-law became the object of Jewish study from which grew a body of commentaries called Gemaras. Together, the

Mishnah (law book) and the Gemara (commentaries) are called the Talmud. Being pro-Jewish, all the references to “Yeshu'a of Nazareth” in the Talmudic writings are unfriendly, but in sufficient number, nevertheless, to establish the historical reality of Jesus Christ.

2. *Josephus.* The most important references to Jesus from a Jewish source are from a former Jewish general turned historian by the name of Flavius Josephus. In his writings he tells us who he was, what he did, and of his own evaluation of an historian. He writes of many of the outstanding persons we read of in the New Testament: of Pilate, of Quirinius of Syria, of the Caesars, the Herods, the Pharisees and Sadducees, of Annas, Caiaphas, Felix, and Festus. He also writes of Jesus' brother James, and of the death of John the Baptist. Most significant is his reference to Jesus: “And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvelous deeds, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure. He won over many Jews and also many Greeks. This man was the Messiah. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross at the instigation of our own leaders, those who had loved him from the first did not cease. For he appeared to them on the third day alive again, as the holy prophets had predicted and said many other wonderful things about him. And even now the race of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.”⁹

All attempts to impugn the authenticity of Josephus' references to Jesus Christ have failed. It is included in all of the manuscripts of Josephus.

At the close of his excellent little book offering historical evidences for Christianity, F.F. Bruce remarks that, "Whatever else may be thought of the evidence from early Jewish and Gentile writers. . .it does at least establish, for those who refuse the witness of Christian writings, the historical character of Jesus himself. Some writers may toy with the fancy of a Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories."¹⁰

Cambridge historian Michael Grant has written:

"That there was a growth of legend round Jesus cannot be denied, and it arose very quickly. But there had also been a rapid growth of legend round pagan figures like Alexander the Great; and yet nobody regards him as wholly mythical and fictitious. To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars. In recent years no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus or at any rate, very few, and they have not succeeded in disposing

of the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary.”¹¹

C. FROM NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS

Whatever reasons may be given for receiving the testimony of Josephus or of Tacitus or of any other writer from antiquity as reliable history must be equally applied to the New Testament writers. Fairness and consistency demands that we give at least the same consideration to the New Testament as we would to any other document from the same period. All of the New Testament writers were contemporaries of Jesus. Four were eyewitnesses, three accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry, and all of their writings are in remarkable agreement, and continue to stand the tests of genuineness and historicity. These documents are by no means the least of the evidence to the actual existence of Jesus as a real person of history. If the New Testament documents were the only single source from antiquity which presented to us the life of Christ that would be more than sufficient proof of his historical reality.

H. G. Wells in commenting on the Gospels, while disavowing the supernatural element, nevertheless, admits that they carry the conviction of reality, and feels compelled to say of Jesus: “Here was a man. This part of the tale could not have been invented”¹² Will Durant examines the evidence for Jesus and writes: “That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle

far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels.”¹³

The fact of the historical Jesus, as supplied to us by sources both friendly and hostile, is thus seen to be quite an indisputable matter. In point of fact there was a Jesus of Nazareth, a man of outstanding character and unique personality, whose life and teaching indeed “constitute the most fascinating feature in the history of Western man.”¹⁴

III. THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF KNOWING OF CHRIST'S HISTORICITY

Merely the fact that Jesus existed is not enough to convince us that he is the son of God. Practicality leads us to ask for the real value of this knowledge.

He lived, so what?

A final thought considers the viewpoint of those who accept Jesus as historical but ask pointedly, So what? Why should the mere fact of Jesus' existence mean any more to us than that of any other person from antiquity? With all the evidence bearing upon Christ's existence we should expect an atheist to admit that Jesus lived rather than deny it. But the bare fact that he lived is not *proof* of his deity.

The major consideration, then, goes beyond the mere fact of Jesus to those implications essentially inherent in that existence. An admission of his greatness is an endorsement to an appreciable degree of the historicity of the New Testament documents.

Consider that men do not receive such recognition among the great men of history merely because they exist. They must either do or say something that is truly great. A crucial fact to keep in mind at this point is that the only source of information in our possession which tells us of Jesus' greatness is the New Testament. It is the single source material upon which we must all rely for information about the great life of Christ. Beyond the New Testament we know only the fact of the life of Christ and that he was crucified by Pilate at Jerusalem. Thus to know the nature of Jesus' greatness we are totally dependent upon the New Testament. Therefore, an acknowledgment of Jesus' greatness is an admission of the historical reliability of the details that the New Testament relates about Jesus.

This conclusion is of extreme practical value to those who would know whether the New Testament expresses merely an outdated sentiment or an historical revelation for the redemption of ruined humanity.

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (1)

By the means of historical testimony modern man can learn of many events from antiquity. We can know, for an illustration, that Bonaparte lost to Wellington at Waterloo, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon and went on to rule Rome, or of the exploits of Alexander the Great. By this same means we can know about the life, personality, deeds, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is simply a matter of historical testimony.

Propositional statement: It is the proposition of this study that there is abundant evidence from historical sources which is adequate to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God. Those historical sources are the New Testament documents. Since the evidence for Jesus is furnished by the New Testament it is obvious those documents must be considered as historically reliable sources of information. It is the aim of this chapter and the next to demonstrate the historical reliability of the New Testament.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT THE SOURCE OF THE EVIDENCE

A. HOW TO PRESENT THE EVIDENCE TO UNBELIEVERS

The New Testament says that “belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). Some, however, do not believe the Bible is the word of God. When asked how we would present the evidence for Christ to unbelievers we answer that the New Testament is historically reliable to report the facts in evidence for the claims of Christ. Whether the New Testament is accepted as the word of God is not essential to prove the proposition. (That is the conclusion to which we want to bring the unbeliever). The challenge is to demonstrate the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament; that it is as historically reliable as any document from antiquity. One has then but to examine the evidence from the New Testament and draw a conclusion in relation to Christ.

B. OUR DEPENDENCE ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. *As the ground of belief in Christ.* Jesus himself grounded our belief on the eyewitness testimony of his apostles: “Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their (apostles’) word” (John 17:20). The apostles’ belief was due to their own objective observation of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, whereas the belief of modern man who has not seen Jesus, is the result of the apostles’ written testimony (John 19:35; 20:30-31). The writing and preservation of the apostles’ testimony in the New

Testament was God's plan for generating belief in Christ for all generations succeeding the apostles. Thus after satisfying Thomas' doubts as to his resurrection (John 20:24-28), Jesus explained, "Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). The source of modern belief in Christ is the testimony of the eyewitnesses. Paul says that word (which he affirms is the word of God) is the means of belief until Jesus returns (Romans 10:17). Therefore, only by the written testimony of the apostles and of apostolic men can those of us who come after them be brought to belief in Christ. Commensurate with this, Luke claims that his account is an "accurate" testimony, having obtained it from the "eyewitnesses" themselves, and guarantees to the reader that he can "know the certainty" of Christianity (Luke 1:1-4).

God intended for belief in Christ to be generated by the New Testament whether or not it is accepted as God's word. Christians should not therefore be intimidated to lay aside the Bible as authoritative simply because unbelievers deny its divine authorship. Its own historical authority is adequate to convince any honest investigator.

2. *For the true portrait of the historical Jesus.* We are totally dependent upon the New

Testament for a personality portrait of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to reproduce the life and teachings of Christ from the total amount of information that comes down to us from first century Greek, Roman, and Jewish writers. From these writings outside the New Testament we can learn precious little about Jesus beyond the fact that he lived and was crucified at Jerusalem by Pontius Pilate.

3. *What this implies to us today.* What this implies in terms of an authentic representation of what Jesus actually said and did is this: *that neither historian nor theologian can say with any authority whatsoever that Jesus said or did anything without an appeal to the New Testament.*

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Myths are recorded in a “once upon a time in a far-away place” kind of context that cannot be located in historical space and time. The New Testament does not resemble this kind of literature. It is written in an historical context specifying those persons, times, places, and events that offer themselves for verification. F. F. Bruce’s comment on the historical context of the New Testament is to the point, that a “writer who thus relates his story to the wider context of world history is courting trouble if he is not careful; he affords his critical readers so many

opportunities for testing his accuracy.”¹⁵ Since the New Testament is written in an historical context it can be checked out for its accuracy.

III. THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The following is offered in evidence for the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament.

A. ARCHAEOLOGY

In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte authorized to mount an expedition to seize Malta and Egypt. On May 19 he sailed from Toulon with a fleet of 328 ships and an expeditionary force of 38,000 men to conquer Egypt. He landed at Abukir Bay near Alexandria on July 1. The expedition was accompanied by members of a special Scientific and Artistic Commission selected by Napoleon to provide a cultural and technological background to plans for colonization. The Commission consisted of 167 scientists and technicians.¹⁶ Of this expedition Merrill Unger writes that, “Modern archaeology may be said to have had its beginning in 1798 when the rich antiquities of the Nile Valley were opened up to the scientific study by Napoleon’s Expedition.”¹⁷

Since that time archaeologists have unearthed hundreds of artifacts reflecting many instances of biblical accuracy. The value of the biblical archaeologist has been to discover and to organize material from the past to provide the general background for the historicity of the Bible.

According to Unger the role of archaeology is to excavate, decipher and critically evaluate the ancient records of the past that touch directly or indirectly upon the Bible and its message. “It sheds light upon the historical background and the contemporary life out of which the Holy Scriptures came, illuminating and illustrating its pages with its discoveries.”¹⁸

Biblical archaeology has made a significant contribution toward corroborating the Bible’s historical reliability.

B. CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTATION

New Testament writers, and their Jewish and Gentile contemporaries from the first and second centuries, often overlap in recording contemporaneous events. For an illustration, (1) the famine foretold by the prophet Agabus that came to pass in the days of Claudius (who reigned from 41-54 A.D.). This is corroborated by Josephus who dates the event in the time of Crispus Fadus (44 to 46 A.D.) and Tiberius Julius Alexander (46-48 A.D.) who were procurators (*Antiquities*, xx. ii, 5 & v,2). F.F. Bruce says that, “classical writers testify to the famine-conditions which were prevalent in his (Claudius’) dominions at various times during his reign.”¹⁹ (2) Josephus also parallels Luke’s account of the events leading up to and including the miserable death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:20-23 and Josephus’ *Antiquities* XIX. 8. 2). (3) Suetonius in his, *Life Of Claudius*, XXV 4, writes, “As the Jews were making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (Claudius) had them

expelled from Rome.” This, written about 120 A.D., corroborates Luke’s statement that “Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome” (Acts 18:2), which resulted in Paul’s co-occupational friendship with Aquila and Priscilla.

Other contemporary writers verify the accuracy of the New Testament in regard to the morals, politics, culture, economics, climate, topography, etc., of that period of history.²⁰ There is enough documentation of this sort to insist that to whatever degree the classical literature is received as reliable, we must also receive the New Testament’s statements to be of equal reliability. Where they can be compared, both generally parallel each other.

C. THE ACID TEST

The books of the New Testament have passed the “acid test” for the trustworthiness of ancient documents. They were written in the same generation in which the events took place, and were circulated among the very people about whom the documents spoke, while they were still alive to deny them. But the early disciples believed the New Testament writings, and suffered persecution for their faith, some even paying the supreme sacrifice for their faith. The fact that they preserved the New Testament writings for posterity testifies to the confidence those earliest Christians had in the reliability of those documents.

Mr. Louis Cassels of UPI reported in the Nashville Banner (April 1, 1972) on a much publicized discovery by professor Jose O’Callaghan of the

Pontifical Biblical Institute at Rome. The discovery consisted of nineteen tiny scraps of papyrus found among the Dead Sea Scrolls which were identified as fragments of the Gospel of Mark. Scientific methods established the fragments to have been in a Palestinian library about 50 A.D. putting the Gospel of Mark in circulation only about a dozen years after the death of Christ. Mr. Cassels observed the importance of this discovery by saying:

“:But if Mark’s gospel were written within a dozen or so years of Jesus’ death - as it must have been if a copy had circulated so far as the Essene library by A.D. 50 - then it had to survive the acid test of all historical writing or journalism: namely, being published at a time when it could be read, criticized and, if inauthentic, denounced by people who were alive and present at the time the alleged events occurred. Let me assure you, as a reporter, nothing makes a writer more careful of his facts than the knowledge that he’ll be read by someone who can say, “I was there.”

Moreover, the fact that the early Christian community chose mark as one of only four gospels (out of dozens in circulation) to be preserved for posterity in what we now call the “canon” of the New Testament is further evidence that the people closest to the events - Jesus’ original followers - found Mark’s report to be accurate and trustworthy, - not myth, but true history”

(This Fellow Jesus, Warner Press, Inc., Anderson Ind., 1973) p. 20.

D. THE WRITINGS OF THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

There is a collection of documents written from about 90-160 A.D. known as the writings of the apostolic fathers. These are so called inasmuch as the writers were in close proximity to the apostles by having either sat at the feet of one or more of the apostles, or at the feet of those who did. These post-apostolic writings contain an abundance of quotations (more like paraphrases) from nearly all of the New Testament books.

1. *Their testimony to the completion of the New Testament before 100 A.D.* The early date of these writings makes it clear that the New Testament books were already in circulation among the churches of Christ before the end of the first century. To illustrate, F.F. Bruce tells us that in three works written about 100 A.D. - the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache (the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), and a letter written by Clement of Rome to the Corinthian church about 96 A.D. - we find quotations from Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, I Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, I Peter, and possibly other books. Also in letters written by Ignatius about 115 A.D. we find quotations from Matthew, John, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, I and II Timothy, and Titus. And a letter from Polycarp to the Philippians about

120 A.D. quotes from the first three gospels, Acts, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Hebrews, I Peter, and I John.²¹

2. *The value of the writings of these early fathers to us as an evidence of the historical reliability of the New Testament is two-fold.*
 - a. First, *these writings from the apostolic fathers quoting the New Testament as divinely authoritative, clearly indicate the reliability the church attributed to the New Testament at that time.* The New Testament had to be written early enough, be in circulation long enough, and be received widely enough throughout the body of Christ by this time for quotations from it to be familiar and to carry apostolic authority in the church. It is conclusive that the church which received the New Testament as the very word of God had to consider it reliable historically.
 - b. Second, *The church was persecuted at this time precisely for believing the message of the New Testament.* If the New Testament was not considered to be reliable in every respect it is not reasonable to believe these early Christians would have ordered their persecuted lives after it. It cannot be expected of human nature to suffer discrimination and martyrdom as a way of life based on testimony that is even slightly suspect. The inestimable respect the early church had for the absolute reliability and

authority of the New Testament cannot be doubted.

IV. ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A. THE LETTERS OF PAUL

These are the earliest writings of the New Testament. Ten of Paul's letters had been written and circulated before the traditional date of Mark's gospel (c. 60-62 AD). His letters abound in historical references which are inextricably bound up with his doctrine.

1. *Galatians chapters 1 and 2 presents some of the major events in Paul's life from before his conversion to seventeen years after conversion. These are laid out in chronological sequence as historical proof of his claim to have received the gospel directly from Jesus and that he was therefore an apostle.*
2. *References to over 500 persons who saw Jesus alive after the crucifixion whom Paul affirmed were for the most part still alive and readily available for confirmation, was offered as an evidence of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5-6).*
3. *References to persons obviously known by his readers (Romans 16:1-23; 1 Corinthians 1:14; 16:17, 19; Ephesians 6:21; Philippians 4:2-3;*

Colossians 1:7; 1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 1:5, 15-16; 4:9-15, etc.).

4. *References to sister churches engaged in relief activities among the disciples* (Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-6).
5. *His attempt to motivate the Corinthian church to give liberally by pointing out the liberality and poverty of the Macedonian churches* (2 Corinthians 8:1-7).
6. *His statements of intimate friendship and deep yearning for the personal fellowship of Timothy* (Philippians 2:19-20; 2 Timothy 1:2-5; 2:1; 4:9-13).

Such statements as these lift the context of Paul's letters completely out of the realm of invention. In addition to this his references to geography, contemporary cultural procedures,²² the moral, religious, and political conditions of the day combine to produce a context which must be considered factual.

B. THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

Christianity became a system of life and action amid the Jewish and Roman societies of the first century of such momentous consequence to those cultures that they reacted with great anxiety toward both its doctrine and its adherents. Every historian who deals with those forces which he supposes contributed to the shape of civilization, and especially of the Western world, must deal with the

facts of Christianity which gave it its power to greatly affect our twenty-first century world.

To accomplish his work the historian must decide what ancient documents are trustworthy and those which he believes offer to him the most abundant source of reliable information. Without exception they rely on the Gospels and Acts.

1. *Luke opens his account to Theophilus*, the Roman official,²³ by assuring him that the material he is about to read had been carefully researched, secured from eyewitnesses, that the material was presented accurately. Then he states the reason for such precision of research and accuracy of writing: “that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou was instructed” (Luke 1:4).
2. *The birth of Jesus* is set squarely in the context of first century Palestine (Luke 2:1-7).
3. *The ministry of John* (Matthew 3:1ff; Mark. 6:14-20; Luke 3:1-2; John 1:19-37). Recorded is the content of his preaching, his diet, his clothing, his boldness toward the Jews and Herod who knew him. His activities are located from the city of Jerusalem to along the river Jordan where he baptized. Herod the tetrarch knew John and held a certain fearful respect for him. Such wide spread activity and fame would have a lasting effect upon the residents of Palestine and would make it well nigh impossible to believe that any one of the gospel

accounts could have been circulated as reliable reports among so many persons in Palestine if the things concerning John the Baptist were not true.

In addition, every political and religious figure mentioned in Luke 3:1-2 has been mentioned in other writings from the same period. No half smart inventor would tie his tale to so many known persons and places with any serious intent to deceive. It would be a futile effort.

4. *The life and ministry of Christ* did not take place in an historical vacuum. It embraced the great masses of the people in Palestine from Galilee to Judaea during the time of the Roman occupation of Palestine when the Herodian rule was replaced by direct Roman administration from 6 AD. Many persons, places, events, weddings, temples, valleys, mountains, rivers, feasts, cities, define the historical setting. Jesus' ministry is dated during the governorship of Pontius Pilate at Judaea. The accuracy of the geography and intimacy of knowledge of the culture of the land, the language, the religious and political peculiarities of both Jews and Gentiles – all confirmed in other documents from the same period of history – should be sufficient for any inquirer into the historical reliability of the New Testament.
5. *The beginning and spread of the church of Christ* is traced from Jerusalem to Rome while

opposed by the Jewish hierarchy and involves Roman proconsuls like Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:4-12), and Gallio (Acts 18:12-17),. Roman governors like Felix (Acts 23:24 – 24:27), and Festus (Acts 24:27 – 26:32)., involving Imperial decrees (Cf Acts 18:12), rioting over Christianity's threat to idolatry in Greece (Acts 19) and the establishment of a new religion which was referred to as a sect everywhere spoken against (Acts 28:22) as presented in the history book called Acts, could not possibly have been invented in one generation and then passed off on the people of that same generation who knew better.

It would have been as impossible to have fabricated an account of Christianity and to have successfully pawned it off on the same generation of people who know better as for a present day writer to fabricate a story of a Japanese invasion of California in the early months of World War II, to have located the invasion landing at Long Beach in June of 1942, and then further to have invented certain events and speeches which were supposed to have taken place among the people who actually lived in Long Beach at the time. Many would still be alive today to deny the truth of the invasion story. The New Testament writings could have had no better chance of survival than this if their contents were mere figments of the imagination.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament documents are certainly not myths. They were written in the sane and sober appearance of history, the authors ask us to believe their accounts are true (e.g., John 19:35; 20:30-31), and they come up reliable upon investigation. Until it can be proven that these writers were fakes their documents are going to have to be received as historically reliable.

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (2)

This chapter appeals to two recommendations from modern scholarship for its historical trustworthiness of the New Testament: manuscript attestation and modern historians.

I. COMPARISON OF THE MANUSCRIPTS

An evaluation of the reliability of the New Testament can be made by comparing its manuscript value to the manuscript value of classical histories which are generally received as authentic. It is only fair that the New Testament receive the same consideration as other writings from antiquity.

A. MANUSCRIPT ATTESTATION FOR CLASSICAL HISTORIES

1. *Caesar's Gallic Wars* (by Julius Caesar) written c. B.C. 58-50. Of existing manuscript copies (there are no originals) the oldest comes from about the ninth century AD. That leaves a gap of some 800 years between the original and the best copy in our possession.

2. *The Roman history of Livy* c. B.C. 59-17 AD. Of the 142 books originally written, only thirty-five survive in some twenty manuscript copies, the oldest copy coming to us from the fourth century. This is a gap of some 350 years between the original and the best copy.
3. *The histories and annals of Tacitus* were composed around 100 AD. Four and a half books survive the original fourteen books of his histories, and only ten fully survived the original sixteen books of his Annals. The record of these two great works from the outstanding historian are two manuscript copies, one from the ninth, and the other from the eleventh century. Gaps of from 800 to 1000 years exist from the original writings to the copies in our hand.
4. *The history of Thucydides* written c. B.C. 460-400 comes from eight manuscript copies, the earliest being from about 900 AD. A gap of some 1300 years.
5. *The history of Herodotus* written about B.C. 480-425 has about the same manuscript attestation as that of Thucydides. Another gap of some 1300 years.

In no case can the copies of these histories be compared with the originals so as to determine absolutely the accuracy of the copies in our possession. Bruce observes from this point of view, “Yet no classical scholar would listen to an

argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are 1300 years later than the originals.”²⁴

B. MANUSCRIPT ATTESTATION FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT

Manuscript evidence for the New Testament is far greater than that for classical histories. There are presently in existence about 5,000 copies of the Greek New Testament in whole or in part (see the chart on page following this lesson). The oldest and most valuable are:

1. *Codex Sinaiticus* dating from about 350 A.D. This codex derives its name from the place of its discovery, the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. It was discovered by the German biblical scholar Constantine Tischendorf in May 1844. Eventually it became the possession of the British Museum in 1933 where it now resides on exhibition. The Sinaiticus contains some of the Old Testament, the complete New Testament, and is followed by two non-canonical writings from the apostolic fathers, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.

Dating the Sinaiticus from about 350 A.D. separates it from the completed New Testament at the end of the first century with a gap of some 250 years.

2. *Codex Vaticanus* dating from about 350 A.D. Residing in the Vatican Library in Rome. All of the New Testament books were originally present. Of the original 820 leaves, 759 are still preserved. The parts missing are First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Revelation, and Hebrews 9:14ff It rivals the Sinaiticus for antiquity leaving a gap of 250 years between its production and the completed New Testament.
3. *Codex Alexandrinus* dating from the fifth century. Originally contained all of the Old and New Testaments, though now most of Matthew is missing. At the end of the New Testament it is followed by two non canonical books, the First and Second Epistles of Clement to the Corinthians. Its dating leaves a gap of about 350 years from the close of the first century.
4. *Codex Ephraemi* dating from the fifth or sixth century contains portions of every book of the New Testament except Second Thessalonians and Second John. It is presently in the National Library of Paris. This codex is a palimpsest. The text of the New Testament was rubbed off the vellum in the 12th century by a Syrian church father named Ephraem, to record one of his sermons.
5. *Codex Bezae* dating from the fifth or sixth century. It is named after Theodor Beza, a reformer from Geneva, who presented it to the University of Cambridge in 1581, where it is

presently. The codex contains the Gospels and Acts in bilingual form. On the left page is the Greek text and on the right is the Latin text.

6. *Codex Washingtonianus* dating from about the fourth or fifth century. It contains the Gospels and portions of the Pauline epistles with Hebrews following Thessalonians. It was purchased by C.L. Freer for the United States. It is preserved in the Smithsonian Institute.

In comparison, then, the New Testament has many more manuscript copies than the classical histories, the total amount of New Testament books have been preserved in these manuscripts, and the gaps separating the completed New Testament and these copies are in many cases much closer.

In view of the evidence for the classical writings how much more should we receive the New Testament as authentic in view of the evidence for its reliability. Bruce observes, it seems, with tongue-in-cheek, “If the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt.”²⁵

II. MODERN HISTORIANS

This section is more of a recommendation than an evidence. Sufficient evidence for the New Testament’s reliability has been already set forth. This is a recommendation from those who have the distinction of being outstanding historians that the New Testament is

at least as reliable as any document in our possession from antiquity.

- A. **H.G. Wells**, in his *Outline of History*, was compelled to give scores of lines to Jesus and the apostles using the New Testament as his source material. His comments are interesting: "About Jesus we have to write not theology but history . . . Almost our only sources of information about the personality of Jesus are derived from the four gospels, all of which were certainly in existence a few decades after his death...all four agree in giving us a picture of a very definite personality...In spite of miraculous and incredible additions, one is obliged to say, 'Here was a man. This part of the tale could not have been invented.' " Though Wells brands the miracles as incredible additions he nevertheless admits of a sufficient reliability to use the New Testament authoritatively for his source material for that section of history.
- B. **Will Durant** was formerly the Professor of the Philosophy of History at Columbia University and was perhaps America's foremost historian. He has written extensively on *The Story of Our Civilization*, giving special attention to the historical over-lappings of Caesar and Christ. His source material for the entire chapters on Jesus and The Apostles was the New Testament. While his comments reflect his dependence on liberal theologians whose disregard for the New Testament is well known, Durant's regard for the New Testament as a sufficiently reliable document of

history nevertheless emerges throughout the two chapters.

- C. **Arnold Toynbee**, the late Professor Emeritus of International History at the University of London, an admitted agnostic, has written, “One of the sayings that are attributed to Jesus is, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God’ Another of Jesus’ reported sayings is: ‘My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ Since these two sayings were denials, out of Jesus’ own mouth, of the divinity that his followers attributed to him, they would surely have been expurgated if they had not been notoriously authentic.”²⁶

Toynbee, while a good historian, is a poor theologian. He misses the implications of both sayings which actually are claims to deity, but nevertheless states that these sayings from the Gospels are authentic (Mark 10:18-19; Matthew 27:4).

- D. **David Flusser**, Professor of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University at Jerusalem, writes that, “Information about the life of Jesus is remarkably full, though it comes entirely from writers who accepted him as the son of God. . . The plain historical fact of Jesus’ existence was, however, always central to the new faith, and in this it differed from all the mystery-cults. Instead of a non-historical and purely mythical figure, Christianity offered a man who had lived and died at a specific time and place.”²⁷

It is that “specific time and place” which allows the New Testament to be verified historically. Historians such as Flusser know that and so appeal to it for their source material for their comments on the subject.

- E. **Sir William Ramsay** of Great Britain, during the greater part of his life was Professor of Humanity at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. An acknowledged historian and authority on the life of Paul and history of the early church, carried on extensive archaeological research in Asiatic Turkey and the Bible lands. He defended his faith in the historical Jesus as the son of God. This is particularly convincing when we consider that Ramsay did not begin his research with the same conviction that he later acquired through research. Ramsay’s archaeological studies drove him to the New Testament. W. Ward Gasque in an excellent little biography on this truly great scholar stated, “It is of great significance that Sir William Ramsay came to the study of the New Testament as a Roman historian rather than as a theologian.”²⁸

Ramsay had earlier accepted the literal view of the Tubigen school that Acts was a second century production. But his own archaeological findings convinced him of the total reliability of the book. He writes of that matter as follows: “I may fairly claim to have entered on this investigation without any prejudice in favor of the conclusion which I shall now attempt to justify to the reader. On the

contrary, I began with a mind unfavorable to it for the ingenuity and apparent completeness of the Tubigen theory had at one time convinced me. It did not lie then in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely; but more recently I found myself often brought in contact with the book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth.”²⁹

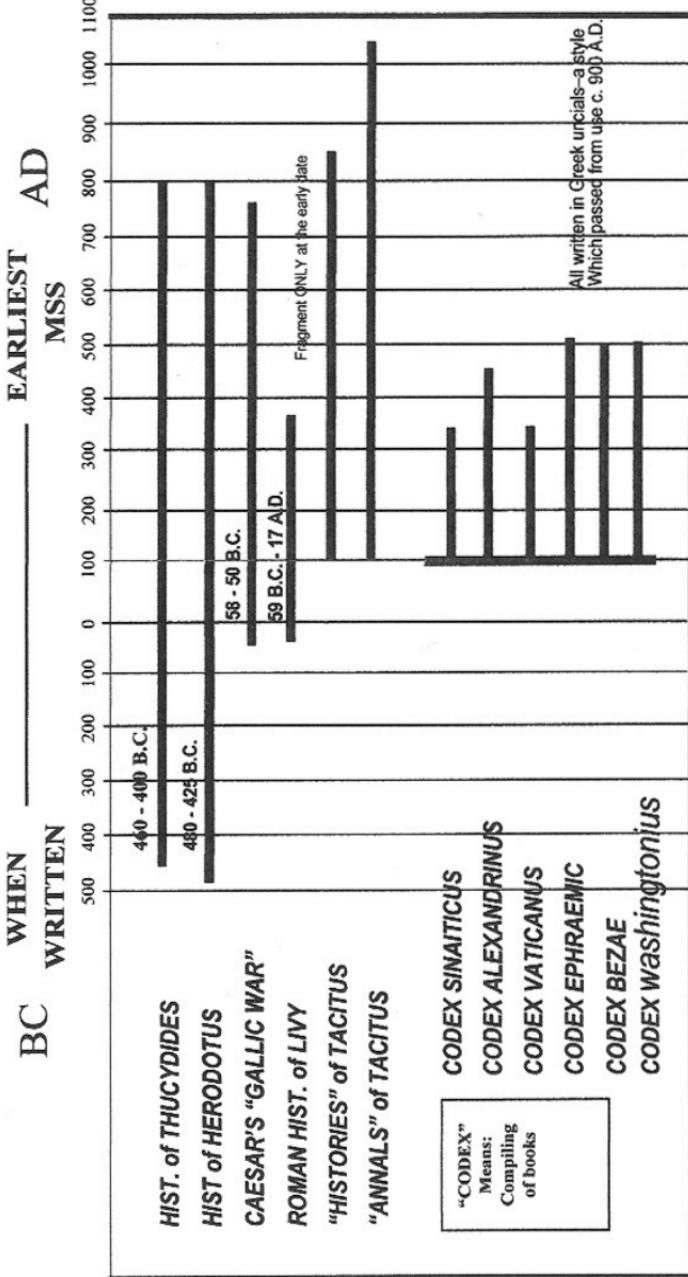
In another book, *Luke The Physician*, Ramsay said that “Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness” (p 177). In still another book reporting New Testament verification by his own archaeological research he wrote, “Luke is a historian of the first rank: not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense . . . this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”³⁰

CONCLUSION

The evidence that Jesus is the son of God is the written testimony of the New Testament writers. It is a mistake to think that these writers merely assert that Jesus is divine without pointing us toward the weight of historical evidence. They do not seek to convince by emotionalism, but by an appeal to the intelligence. The New Testament writers only ask that we read their writings and weigh the evidence as they offer it to us. It is upon that evidence that the writers of the New Testament developed their case for belief in Christ.

It becomes ours to consider that evidence with a view toward making a decision as to whether Christ is liar or Lord.

A Comparison of New Testament MSS With MSS of Classical Histories



THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST (1)

Evidence From The Burial Tomb

Christ's resurrection as presented in the Gospels is founded on the evidence from the burial tomb of Jesus. Keep in mind that the New Testament has been repeatedly verified as a reliable record of history and that therefore our appeal to the Gospels for the facts in the case is as reliable as any Greek, Roman, or Jewish record from the same period of history. The Gospels are reliable records of fact, not fiction.

IMPLICATIONS

Our Lord's resurrection is the supreme sign of the Christian religion. If Jesus was resurrected from the dead it is necessarily implied that he is the son of God and the Bible is the word of God.

1. *The resurrection proves that Jesus is the son of God.*

Resurrection is obviously a sign of deity; mere men cannot raise themselves from the dead. Jesus pointed to this event as the divine sign (Matthew 12:38-40; John 2:18-21). The apostle Paul also pointed to the resurrection as a declaration of

Christ's divine Sonship and power (Romans 1:4). If Christ was therefore raised from the dead then he is totally trustworthy and all of his claims have been sustained.

2. *The resurrection proves the Bible is the word of God.*

Jesus equated the Old Testament with being the word of God (Jno 10:35). He also stated that the apostles would be guided by the Holy Spirit (Jno. 14:26; 16:13). Hence both their preaching and their writing would be the very words of God. This is the claim of Luke (Acts 2:1-4), Paul (1 Cor. 2:10-13; Eph. 3:3-5), and Peter (1 Pet. 1:12).

John's Gospel account

Each of the four Gospels presents the resurrection evidence from Christ's burial tomb. We will follow the line of reasoning which John presents in his account since he wrote for the express purpose of producing belief in Jesus as the son of God (20:30-31), and so offers the resurrection evidence as the supreme sign of his deity.

We will co-ordinate the evidence from the other three Gospels with John's account in 20:1-8.

"Now on the first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, while it was yet dark, unto the tomb, and seeth the stone taken away from the tomb. She runneth therefore, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we know not where they have laid him. Peter therefore went forth, and the

other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. And they ran both together: and the other disciple outran Peter, and came first to the tomb; and stooping and looking in, he seeth the linen cloths lying; yet entered he not in. Simon Peter therefore also cometh, following him, and entered into the tomb; and he beholdeth the linen cloths lying; and the napkin that was upon his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself. Then entered in therefore the other disciple also, who came first to the tomb, and he saw, and believed.”

John presents his material without any comment as to the implications which might arise from the evidence. He only says that the disciple who came first to the tomb “saw and believed.” The matter is a simple statement of fact. But his belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead is stated at precisely this point in order to draw our attention to the obvious conclusion which this disciple had reached *on the basis of the facts*. He wants us to know *what* he saw and *why* he believed. The whole function of reason at this point is to draw a logical conclusion from the evidence.

We might mention here that it is not reason’s function to determine whether the claim for Christ is believable before the evidence has been considered. When the evidence is trustworthy it is not difficult to reach a believing conclusion even though it embraces a line of reasoning which reaches to the supernatural.

The facts as we have them from John are four in number: (1) the stone had been rolled back and the tomb was standing open, (2) the tomb itself was empty of the body of Jesus, (3) the grave cloths in which Jesus was buried were

lying in the tomb, and (4) it was Sunday, the first day of the week; a fact not at all to be slighted. We will consider the evidence in this order, combining the first two facts into a single unit of study to avoid repeating the same line of argumentation.

I. THE TOMB WAS OPEN AND EMPTY

Reasoning from the facts to the cause makes us to ask who opened the door and removed the body of Jesus. It was necessarily either a human act or a supernatural act. Either Christ was raised from the dead or he was taken away from the tomb by human ingenuity. Now if we can satisfy a line of inquiry which eliminates the human element as the cause of the removal of Jesus' body from the tomb then this will leave us with the conclusion that the cause was supernatural, and the resurrection claim will be sustained.

Who, then, opened and emptied the tomb of Christ? Friends or enemies?

A. WAS IT THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST?

This is precisely the question which evidence answers. Matthew records that sufficient steps were taken to prevent such a thing. He informs us that, "on the morrow, which is the day after the Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees were gathered together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that deceiver said while he was yet alive, After three days I rise again. Command therefore that the sepulcher be made sure until the third day, lest haply his disciples come and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: and the last error will be worse than the first. Pilate

said unto them, Ye have a guard: go, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulcher sure, sealing the stone, the guard being with them" (Matthew 27:62-66).

It is obvious that a Roman guard posted at the door of the tomb³¹ would preclude the possibility of the disciples quietly stealing the body of Jesus. Furthermore, it became common knowledge that the Jews had bribed the Roman guard to offer as an explanation for the empty tomb that the disciples had stolen the body while they slept! (Matthew 28:11-15). Of course, such an explanation is fraught with the haunting suspicion that sleeping men simply do not know what is happening around them.

Could anyone have ever seriously entertained acceptance of this explanation? It's doubtful. Who could believe that the guards were all sleeping at once, and that not one of them was disturbed by the noise several men would have had to make in rolling back the stone, seeing that "it was exceeding great" (Mark 16:4); that not one of the guards was awakened during the time required to roll away the stone, unwrap the corpse and then re-wrap the burial cloths to make it appear as if they had not been tampered with? Who could believe it? It would be easier to believe the resurrection.

There is no reason for believing that the disciples came and stole away the body of Christ. Any suggestion of such is mere speculation without evidence and contrary to the facts as we have them.

B. WAS IT THE JEWS?

Did the Jews themselves take the body of Christ out of the tomb and put it in another place? Such an action would have been completely contrary to their own statement of intent and desire to keep the body of Christ in the tomb until the third day after the crucifixion. Jesus' claims that he would rise again on the third day was by the time of the crucifixion common knowledge among the Jews (Matthew 27:63). It occurred to them that if the disciples stole the body it would appear, at least for a while, that Jesus had made good his claim. Logic told them to secure the body in the tomb until the third day at which time they could go to the tomb, exhume the body, and with fanfare demonstrate that Jesus had failed to rise from the dead. Christianity would have been stopped dead then and there.

When the facts are considered, rather than set aside to accommodate some speculation offered as a possible alternative answer to the fact of the empty tomb, the speculative "possibilities" will have to be assigned to their place as myths.

In answer to the question, Who opened and emptied the tomb of Christ? we must conclude on the basis of the documentary evidence that the disciples of Jesus *could not* have done the deed, and the Jews certainly *would not* have done it.

On the outside chance that someone would suggest that a grave robber took away the body of Christ, it must be remembered that the same guards would

have posed as much a problem for a grave robber as for anyone else. Also, in ancient times graves were robbed for the valuables that were buried with the deceased. In this case the only thing of value was the one hundred pounds of spices which were poured into the folds of the burial cloths which were left behind in the tomb when Jesus vacated the premises (John 19:39-40; 20:5-7).

The logical implication from the facts as they come to us in the Gospels is that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead.

II. THE GRAVE CLOTHS

Christ's burial garments left behind in the tomb form one of the most interesting aspects of the evidence for the resurrection. There are two areas of consideration in this regard.

A. THEIR POSITION

John tells us that the grave cloths were left "lying," and indicating that Jesus had passed through them without disturbing their position. They apparently were lying in the same folded position which formed the outline of the body of Christ when he was "wound" in them for burial (Mark 15:46). The grave cloths were not disheveled but were found lying as they had been folded originally. Whether they were rather flat in position or whether the sticky spices, which would certainly have acted as a glue, would have held the cloths in a slightly collapsed cocoon shape, they were nevertheless still there in their folds and pressing the mind for answers.

B. BURIAL CUSTOM OF THE JEWS

Jesus had been bound up in grave cloths for his burial. The manner in which the Jews dressed their dead for burial is described in John's account of Lazarus' resurrection: "He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave cloths; and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:44). Lazarus needed assistance to get out of the burial wrappings; he was helpless to help himself. Now Jesus was prepared for burial in this same manner. John says that "they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury" (John 19:40). When Jesus was placed in the tomb he had been bound hand and foot with grave wrappings.

If Jesus was not raised from the dead then the question must be answered, Who, by stealth, silently rolled back the stone without the notice of the guards, unwrapped the body of Jesus, then again wrapped the grave cloths with such skill that eyewitnesses could not detect the deception, and then carried away the body totally without detection?

The so-called swoon theory that Jesus did not really die, but only swooned on the cross and in the cool of the tomb was revived, is obviously without real strength. It totally disregards the fact that all four of the Gospel accounts testify to the fact of Jesus' death on the cross (Matthew 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30, 33). Mark even records

that Pilate's surprise that Jesus was already dead after only a few hours on the cross was nevertheless satisfied when he learned from the centurion who was in charge of the execution that Jesus was indeed dead (Mk. 15:44-45). The swoon theory fails to answer the problem Jesus would have had as a mere man, battered and severely torn through scourging and crucifixion, and severely wounded by the soldier's spear thrust upwards into his side—how did Jesus manage to release himself from the cloths in which he was bound, and how would he have rolled back the stone from inside, especially since it was exceeding great? Finally, in such an emaciated condition, what stretch of the imagination could envision Jesus on that very day as the perfect picture of health and divine power to inspire confidence in his disciples that he had triumphed over the power of death?

Perhaps this line of reasoning will expose the folly of substituting mere speculation for historical evidence. The evidence from history is more than sufficient to satisfy the honest mind and heart that the claim of the New Testament for the resurrection of Jesus Christ has been adequately sustained.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THIRD DAY

This refers to the third day after Christ's crucifixion. It was on that day, "the first day of the week," that Jesus' tomb was found empty (Matthew 28:1-7; Mark 16:1-7; Luke 24:1-7; John 20:1-7). This historical fact on that particular day offers to us at least five points of

consideration as contributing evidence to the resurrection claim.

A. JESUS PROPHESIED HE WOULD RISE ON THE THIRD DAY AFTER DEATH BY CRUCIFIXION

Resurrection obviously implies a death. But Jesus specified death by crucifixion (Matthew 20:19; John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33). The absence of Jesus' body from the tomb on the third day following his execution by crucifixion becomes extremely significant when we understand that the Jews made a number of attempts to kill Christ by different means throughout his ministry (e.g. Luke 4:28-30; John. 5:18; 7:1, 25; 8:59; 10:31; 11:8), while Jesus steadfastly maintained that his would be a death by crucifixion. Thus the fact of the empty tomb on the third day following the crucifixion lends a great deal of credibility to the resurrection claim inasmuch as both the means of death and the time of the resurrection were foretold throughout his ministry and were fulfilled in the face of physical opposition which was even officially employed to prevent the fulfillment of both prophecies!

B. THE PROPHECY WAS FORETOLD EARLY IN HIS MINISTRY

This precludes the idea that Jesus' prediction was of a mere human kind which foresaw his death by crucifixion only after he began to detect at the end of his ministry the direction in which the stream of events were to carry him. After the first temple cleansing at the outset of his ministry Jesus pointed to his resurrection on the third day as a confirmation of his claim to deity (John 2:13-22).

He appealed to Jonah's experience in the fish for three days and three nights as a sign prophetic of his own experience to be accomplished in death, burial and resurrection (Matthew 12:38-40). Here, then, was prophecy characteristic of the Biblical kind, the fulfillment of which was so far removed from the original statement of the prophecy that it was humanly impossible to foretell.

C. IT BECAME COMMON KNOWLEDGE

This prophecy of death by crucifixion and of a resurrection on the third day following spread beyond the little circle of Jesus' disciples. The Jewish rulers knew of the prophecy and considered that knowledge of it was so widespread among the common people as a sign of his Messiahship that they took official steps to prevent the body of Christ from being taken from the tomb until the third day (Matthew 27:62-66). It is rather clear that they did not expect a resurrection and that their intentions were to present the lifeless body of Jesus on the third day as an absolute refutation of his Messianic claims.

D. AN EMPTY TOMB ON THE THIRD DAY!

Yet on the third day Jesus' body was nowhere to be found. Had either the Roman or Jewish rulers removed the body from the tomb at any time prior to the third day it would have been no problem for either of them to have presented the corpse and to have stopped the new movement cold.

E. CHRISTIANITY AND THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

From the day of Pentecost following the crucifixion, the first day of the week has been special to Christians. It is nowhere in Scripture called a special day, or even a holy day, but that it contained for the early church a special significance is made clear from the Scriptures. On the first day of the week the church of Christ was established (Acts 2:1-47). Paul shows us that the first day of the week was already special to the church by the time he directed the Corinthians to begin regularly to take a collection on the first day of every week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Also, the churches observed the Lord's supper on that day (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 4:17).

The transfer of emphasis from the Sabbath day to the first day of the week is a very impressive testimony to the significance of this particular day, and more especially when we remember that devout Sabbath keeping Jews who became Christians never questioned the correctness of this emphasis. The question is raised, What great event happened to produce such an emphasis if not the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

CONCLUSION

If Jesus was raised his claims are true and he is the Lord. If not, the historical Jesus who claimed to be God come down to men, who claimed to be Savior and King with the gift of eternal life for the believer was in reality a liar, a cheat, and a blasphemer.

How can we know? We can know by the evidence. The function of reason is to sit in judgment on the evidence and to draw a conclusion which answers to it. The facts are that there was an historical Jesus who was crucified on a Roman cross, who was buried, and whose tomb was found empty on the third day even as he had predicted. And all these facts are recorded in historical documents. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, what possible alternative answer can be given in answer to the facts as we have them?

Reason demands an answer. What does the evidence say?

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST (2)

The Pentecost Phenomenon

On the day of Pentecost a transformation of extreme proportions took place in the apostles. The claim of the New Testament is that the change was due to the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-21). Due to the nature of the case, if the cause can be sustained as supernatural it will in turn become a strong evidence for the resurrection.

Remember that nothing is to be assumed. The evidence as it comes to us from the New Testament is as reliable as that from any other source from that same period of time.

There are five facts to be considered in the systematic development of this evidence.

I. FACT NUMBER ONE: THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AS PROMISED BY JESUS

Prior to the crucifixion, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would endow the apostles with total knowledge of

the gospel (John 14:26; 16:13); a knowledge they could not at that time receive (John 16:12). The language of these verses makes it clear that this knowledge was to be given to the apostles by a supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit upon them.

II. FACT NUMBER TWO: THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WAS CONDITIONAL

Jesus imposed upon himself the condition of returning to the Father before the Spirit would be permitted (or enabled) to come to the apostles (John 16:5, 7, 10).

III. FACT NUMBER THREE: JESUS DIED AT CALVARY

Eye witnesses carefully documented his death (Matthew 27:50; John 19:30). Mark testified that the centurion in charge of the crucifixion assured Pilate that Jesus was dead before Pilate would grant the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea for burial (Mark 15:39-45). A soldier of the execution squad pierced Jesus' side to the extent that both blood and water gushed out freely from the gaping wound (John 19:34-35). His preparation for burial and his entombment are thoroughly documented (Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-55; John 19:38-42).

Any suggestion that Jesus survived the ordeal of crucifixion to live out the rest of his life in another place as Hindus and Moslems claim, is totally without historical basis and in flagrant contradiction of bonafide eyewitness accounts.

THE FORCE OF THE ARGUMENT

The facts thus far have brought Jesus to his death. Keep in mind that Jesus promised to return to heaven before he could send the Spirit, but that he died before returning to his Father. Therefore, to ascend to the Father and send the Holy Spirit he would have to have been raised from the dead. It is thus essential to prove that the Holy Spirit came to the apostles in order to prove that Jesus was raised. We have only to prove that the Spirit came to the apostles and the resurrection claim shall be sustained.

The evidence that the Spirit came and accomplished his work is presented in the following:

IV. FACT NUMBER FOUR: THE STATE OF THE APOSTLES PRIOR TO PENTECOST

During the ministry of Christ the state of the apostles theologically, intellectually, relationally, emotionally, educationally, and linguistically stands in extreme contrast to the superior level of excellence they would attain in each of these categories on Pentecost. When this phenomenon is coupled with the fact that it occurred without the natural processes of the time and education otherwise required for a normal change of such proportions, that it occurred within seconds after hearing a sound like a violent wind (Acts 2:1-4), the claim of supernatural intervention by the Holy Spirit cannot easily be discounted. Consider the pre-Pentecost state of the apostles.

1. *Theologically*

The apostles were nationalistic in concept. Their theology of the kingdom of God, as they interpreted the prophecies, was to see it bathed once again in Solomonic splendor, their Messiah-King enthroned in ultimate regal glory, and extending his reign to the ends of the earth. Their narrow nationalistic theology led to a misinterpretation of the prophets and of Jesus.

- a. Matthew 16:13-23. Peter's view of the Messiah and his kingdom, if left unchecked, would actually have hindered the great redemptive work of Christ. His theology was in such opposition to the purpose of God that Jesus spoke of him as Satan, his adversary. However sincere, his mind-set was not of the things of God, but of the things of men. Such an outlook was typical of all the apostles at that time. Hence Jesus charged the apostles to "tell no man that he was the Christ" inasmuch as their nationalistic theology was a "stumbling block" to God's redemptive purpose.
- b. Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45. The apostles' concept of the nature of the kingdom excited them with ambition to make a power play and to ask for seats of power on the right and left hands of Christ. But Jesus said, "Ye know not what ye ask."
- c. John 6:1-15. When Jesus fed the five thousand with two fish and five loaves, the response of all was to "take him by force, to make him a king." They interpreted his ability to multiply the loaves and fish in terms of reproducing

food and weapons for outfitting an army and instituting “by force” the new government of Messiah. But his kingdom was not to be according to their theology (see John 18:36; Romans 14:17). Consequently he turned them down, withdrawing “into the mountain himself alone” (“alone,” indicating a withdrawal even from the apostles at this time).

- d. Luke 24:13-24. Prior to Pentecost the apostles’ theology of redemption seems to have been limited in scope to the nation of Israel (cf. Luke 1:67-68, 71, 77). The Jewish hope was that the nation would be restored to the regal and economic splendors of a past era according to their nationalistic interpretation of Old Testament prophesy (cf. Acts 26:6-7). The apostles’ theology seems to have been no different from the view the Jewish people held generally at that time.

Hence, Jesus’ words, “I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot hear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13). On Pentecost the Holy Spirit would lead the apostles to understand. His theology would become theirs.

2. *Intellectually*

The apostles were rather dull of perception, seemingly unable to grasp the meaning and intent of the Lord’s word.

- a. Matthew 16:5-12, where they misunderstood the Lord's warning about the teaching of the Pharisees.
 - b. Luke 18:31-34, where the plain statements of Jesus' death and resurrection were not perceived.
3. *Relationally*
As the apostles jockeyed for position they divided their own ranks (Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 22:24-30). They were not unified in relation to each other.
4. *Emotionally*
From the cross to Pentecost they were fearful and confused. Peter would deny him three times (Matthew 26:31-34). They all fled at his arrest (Matthew 26:35-56). After the crucifixion they locked themselves behind closed doors “for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19). Even as he appeared to them after the resurrection they were terrified and confused with questions they could not answer (Luke 24:36-38). They were not cowards, but neither could they display the courage at this time they would at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would empower them and guide them into the truth.
5. *Educationally*

It is clear from Acts 4:13 that the apostles were not trained for public service prior to Pentecost. Nor could they have been expected to engage their opposition polemically. (A similar incident left the Jews wondering about the source of Christ's training and ability, John 7:14-15).

From this vantage point it would have been inconceivable that this band of inept no-bodies could ever assume the dynamic leadership of a new movement that would soon capture the attention of Jerusalem and all Judea, then rapidly proceed to the outer reaches of the Roman empire, and persist with millions of adherents to the present time. Such would have been unthinkable prior to Pentecost.

V. FACT NUMBER FIVE: THE CHANGE AT PENTECOST

Luke records the revolutionary change that took place in the apostles at Pentecost and attributes it to the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-21). Suddenly they changed from nationalistic Jews to gospel preachers trying to save men from sin (Acts 2:36-40). Old Testament messianic prophecies are now interpreted redemptively in terms of forgiveness of sins (Acts 3:13-26). Now they understand Calvary and the spiritual nature of the kingdom. They are unified in doctrine; their theological and national differences having dissolved into union with Christ and the gospel. They are no longer confused and fearful, but knowledgeable and bold. With newly acquired linguistic abilities (Acts 2:5-11) they publicly and fearlessly proclaim the resurrection and its messianic implications through ensuing persecution (Acts 4:1-20).

Here was a change of such proportions that the mind is boggled to think of it happening in that brief moment of time. Yet it happened on Pentecost. It is one of the facts of history.

VI. WAS THE CHANGE NATURAL OR SUPER-

NATURAL?

This is a fact of history which must be explained in terms that answer to the facts in the case. The question is, what forces combined to produce this phenomenon? Luke claimed it was the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). So also did the apostles (1 Corinthians 2:10-13; Ephesians 3:3-5; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:3-4). But inasmuch as the Holy Spirit could not come to the apostles until Jesus had ascended back to the Father, and inasmuch as Jesus died before ascending to the Father (John 20:17), it follows that Jesus had to rise from the dead if he would ascend to the Father and send the Holy Spirit.

The only alternative explanation to the change in the apostles is that it was affected by natural processes. But a change of these proportions would require both *time and education*. These are the essential ingredients necessary to produce a thorough-going change in both theology and life-style as it did in these men. *But the fact is that the time required to produce this change was simply not available.* And who was their teacher? who would have been able to unify these apostles in doctrine and martyr-life? Echo answers, Who?

Is it reasonable to believe that such a change was brought about by natural processes? That all of the apostles were brought to this theological viewpoint, this boldness, this unity, this empowerment and conviction in a mere moment of time by merely natural means? Only the coming of the Holy Spirit can satisfactorily answer to the facts in the case. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come and superimpose his knowledge and ability upon the apostles. Luke and the apostles claimed

this was the case. If the change in the apostles was not due to the coming of the Holy Spirit what alternative answer can be offered in keeping with the facts as we have them?

CONCLUSION

We are left with a fact and a question. The fact is, the apostles changed drastically in a very brief moment of time on that Pentecost morning. The question is, was that change affected by natural or supernatural processes? The only plausible answer *in keeping with the facts* lies in the resurrection claim. On this basis it is reasonable to believe that the Holy Spirit came from God and endowed the apostles, for their change came entirely too fast for the natural course of things to produce it And inasmuch as the crucified Jesus could not send the Spirit until he had returned to the Father in heaven it is also reasonable to conclude that Jesus was therefore raised from the dead.

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST (3)

The Testimony of the Apostles

Luke wrote to Theophilus that, “with great power gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). The power of the apostles’ testimony to the resurrection of Christ was so effective upon those who heard it that Luke said, “great grace was upon them all.” It is the evidence of the apostles’ testimony for the resurrection that we consider in this lesson.

I. WHAT IT IS FOR A PERSON TO BEAR WITNESS

To bear witness a person is to testify in regard of another, or to the reality of a truth or an event. Personal testimony is an account of what one has experienced, or seen, or heard, with a view toward confirming its objective truth or reality. As Christ is recorded to have commissioned Paul, “to this end have I appeared unto thee, to appoint thee a minister and a witness both of the things wherein thou hast seen me, and of the things wherein I will appear unto thee” (Acts 26:16).

The New Testament idea of bearing witness for Christ is the testimony of eyewitnesses to what they had seen and

heard (Acts 4:19-20). This stands in contrast to the modern religious idea of “witnessing for Christ” which is generally couched in terms of a subjective experience wherein the presence and power of Christ is assumed, without *objective* proof, to have been present. This kind of “witnessing,” sometimes referred to as “a personal testimony,” has no foundation in Scripture.

II. THE APOSTLES CHOSEN TO BE CHRIST’S WITNESSES

The reason back of the apostles as his chosen witnesses was as Jesus said, “because ye have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:27). Having accompanied him from the beginning of his ministry to the moment of his ascension they were able to give an eyewitness account of what they had seen. This testimony would begin at Jerusalem, said Jesus, and would proceed “to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:1-8).

III. THE THREE-FOLD PURPOSE OF THE APOSTLES’ TESTIMONY

1. *To produce belief through the word of their testimony,* John 17:20. When Jesus prayed, “Neither for these (apostles) only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word” (John 17:20), he clearly indicated that the ground of faith for all succeeding generations would be the word of his apostles. This is precisely because they were eyewitnesses. After Thomas had seen the marks of Christ’s crucifixion in his hands and side, he confessed to Jesus, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:26-28). This was one of the most blasphemous statements a Jew could make to

another man, unless what he said was true. But Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who believe what Thomas confessed: “Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29). Belief among modern men who have not seen Christ is the result of the historical testimony of the apostles who, like Thomas, were eyewitnesses. That eyewitness account is preserved in the New Testament.

This eyewitness testimony is back of Peter’s statement to those who had heard the gospel and believed on Christ, but had not seen him: “whom not having seen ye love; on whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice greatly with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8). Our faith today, like theirs, is the result of the apostles’ testimony.

2. *To testify that Jesus is the Messiah*, Luke 24:44-48. In his final words to the apostles Jesus explained: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. *And Ye are witnesses of these things.*” In his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies that the messiah would die and rise again on the third day. The apostles accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry to the time of his death, and walked with him after the resurrection to the time of his ascension. Because of this objective eyewitness

experience they were able to testify that Jesus answered to those messianic prophecies.

3. *To testify to the resurrection of Jesus*, Acts 1:21-22. The resurrection is the ground of the Christian faith (cf. John 11:25; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 1 Peter 1:3). The grand purpose of the apostles' testimony is to offer evidence for the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection, and by this to confirm his claims to be the Christ, the son of God.

The testimony of the apostles is that they were with Jesus throughout his ministry, that they saw him alive after the crucifixion, and that they ate and drank with him after his resurrection. They further testify that they had the opportunity to observe him closely, to the point of examining the marks of the crucifixion in his flesh, and so to satisfy themselves that this was indeed the same Jesus of Nazareth with whom they had lived and walked for some three years prior to the cross.

IV. TESTIMONY TO JESUS' RESURRECTION CONFINED TO THE APOSTLES³²

MODERN BELIEF IN CHRIST IS DEPENDENT ON APOSTLES' EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

No person living today has seen Jesus Christ. There is therefore no one living to give an eyewitness account of the historical reality and life of Christ any more than of any other person from antiquity. Any eyewitness testimony to the life of the historical Jesus is confined to those first century persons who accompanied him during his earthly ministry and observed his life and works. The New Testament is the historical record of the apostles' testimony to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Apart from their eyewitness testimony there can be no belief in Christ as Lord.

A. LUKE'S CLAIM, Acts 1:1-3, 8

Luke records that the apostles were specially “chosen” by the Lord to be his witnesses and to testify to what he “began to do and to teach.” After the resurrection Jesus made special appearances to the apostles for the purpose of showing “himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing unto them by the space of forty days.”³³ Then he explained to the apostles, “But ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”³⁴ Jesus said the apostles would become his witnesses only after they were empowered by the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us later that the apostles began that testimony on the day of Pentecost as the Spirit descended upon them (Acts 2:1ff).

B. PETER'S CLAIM, Acts 10:39-41

Peter explained that the apostles had companied with Christ throughout his ministry to the crucifixion. He then claimed that Christ was raised on the third day and made a special post-resurrection appearance to the apostles. He was careful to specify to whom this appearance was made: “not to all the people, but unto witnesses that were chosen before of God, even to us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” Note carefully that not all the people were witnesses, but those “that were chosen before,” that is, the apostles. They were specially chosen as witnesses

for Christ due to their unique eyewitness experience with him during his ministry, at his death, and after his resurrection. Theirs would be an eyewitness testimony of an objective nature that would carry credibility.

C. PAUL'S CLAIM, Acts 13:30-31

Paul specified that “those who are now his witnesses unto the people” were the original apostles “that came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem,” having “seen him for many days” after his resurrection. Paul excludes himself from this group of eyewitnesses inasmuch as he was not in their company during the Lord’s earthly ministry and resurrection. He could not testify to what he had not seen. His testimony to the resurrection (In Chapter 7 of this book) embraces his own objective experience of seeing the risen Lord. While Paul was on the road to Damascus Jesus made a special post-resurrection appearance to him and commissioned him to be his special envoy: “To this end have I appeared unto thee, to appoint thee a minister and a witness both of the things wherein thou hast seen me, and of the things wherein I will appear unto thee” (Acts 26:16).

D. JOHN'S CLAIM, 1 John 1:1-4

John writes that our fellowship with God is dependent on the apostles’ testimony to what they had seen and heard and handled. This implies the death and resurrection of Jesus by which “the eternal life” was “manifested” to them, and which they “declare” to us in order to have “fellowship” with the Father and the Son.

The claim of Luke and Peter and Paul and John is that the testimony to the resurrection of Christ, by which all men come to faith, is confined to the eyewitness testimony of the apostles.

V. APOSTLES SPECIALLY QUALIFIED TO BE CHRIST'S WITNESSES

A. THEY HAD TO BE WITH JESUS FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE ASCENSION, John 15:27; Acts 1:21-22

Jesus specified that the apostles would be his witnesses “because ye have been with me from the beginning.” Luke explains that the “beginning” was from the baptism of John. This is clarified in Peter’s statement of the qualifications necessary to appoint one to take the place of Judas: “Of the men that have companied with us all the time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto the day that he was received up from us, of these must one become a witness with us of his resurrection.”

Note that “these” from whom a witness would be selected had to have been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, when he was baptized by John, to his ascension.

B. THEY HAD TO BE SPECIALLY EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, John 14:26; 16:13-14; Acts 1:8

Jesus clearly stated that the apostles would be his witnesses after they had received the Holy Spirit: “But ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses”

(Acts 1:8). This empowering of the apostles by the Holy Spirit was due to their need for a supernatural endowment to remind them of all that Jesus had said during his ministry (John 14:26). Mere unaided human intellect could not be relied upon to have total recall. Luke tells us that on Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and they testified to Jesus “as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4). The testimony of the apostles, as guided by the Holy Spirit, is completely reliable.

VI. THE CREDIBILITY OF THE APOSTLES' TESTIMONY

The apostles' testimony is believable due to the three-fold characteristic of their number, unity, and faithful lives in persecution.

A. THEIR NUMBER

There were twelve witnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One person of reliable character is usually sufficient to confirm the claim or character of another. In this case there were twelve witnesses whose reliability is confirmed by their lives under hardship which was due to their testimony, and whose lives exonerate them from any indictment that their testimony was due to any ulterior motive. Twelve such witnesses would be adequate for confirmation in any court. If these twelve would not be received as confirmation of the resurrection neither would twelve hundred.

B. THE UNITY OF THEIR TESTIMONY

Unity of agreement among the total number of witnesses lends great credibility to their claim. While the claim for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is no ordinary claim it is attested by twelve men who claim to have been eyewitnesses of the life, death, and post-resurrection appearances of Christ. Remarkably their reports are not flawed by contradictions among themselves. This unusual agreement among all twelve apostles lends credibility to their testimony.

C. THEIR FAITHFUL LIVES IN PERSECUTION

From Pentecost the evidence for the resurrection was the unswerving testimony of a unified band of apostles, who, however imprisoned (Acts 4:1-3; 5:17, 25), and in the face of threats upon their lives (Acts 4:17, 21; 5:17-33), and early martyrdom of the apostle James (Acts 12:1-3), nevertheless maintained that they had seen Jesus alive!

These apostles persisted without veering from their course both doctrinally and morally in the face of severe hardship and persecution to the death. It cannot be expected of human nature to maintain high moral standards that are based on a lie, much less to endure persecution for what is known, or even slightly suspected, to be fraudulent.

When the apostles testified to the resurrection of Jesus Christ they were not faking it.

VII. THE APOSTLES' TESTIMONY

The recorded testimony of the apostles reveals their characteristic line of preaching Christ. Carefully note their claims in Acts 2:32; 3:14-15; 4:19-20; 5:29-32;

10:39-41; 13:30-31; 1 John 1:1-4. In each case the death and resurrection of Jesus is affirmed as an historic space-time truth and is followed by the apostles' own eyewitness experience as proof of the claim.

CONCLUSION

The only reasonable conclusion from the evidence, as it comes to us from the New Testament, is that the apostles' testimony is true. Jesus was raised from the dead and the apostles actually saw him. Their number, the unity of their testimony, and their unchallenged motives in time of persecution stand as convincing evidence to the truth of their resurrection claim. Herein lies the force of Luke's statement that, "with great power gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." What other possible alternatives can be offered in keeping with the facts for such testimony from such men?

Today we have no testimony of our own experience that can be objectively offered as evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Our testimony must be that of the apostles. The apostles' testimony became the testimony of the early Christians who had not seen the risen Lord (Revelation 12:11). It is not ours to offer a subjective "experience" of our own as proof of Christianity. Ours is to declare the testimony of the apostles. Ours is to preach the word (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST (4)

Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

Luke records Paul's defense before Agrippa and an impressive assembly of Roman nobility. To these Paul addresses himself to the historical and verifiable evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 26:1-29). He begins his apologetic by recounting his manner of life from his youth to the time of his conversion. After challenging Agrippa with the credibility of God raising the dead (v. 8), he proceeds to paint a picture of his anti-Christian personality and life and the severity to which it extended against the church. He states that this phase of his life was abruptly halted while on the road to Damascus when Jesus himself appeared to him, stopping him dead in his tracks.

The force of this argument for the resurrection lies in Paul's manner of life before he became a Christian: his sincere and furious zeal against Christianity was of such a severe nature that any human attempt to convert Saul of Tarsus to Christ would have been unthinkable and impossible. Yet he was converted! The abruptness of the change from Paul's pre-Christian religion to zealous exponent of the gospel reveals a contrast of such proportions

that natural causes are totally inadequate to explain them. His drastic change from persecutor of the church to preacher of Christ involved such extremes of change in theology and lifestyle within such a brief period of time (a few days) that that change could have only been produced by some dynamic greater than any mere man could have exercised.

This material is further developed by Paul in his Galatians epistle, and under the same title, “my manner of life in time past” (Galatians 1:11-14). In Galatians 1:11-12 Paul claimed that he received his gospel from Jesus, not from man. And in verses 13-14 offers his manner of life in time past in Judaism as the historical proof of the claim. Inherent in the argument is evidence for the resurrection. It is a matter of historical record that Jesus was crucified before Saul was converted. Obviously Jesus would have to have been raised from the dead in order to appear to Saul and deliver to him the gospel. Paul’s own presentation of the evidence is set forth in the following.

I. MY MANNER OF LIFE IN TIME PAST Galatians 1:13-14

After laying claim to Christ’s personal revelation of the gospel to him, Paul then begins to present the evidence in the form of a logical three-pronged argument from his past manner of life. This unique manner of life would be convincing that only Christ himself could have approached the fiery persecutor with the gospel to convert him.

A. HE PERSECUTED THE CHURCH BEYOND MEASURE!

The evidence that Paul received the gospel from Jesus lies in the fierceness of that persecution. That

phrase “beyond measure” shows the severe measure of the persecution. This description of his former life was apparently well known to the Galatians. It seems he had only to mention the three particulars in the case for them to fully appreciate what he meant. We are fortunately in possession of Luke’s great historical Acts document in which he mentions enough of Paul’s past life as persecutor for us to piece together quite a graphic description of that persecution which was “beyond measure.” With Luke’s help we can know what the Galatians knew about that particular point in Paul’s former life.

Luke introduces Saul of Tarsus as among those who were consenting to the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58). On that very day a persecution was begun against the church and Saul entered into every Christian house he could and “dragging men and women committed them to prison” (Acts 8:1-3). His utter hatred of Christianity is depicted in Luke’s statement that Saul requested and obtained from the Jewish authorities letters empowering him to arrest and imprison Christians at Damascus (9:1-2). After his conversion it was remarked that he was the one who sought to destroy all Christians (9:21). He later remarked himself that such was certainly the case (22:4). In his defense to King Agrippa, Paul, now a veteran of Christ for many years, recounts how he, with complete consent of conscience, shut up many of the saints in prisons, voted for their deaths, punished them even in their worship assemblies, and even strove to make them blaspheme the name of God, probably by eliciting

from them their confession that Jesus is LORD (Acts 26:9-12). He capped off his description of the extreme measure to which he went in persecution when he related that his persecutions were carried on with such intensity that he pushed on toward Damascus in the heat of the Eastern midday (v. 13). While others rested from the heat at this time of day Saul pressed on toward his self-assigned task in Damascus.

In this historical account of Saul's persecution of the church emerges a picture of a persecutor so fierce and frightful, and at the same time spurred on by a religious conviction that what he was doing was right (cf. Acts 26:9), that we can only see Saul of Tarsus as *fanatical* in his opposition to Christianity. This is what Paul meant when he said to the Galatians that he persecuted the church "beyond measure." And they fully appreciated it! "Beyond measure!" A fanatic!

The question at this point is, how do you deal with a fanatic? Of course, you cannot. This is the very point Paul was intending to make; *that no one could have converted him*. Yet he was converted. Who then converted him? Christians *could not* have done it, and Jews certainly *would not* have done it. Who then? Paul affirmed stoutly that it was Christ. But Christ was crucified. Therefore, if Christ appeared to Saul he must have been raised from the dead.

B. HE ADVANCED IN THE JEWS' RELIGION

There are at least four areas of Paul's advancement during his pre-Christian life which can be specified

from Scripture. He advanced as a *scholar* having sat at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), whom some think was supposed to have been the greatest rabbi of the time. He advanced *socially* among the Jewish elite. This would be guaranteed through his connection with the sect of the Pharisees of which he was outstanding (Philippians 3:5). Also, *power* was seen to be his in the very exercise of his persecution against the church (see Acts 9:1-2; 26:12). And *finances* were certainly not lacking in order for him to support the police force which had to accompany his efforts. He had, at least, the ancient equivalent of a modern expense account. Saul of Tarsus was what some would call a success. Beyond a doubt he was a prominent person among the Jews. His reputation even preceded him to the Gentiles from time to time (cf Acts 26:24). His *prominence* was outstanding. What ulterior motive could brilliant young Saul of Tarsus possibly have had for becoming a Christian? What could Christians have offered him? Christianity would mean that he would be severed from all such standing and accomplishments as well as reversal of his religious convictions. Only Jesus Christ could have provided the dynamic sufficient to have converted him. But he was dead. Crucified. How could Jesus have converted him unless he had been raised from the dead as Paul affirmed?

C. HE WAS EXCEEDINGLY ZEALOUS FOR THE TRADITIONS OF HIS FATHERS

His fathers were the Pharisaical fathers. The traditions were their interpretations of the law of

Moses. The Pharisees were famed for their conflict with Christ. It was their particular interpretation of the law which blinded them to Christ's claims and doctrine. As a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5) Saul of Tarsus would be as *prejudiced* against Christ as his "fathers." Prejudice does not always preclude dishonesty. It is often the product of a *lack* of knowledge (1 Timothy 1:13).

One can be honestly prejudiced, thinking in all sincerity he is in possession of the truth. Saul was not mentally tormented as though he had second thoughts about his severe measures against Christians. He was thoroughly persuaded that his persecutions were right. As he later reflected, "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). His excess of zeal stemmed from his religious sincerity and dedication of purpose. As cream coming to the top, we see in Saul of Tarsus the emergence of a certain *theological prejudice and pharisaic legalism*.

But how does one convert a prejudiced, prominent fanatic? Echo answers, How?! If human beings cannot, that leaves God. Saul became a Christian. He changed horses in the middle of a religious stream. The impossible happened. And it is a matter of history, not fantasy. But who did it? If it was Jesus who appeared to Saul and effected his conversion then he had to have been resurrected from the dead. This is what Paul affirmed. If it was not Christ, then what alternative in *keeping with the*

historical facts can satisfy the fact of Saul's radical reversal?

II. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING SAUL'S CONVERSION

Keep in mind that there was actually an historical Saul of Tarsus who renounced Judaism for Christ, whose life was every bit as colorful as the New Testament describes it. Historians have never doubted his historicity and his meetings with the other apostles.³⁵ There are thirteen epistles which bear his name. Even the most radical of schools do not deny him the authorship of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians. The oft vindicated historian, Luke, speaks of himself as Paul's companion on some of his evangelistic journeys. Paul was as real as any man of history.

But are there not other reasons which we could consider as alternative reasons for Saul's changeover other than the resurrection? What would they be? What would they *have* to be? Consider the following:

A. WAS THERE AN ULTERIOR MOTIVE BACK OF SAUL'S CONVERSION?

Could it be that Saul became a Christian for reasons other than those he gave? This brings up the subject of motive. What reason could have motivated Saul of Tarsus to become a Christian other than the reasons he gave?

1. *Wealth?* He had that with the Jews and left it for the poverty of Christianity (cf Acts 20:33-34; 1 Corinthians 4:11-12).

2. *Reputation?* He had a reputation which was heard among kings (Acts 26:24) and renounced it to become “a fool for Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:10, 13).
3. *Passion?* Was there some immoral reason? His moral integrity was above reproach among Jews as well as Christians. All allusions of liberalism to a youthful participation in fornication which this “lion of God” may earlier have engaged in are totally without historical foundation and are strictly the product of the imagination. Paul had many enemies after espousing the Christian religion who attacked him mercilessly, but none tried to cast reflection from this vantage point. They simply had none to cast (2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:10).
4. *Power?* He had this with the Jews and left it for Christ (See Acts 26:1-12).

There is no ulterior motive which can be discovered against Paul. We must conclude that when Saul of Tarsus made his “about face” he was absolutely sincere.

B. WAS HE DECEIVED?

Could this have been the case? Many are sincere but deceived. The question at this point is, who deceived him? Friends or enemies? His friends would not. Saul was their champion. Christians could not; he would have been intolerant of them. It is thus conclusive that Saul was not deceived.

But if Jesus did not actually produce the change in Saul of Tarsus there is only one alternative left: Saul was mad.

C. WAS HE MAD?

Was he indeed beside himself, mad, crazy? Some modernists, inasmuch as the historical documentation from the New Testament is so overwhelmingly authenticated that Saul did change from persecutor to preacher, have attempted to explain this phenomenon in psychological terms. In other words, Paul is accused of being so intense in his efforts, yet conscience stricken for his terrible deeds to Christians that he became depressed, that while on the road to Damascus he experienced too much heat; and that such combination of forces working on his fevered imagination cause him to merely think that he saw Jesus!³⁶ However this is contrary to the whole historical record of the account of the life of Saul and his encounter with Christ. Paul was not depressed while engaged in the persecution of the saints. As a matter of fact he was quite sincere, he states, doing what he “thought he ought” to be doing in his service to God (Acts 26:9).

It is inconsistent to accept the New Testament account of the fact of Saul of Tarsus, of his life in Judaism, of his severe persecution of the church, of his conversion, of his characteristic zeal in Judaism and in Christianity, of his accomplishment in Christ, *and then to reject the account of the cause for that change which is also presented in the same New Testament documents.* To accept the historical

accuracy of the New Testament in one place and to reject its historical accuracy in another place without any more evidence than a bias against the supernatural, and without any historical evidence to militate against the accuracy of those references, manifests a prejudice rather than an objective conclusion from the evidence.

Furthermore, a single reading of Paul's letters will erase any trembling thought that he was anything other than sane, sound, and slightly brilliant. No one who authored such documents as these could be seriously indicted of mental imbalance.

CONCLUSION

It appears conclusive that Saul of Tarsus met the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus, that he instructed him to go to the house of Judas on the street called Straight and that there Jesus revealed to him the gospel of salvation. But for Christ to have appeared to Paul after the crucifixion he must have been raised from the dead.

What alternative explanation can satisfactorily explain the conversion of Saul without doing violence to the facts as we have them?

Paul's "I am not mad most excellent Festus; but speak forth words of truth and soberness" (Acts 26:25) needed no miracle to confirm. For as he explained, "this hath not been done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). His manner of life was a much publicized fact, more like an open book for all to read. And the facts available to all for ready investigation when weighed in the balance stack up in favor of the resurrection

claim. It is not thus conceivable that Paul perjured himself when to this very matter he attested: “Now touching the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not” (Galatians 1:20). If Paul was a fake, where lies the fallacy?

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST (5)

Evidence From Paul's Epistles³⁷

The early date of ten of Paul's letters and the content of those letters when compared with the content of the Gospel accounts concerning the life of Christ support Paul's claim to have received his gospel from the Lord (Gal. 1:11-12). This in turn supports the New Testament claim for the resurrection of Jesus.

The point of the argument is to answer this question, Where did Paul get his information about Jesus Christ which his letters reveal he had?

I. THE FACTS IN THE CASE

A. PAUL WAS NOT A COMPANION OF JESUS IN THE DAYS OF HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY

And with the exception of two or three brief meetings he was not a companion of the original apostles after his conversion. He preached the

gospel for three years prior to his first meeting with an apostle (Galatians 1:15-18).

- B. THE EARLIEST GOSPEL ACCOUNT OF JESUS WAS FROM THE HAND OF MARK ABOUT 60-62 AD**
- C. PRIOR TO THE WRITING OF MARK'S GOSPEL**

Prior to the Gospel of Mark, the apostle Paul had already written ten epistles beginning from about 48 AD. In these epistles we find a sufficient amount of information to enable us to reconstruct what he preached about Jesus, and much of Jesus' life and personality *which we also can read about in the gospels.* (For specific comparisons between Paul's letters and the gospels in relation to Jesus' life, teaching, and personality, see F. F. Bruce's, *The New Testament Documents*, pp. 76-79).

II. REASONING FROM THE FACT TO THE RESURRECTION

What Paul wrote about Jesus and the gospel is in remarkable agreement with what we find in the Gospel records. Keep in mind that Paul did not get his information about Christ from the Gospels inasmuch as they had not yet been written. Neither is there any proof that he obtained his information from the apostles, and this is seen more clearly to be the case when we remember that Paul maintained an independence of them all his Christian life.

It is one thing to surmise that Paul picked up some gospel information and some facts in the life of Christ during the days of his persecution of the church, but is an altogether different matter to conceive that Saul of Tarsus, fiercely militant against Christianity to the point of breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples, would painstakingly research the religion he was bent on destroying to the most intimate details of the life of Christ, as depicted in his letters! The interest which Saul of Tarsus had in Christianity was not academic, but grew out of his hatred of the religion which he believed was opposed to the truth.

The question at this point is, Where did Paul get his information which corresponds so perfectly with the information recorded in the Gospels? Whence came such perception of the meaning of the gospel of Christ which agrees with that of the original apostles? He did not get it from the apostles from whom he maintained his independence (Galatians 1:15-2:9). He did not get it from any of the churches which he had not established (Acts 9:20-21; Galatians 1:20-24; Romans 15:20). He claimed that he received his information from Jesus himself (Galatians 1:11-12). But since Jesus had been crucified long before Paul became a Christian, then Jesus would have to have been raised from the dead in order to make that revelation to him.

CONCLUSION

The facts in the life of Paul as *we have them*, and the content of his letters are in perfect harmony with the lives of the other apostles and with the content of the gospel they preached and with the personality of Christ as revealed in the

Gospels. This harmony reveals the integrity of both Paul and the original apostles and thus supports the claim of the New Testament for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

JESUS, THE MAN OF DESTINY

When the claims of Christ to have perfect control over his life and the manner of his death are compared with the circumstances surrounding that life and death, they combine to form a very convincing argument that Jesus was something far more than a mere man; *that he was in fact a man of a certain planned destiny.*

I. THE CLAIMS OF CHRIST CONCERNING HIS LIFE AND HIS DEATH

- A. JESUS CLAIMED THE MANNER OF HIS DEATH WAS PREDETERMINED (Matthew 20:19; John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33). To be by crucifixion.
- B. JESUS CLAIMED THE TIME OF DEATH WAS PREDETERMINED (John 2:4; 7:6, 30; 8:20)

This “hour” was obviously a moment in the future which Jesus viewed as predetermined. Jesus explained that it was the hour of his death and glorification with the Father (John 12:23-27; 13:1).

It is conclusive that Jesus believed both the time and the manner of his death was a destiny that he had come to fulfill.

C. JESUS CLAIMED NO ONE COULD TAKE HIS LIFE FROM HIM (John 10:17-18)

When Jesus claimed to have power over his life and that no one could take it from him, it was another way of saying that he was in control of the circumstances surrounding his life and that of human society. Quite a claim!

D. JESUS CLAIMED TO HAVE POWER TO LAY DOWN HIS OWN LIFE (John 10:17-18)

In this he claimed to be able to give up his life whenever he wished. Such power would have been considered highly desirable by anyone sentenced to death by crucifixion.

II. THE FACTS OF CHRIST CONCERNING HIS LIFE AND DEATH

The following facts make good Christ's claim to have control over the circumstances touching his life to the point of fulfilling his destiny at the cross.

A. NO ONE COULD KILL JESUS ALTHOUGH ATTEMPTS WERE MADE ON HIS LIFE

1. *Herod attempted to kill Christ* in infancy in what he thought was expedient to save his throne (Matthew 2:13-21). He failed.
2. *At Nazareth* the members of the synagogue attempted to throw Jesus off the brow of the

hill on which their city was built, but failed (Luke 4:16-30). Luke does not attempt to explain the method which Jesus employed to escape, he only states the fact that it happened.

3. *Officers were sent* by the ruling Jews to arrest Christ but even the arrest was not carried out (John 7:32, 45-46). The impact which Jesus had upon the officers was quite impressive.
4. *A number of attempts* to kill Jesus by stoning also failed (John 8:59; 10:31, 39).
5. His entire public ministry was threatened by attempts to kill him one way or another (John 5:18; 7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40; 11:53, 57).

Jesus' life during his ministry was continually under the threat of death, yet all efforts to kill him failed.

B. THE FACTS CONNECTED WITH THE CRUCIFIXION REVEAL THAT JESUS DIED VOLUNTARILY

1. *Death by crucifixion took 36 to 72 hours.* The death of the crucified was brought about by exhaustion, not by loss of blood. Thus the reason for breaking the legs of the thieves was to prevent them from supporting their bodies in order to breathe and so accelerate their death (John 19:31-33).
2. *Jesus died in six hours* (Mark 15:25-37). This explains Pilate's surprise when he learned of

the death of Jesus; it was too soon to be expected (Mark 15:44).

The importance of this fact cannot be overstated. For had Jesus remained alive on the cross for the length of time it ordinarily took to die by crucifixion there would have been no evidence that he had the power to lay down his life by his own will. It would have appeared that he had died as any other man. It was therefore necessary for him to die early while there was yet strength of life surging through his body. In other words, it would have been quite natural to expect that an average man would have survived the ordeal had he been taken down from the cross in only six hours. But, remarkably, after only six hours on the cross, he announced with a strong voice the very moment of his death and immediately he died! (Luke 23:46; John 19:30).

3. *Jesus died voluntarily.* That is, he chose the very moment of his death and by an effort of his own will he died. This is made quite clear in the following accounts: “Jesus cried again with a loud voice, *and yielded up his spirit*” (Matthew 27:50); “And Jesus uttered a loud voice *and gave up the ghost*” (Mark 15:37); “And Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘*Father, into thy hand I commend my spirit*’: and having said this, *he gave up the ghost*” (Luke 23:46); . . . he said, ‘*It is finished’.. and bowed his head, and gave up his spirit*” (John 19:30).

Carefully notice that the death of Jesus was the result of giving up the spirit. His loud proclamation just before dying proves that he yet had much physical strength. His life did not ebb away, it was voluntarily given away while yet physically strong! He did not pale away into unconsciousness, nor did he go into a coma. He simply reached that point in time when he decided to die. He pronounced his work finished,³⁸ commended his spirit to the Father, bowed his head (showing his head was upright to this point and his physical strength still with him) – all of this in succession – and immediately gave up his spirit. *He died by an act of his own will at the moment he chose.*

It was all contrary to the agony and death by crucifixion which one would naturally expect. Which is precisely the reason why the centurion who “saw that he so gave up the ghost,. . . said, “Truly this man was the Son of God”(Mark 15:39), and, “glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man” (Luke 23:47). The centurion could see that this was not at all like any crucifixion he knew about. Matthew referred to all these “things that were done” and offered them as the reason for the centurion’s great fear (Matthew 27:54).

The question is, can we expect a mere man to have such power and control over his own life as Jesus did, especially in the face of the hierarchy’s power and intention to force him in another direction? Whence came the power that

Jesus had over his own life to preserve it against otherwise overwhelming odds, to the point of giving up his life precisely at that moment of his own choosing totally against the natural expectations of slow death by crucifixion?

CONCLUSION

The facts surrounding the life and death of Jesus Christ are such that they lend great weight to his claim to be the Son of God. Attempts to either capture or kill him prior to the time of his own choosing were thwarted one after the other. His death by crucifixion, was too soon for the normal procedure. His death by crucifixion not some other way, fulfilled his prophecies. Throughout his life to the moment of his death he accomplished his purposes while thwarting the purposes of others against him. This demonstrates that he was the one in control, not only of his own life, but of the lives and circumstances of all that were about him!

Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that Jesus was much more than a mere man; that he was a man of destiny according to God's predestination, and that his death at Calvary was not a failure but his own victorious conquest over sin and death.

JESUS IN THE CONTEXT OF MIRACLES

Supernatural events spanning the entire life of Christ on earth are presented in the Gospels in such quantity and with such constancy that the picture which emerges from those accounts has Jesus literally immersed in the context of miracles. The miraculous element is one of the distinctive aspects characterizing the life of Christ as presented in the Gospels.

Concerning this supernaturalism Bruce has observed, “that for many readers it is precisely these miracle-stories which are the chief difficulty in the way of accepting the New Testament documents as reliable.”³⁹ For an illustration, H. G. Wells acknowledged the Gospels as the historical source for his information about Jesus but at the same time referred to the miracles as “incredible additions.”⁴⁰

It is the purpose of this lesson to show that the miracles of Christ are:

1. Credible on the ground of historical evidence.
2. “In character” with the rest of the life of Christ.
That is, the miracles attributed to Jesus are no more

outstanding in the life of Christ than any other area of reference.

We will develop this argument on the ground of the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts and that Jesus' miracles are "in character" with the total picture of the life of Christ. From this ground we may reasonably conclude that the Gospel miracles are as much a part of the historical reality of the life of Christ as any other fact attested by historical guidelines.

I. GOSPEL MIRACLES ARE ACCEPTABLE ON THE GROUND OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

When unbelieving historians and theologians⁴¹ go beyond the mere fact of Jesus' historical existence to discuss his personality, his teachings, his day-to-day relationships with the Jewish community, and that combination of life-ingredients which brought him to his death, *they are admitting that there is an historical basis for their discussion*. Since the New Testament alone yields this information it is conclusive that it is accepted by them as the historical basis for their discussions. Does it not thus appear inconsistent to reject the historical basis strictly at the point of the supernatural element while regarding it as trustworthy elsewhere? The very motive for such a rejection appears suspect, especially since there is no evidence that the miracles did not happen exactly as the Gospel writers said they did. To reject the supernatural element when it is included in a proven historical context with no more reason than a prejudice against the supernatural is neither a scientific nor an acceptable historical procedure.

The Gospel miracles are as acceptable as any other matter which is determined by historical evidence. Not all unbelieving historians totally reject the Gospel miracles. Will Durant concludes from the historical basis of the New Testament, “That his (Jesus) powers were nevertheless exceptional seems proved by his miracles... the fact that like stories have been told of other characters in legend and history does not prove that the miracles of Christ were myths. With a few exceptions they are not beyond belief.”⁴²

The Gospels have already been shown to be historically trustworthy. We can believe that the miracles happened just as we can believe any other incident which is recorded therein.

II. JESUS LIVED IN THE CONTEXT OF MIRACLES

It has been suggested by liberalism that the Gospel miracles distort the real picture of Jesus, that we should demythologize the New Testament and get back to the true Jesus of history. However, this glib suggestion fails to realize that the Jesus of the Gospels is so inextricably bound up with the supernatural—the events recorded leading up to or becoming the occasion of the miracles—that with precious few exceptions, if the miracles were removed there would be no occasion for Jesus saying or doing anything at all. To remove the miracles is to remove the very direction in which Jesus was going, historically speaking.

A. JESUS’ MIRACLES ARE “IN CHARACTER”

When we say that Jesus’ miracles are “in character” we mean that they are in keeping with the general life and character of Christ as presented in the

Gospels. The general picture of Christ is such that miracles do not seem at all to be out of place. We would expect such a person as presented in the following to work miracles.

1. *His virgin birth* (Matthew 1:18-23; Luke 1:26-35).
2. *His boyhood wisdom* (Luke 2:40-52).
3. *His perception* (John 1:47-48; 2:24-25; 4:16-19; 6:15, 61, 70, cf. 13:1-3; 13:21-30, Jesus' knowledge of Judas' betrayal; 13:38, cf. Matthew 26:34; Mark 14:30).
4. *His predictions of future events:*
 - a. His death and the manner of it (Matthew 20:19; John 2:19-21; 12:32-33).
 - b. His betrayal (Matthew 26:20-21; Luke 22:21-22; John 13:21).
 - c. Peter's denial (Matthew 26:34; John 13:38).
 - d. The destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24; Luke 19:41-44; 21:5-33).
5. *His claims:*
 - a. To build his church in spite of death (Matthew 16:13-19).
 - b. To forgive sins (Matthew 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 19:10).
 - c. To be the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy (Luke 4:16-21; 24:25-27; 24:44-47; John 4:2526).
 - d. To be the Son of God (Matthew 16:13-20; John 5:19-26; 10:36).

- e. That his origin and nature are distinct from ours (John 8:23-24).
- f. That he was pre-existent to Abraham (John 8:58).
- g. That he will open the tombs of all men and raise the dead (John 5:28-29; 11:25-26).
- h. That we come to God only through him (John 14:6) thus eliminating all others.
- i. That his words will judge us (John 12:48).
- j. That he was sinless (John 8:29; 8:34-36; 8:46).
- k. That he would send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-18; 15:26-27; 16:7, 13).
- l. That he is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25-26).
- m. That he will come a second time to receive us to Himself (John 14:3).

And many other claims “in character” with such as these. Are the miracles “out of character” with one who made such claims as these?

- 6. *His moral glory.* The moral glory of Christ is the perfect integration of his life with the perfect ideal as set forth in his claims. No flaw can be sustained in his life. No unintentional flaw can be discovered in the picture of Jesus as we have it.
- 7. *His authority and wisdom* (Matthew 7:28-29; 13:54, where he put them to silence, 22:33; Mark 1:33; 6:2; 11:18; Luke 4:32). Question: Whence came such authority and wisdom?

8. *His death* (Mark 15:33-37, 44; John 19:30). Death by crucifixion took from one and a half to three days. Yet Jesus died in six hours! Compare this with his claim that no man could kill him; that he had power over his own life (John 10:17-18; 14:30-31).
9. *His resurrection* (as presented in the four Gospels).
10. *His ascension* (Acts 1:9-11).

The life of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, is one of supernatural events, claims, and deeds. Jesus lived in the context of the miraculous. The miracles themselves are therefore not at all out of character with the general picture of the supernatural Jesus as presented in the Gospels. To the contrary, the miracles attributed to Jesus are no more out of character than are his claims, his birth, his death, his authority and sinless life.

Wells has written that, “We shall tell what men have believed about Jesus of Nazareth, but him we shall treat as being what he appears to be, a man, just as a painter must needs paint him as a man.”⁴³ However, we feel constrained to ask at what point in the Gospels does Jesus appear to be merely a man? From his birth to his death and beyond, his literary portrait is distinctly that of a divine person, not of a mere man.

CONCLUSION

Inasmuch as the Gospel accounts are historically reliable, and inasmuch as the miracles they assigned to Christ are in keeping with the general life and character of Christ as presented in the Gospels, it is reasonable to believe that the miracles happened and stand as an authentic endorsement of the divine nature of Jesus Christ.

THE CANONICITY FACTOR

Introduction

Questions often asked are, Who decided which books would constitute the New Testament? Are there not other books that bear the title of gospel, e.g., the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Peter? Why are they not a part of the New Testament? And how do we know the 27 books traditionally received are the only ones that should constitute the New Testament? Such questions are quite legitimate and require some investigation into the subject of the canon of the New Testament, its formation, and the process by which the early church received the 27 New Testament books as invested with divine authority.

I. THE SUBJECT OF CANONICITY

A. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TERM “CANON”

From *kanon*, a semitic term meaning “reed.” The word came to mean a measuring rod or ruler (reminiscent of the man in Ezekiel’s vision, chs. 40-48, with “a measuring reed” in his hand who measured the city four-square). The term eventually took on the meaning of a norm or standard and came to be used in the sense of a “list” or “table.” Finally at the end of the 4th century the word was used of the canonization of the 27 books of the New Testament as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus

“canon” implies two important concepts regarding our present New Testament:

1. *It implies the New Testament books met such standards as the early church assumed was required of a Christian writing to have been invested with divine authority.*
2. *It carries the idea of completed revelation.*

David G. Dunbar views “canon” as,

“a closed collection of documents regarded as Holy Scripture...a historical-theological idea that views the process of divine revelation as complete...Only when the age of revelation is regarded as a part of the past does the idea of a definite canon become explicit for the people of God” (Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon) 301.

With the canonization of our 27 New Testament books it is assumed that divine revelation was at last completed and finalized. There is no need therefore for further revelations from God since his purpose for our redemption has been historically fulfilled by Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit, and recorded by Spirit-guided apostles and prophets in the New Testament.

B. THE RULE FOR CANONIZATION: AUTHORITY PRECEDES CANONICITY.

The canonization of a New Testament book (1) did not endow that book with any authority. (2)

Canonization was but the recognition by the Church that divine authority had already been invested in the book. F. F. Bruce's explanation is to the point:

“What is particularly important to notice is that the NT canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any Church Council. When at last a Church Council, the Synod of Carthage in AD 397, listed the twenty seven books of the NT, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity” (The Books and the Parchments), p. 111.

Thus in the case of the New Testament writings their authority preceded their canonization.

II. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

The authority of the glorified Christ for the early church was resident in the apostles. They were appointed by Christ to be the official channels of eye-witness testimony to the earthly ministry and resurrection of Christ and to guide the church in faith and practice (Jn. 13:20; 14:26; 16:13; Acts 1:8). When the church heard the apostles they heard Christ (Lk. 10:16; Jn. 13:20; 20:21; 1 Thess.4:15; 2 Thess.3:6, 14; 2 Pet.3:1-2). The early church was founded, formulated, and instructed upon the authoritative teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:1-42; 1 Cor. 9:1-3; 11:23, 2; 14:37; 2 Cor.3:1-9; Heb. 2:1-4). Their testimony to Christ's ministry and resurrection, confirmed by miracles, would guarantee to the church the true content of their precious faith (Mk. 16:15-20).

Further, New Testament references to the apostles' teachings as "traditions" indicate that what the apostles "received from the Lord" and "delivered" to the churches was the content of "the faith" for which the saints were to earnestly contend (1 Cor. 11:23, 2; 2 Thess. 2:15 3:6; Jude 3) and pass on to faithful men until Christ returns (2 Tim. 2:2).

The idea of a New Testament canon was probably not envisioned by the early church while the apostles were yet alive to give their eyewitness testimony to Christ's death and resurrection, and to confirm that testimony by signs following. While yet living their authority was communicated by oral and written testimony (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6, 14; Col. 4:16). It was from that oral proclamation that the New Testament documents took their rise. As the church grew rapidly to world-wide proportions so that the apostles could not be everywhere at once it became obvious that the authentic nature of their Spirit-guided testimony would be preserved in their autographs, their writings which bore their names, as "was the token in every epistle" (2 Thes. 3:17). Dunbar speaks to the matter, saying,

"Subsequently [the] written deposit became the definitive form of the apostolic tradition. As Herman Ridderbos notes,

"That such would be the case is evident from the very nature of the matter; it is simply a natural development. With the passing of time and the church spreading over the whole world, the apostles could only keep written contact with the churches. And with the death of the apostles, oral tradition diminished in certainty and became less trustworthy, so that the written

fixation of the apostles' tradition naturally acquired more significance' " (Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon,) 321.

A. FORMATIVE BEGINNINGS OF NEW TESTAMENT CANONIZATION IN THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Keep in mind that it was probably born in upon the thinking of the early church that with the passing of the apostles the need of the church for authentic Christian instruction would survive only in the writings of the apostles and prophets. Thus those commendable efforts to gather and preserve their writings were due more to the church's immediate needs for access to the total amount of divinely revealed doctrine than to any idea of contributing to a closed canon of Scripture.

1. *The early church gathered and preserved the apostles' writings.*

- a. Paul's letters gathered into a corpus (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

Peter implies that Paul's letters were "scripture" and the Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (present day Turkey), to whom Peter wrote both his epistles (1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 3:1-2), were familiar with some or all of Paul's writings. This assumes his writings were already gathered, or were being gathered, into a corpus (a collection of books written by a single author).

- b. The Ephesian church familiar with Luke's writings (1 Tim. 5:17-18). Paul reasons for the scriptural right of the church to support

elders by quoting the words of Christ from Luke's gospel that "the laborer is worthy of his hire" (Lk.10:7), calling the account "scripture." The obvious implication is that Timothy and the Ephesian church were familiar with Luke's gospel and considered it "scripture."

2. *Writings of the Apostolic Fathers, 90-160 AD.* Early Christian men who sat at the feet of the apostles, or at the feet of those who did, quote from almost every New Testament book reproducing nearly the entire New Testament. Here we have historical proof that by this time the New Testament (1) had already been written, (2) was already being recopied and gathered together by the churches, (3) was already being circulated throughout the church, (4) was accepted by the church as the word of God.
- B. 2ND & 3RD CENTURY CHURCH LISTS OF NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS RECEIVED BY THE CHURCH AS THE WORD OF GOD**

The first century church was duly warned of false teachers who would distort the truth of the gospel (e.g., 2 Pet. 3:1-2; 1 Jn. 4:1-6). Such false teaching was mentioned by Paul as a present threat (2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15; 2 Thess. 2:7). And it appears that some false teachers were writing epistles in the name of an apostle and unsettling the apostolic mind-set of some in the church (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Therefore there was a need for reliable lists of those writings which could be accepted by the church as

Spirit-inspired. However unintentional these early lists contributed to the future of the canon of the New Testament scripture.

III. THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE EARLY CHURCH RECEIVED THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS AS INSPIRED

Back of the fact that we have the 27 books of the New Testament we should ask, Why do we have these particular books? Why do we have the gospel according to Luke? Why do we have the Galatian epistle or the book of Revelation? The answer is the church kept them. Had the church not kept them as the very word of God and recopied them we simply would not have them. But why did the church keep the ones they kept? For an illustration, why did the church keep only the four gospel accounts we have when Luke tells us there were many who took in hand to write such accounts? (Lk. 1:1). On what ground did the church determine our 27 New Testament books to be the inspired word of God as distinct from other writings. The answer lies in the purpose for the supernaturalism of the New Testament as stated by the apostles themselves. The supernatural process by which Christ's spoken words were confirmed to the apostles as the word of God is the same process by which the apostles' words, both spoken and written, were confirmed to the church.

A. SUPERNATURAL CONFIRMATION OF CHRIST TO THE APOSTLES

Why in the beginning did the apostles follow Jesus? What compelled them to leave their vocations and take up an itinerant ministry of preaching with Jesus

who was opposed from the outset by the most influential wing of Judaism, the Pharisees? The testimony of the apostles themselves was that he was supernaturally authenticated to be the Messiah, the son of God, and that such miraculous confirmation authenticated Jesus' words and compelled their discipleship. Consider the following.

1. *Confirmation of Jesus by John the Baptist* (John 1:29, 35-36).

John, revered as a prophet, authenticated Jesus as "the lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." This was sufficient confirmation for some early disciples to follow Jesus as the Messiah (Jn. 1:37-45).

2. *Confirmation of Jesus by miraculous signs.*

- a. Jesus claimed that his works, the miraculous signs he performed, were a greater testimony to his deity than even that of John (John 5:36. Cf 10:25; 10:30-38).
- b. Miraculous demonstration of Jesus' divine authority.

Nicodemus recognized the divine authority of Christ's words by the signs he performed in Jerusalem (John 2:23-3:2). Such signs manifested his deity to his disciples (John 20:30- 31) and therefore his authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:1-12).

- c. Hence Peter's appeal to Christ's miracles on Pentecost (Acts 2:22).

Peter's announcement to the multitude that Christ had been approved by God by miraculous signs, "even as ye yourselves

know,” gained their attention and accredited his words with truth to preach the gospel.

Thus miracles invested Christ’s spoken words with divine authority.

B. SUPERNATURAL CONFIRMATION OF APOSTLES TO THE CHURCH

The miraculous confirmation of Christ to the apostles is now extended to the church.

1. *At Pentecost* (Acts 2:1ff).

God knew how to get the attention of the multitudes in Jerusalem on Pentecost to listen to the apostles preach Christ.

He produced “the sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind” but without the blowing up of dust clouds and the bending of tree limbs, and without the feeling of wind blowing on one’s face. The sound was located in the house where the apostles were sitting (Acts 2:2). This drew the multitude together who “were confounded” when “every man heard them speaking in his own language.” When they determined that the apostles were Galileans and were speaking in the different languages of the nations from which the multitude had come they were amazed, and with the words, “What meaneth this?” acknowledged the special significance of the occasion. The supernaturalism that clothed the moment in wonder gave authority and credibility to the apostles’ spoken words until

3000 by faith in Christ stepped forward for baptism.

2. *After Pentecost.*

Luke records that “many wonders and signs were done through the apostles” (Acts 2:43). Such supernatural demonstrations confirmed their official representation of Christ as his apostles and divinely inspired spokesmen.

The logical reason for the churches having preserved the apostles’ writings is that their signs and wonders confirmed their written word even as their spoken word (2 Thess. 2:15). It would be next to impossible to rationally explain why the churches kept the apostles’ letters as the word of God if such references to the “signs and wonders and mighty works,” which were offered as proof of apostolicity, were not in fact patiently worked in the church’s presence for confirmation (2 Cor. 12:12; 1 Cor. 9:1-3).

C. APOSTOLIC CONFIRMATION OF NEW TESTAMENT WRITING PROPHETS

Paul endorsed the New Testament ministry of prophets as spokesmen for the Lord (Eph. 3:3-5), e.g., Mark, Luke, James and Jude. Some like Judas and Silas are named (Acts 15:32). Luke’s correspondence is endorsed as “scripture” (1 Tim. 5:17-18 quoting Luke 10:7). While the author of Hebrews is not known to us, those to whom the letter was written obviously knew the author and it was kept from the beginning as the word of God.

CONCLUSION:

Only those writings that were endorsed by the early church as apostolic could become candidates for canonization. The supernatural confirmation of apostles and prophets by which the Church accepted their writings as “scripture” is back of the process leading to canonization. Thus no man, nor group of men, determined which books would constitute the New Testament. The determining factor for the canonization of the New Testament books was the supernatural force that was evident in their production, and which was but acknowledged by the Church.

Thus the rule for canonization is sustained: authority precedes canonicity.

THE VALUE OF THE CRITICAL VIEW OF THE BIBLE

Christianity is an historical religion. It is not to be viewed as merely ethical or moral, consisting simply of rules and regulations. Jesus came to provide redemption from sin and death by the means of his life, death, and resurrection. That redemption is only as real as those events. It is necessary, then, to view the New Testament as a record of the genuine historicity of those events if Christianity is to become a dynamic sufficient to change lives and to create a genuine hope for a future life.

The following quotes help explain the importance of this approach to the scriptures. Edward J. Young, the great Protestant scholar, has written:

When, however, we come to examine the question what we are to believe we discover that the doctrines which scripture commends are rooted and grounded upon that which was done in history. The Christian faith, as it is revealed in the Bible, is not a mass of abstractions divorced from history. It is not eternal truths and ideals, but rather the account of something that God did for us upon this earth in history. Hence, it becomes very important to us to

know whether what the Bible has to say about these historical matters is correct or not.

According to the Bible our salvation depends upon the death of Jesus Christ at Calvary and upon his subsequent resurrection from the dead. Now, it is quite important to know certain details about the tomb in which He was laid. Was that tomb empty upon the third day? Was there an actual historical resurrection or not? Questions such as these intrude themselves into our consideration and will not be pushed aside. Is the Bible, therefore, correct in what it has to say of these historical details or not? If the historical framework in which the great redemptive acts of God took place is a framework which is not to be trusted, how do we know that we have a true and correct account of those redemptive acts themselves?⁴⁴

In other words, history and faith cannot be divorced without destroying the real power of Christianity. For to remove faith from its historical basis is to remove Christ from his power to save from sin and to raise the dead.

F. F. Bruce, the late Rylands professor of Biblical criticism and exegesis in the University of Manchester, explains:

For the Christian gospel is not primarily a code of ethics or a metaphysical system; it is first and foremost good news, and as such it was proclaimed by its earliest preachers . . . And this good news is intimately bound up with the historical order, for it tells how for the world's redemption God entered

into history, the eternal came into time, the kingdom of heaven invaded the realm of earth, in the great events of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The first recorded words of our Lord's public preaching in Galilee are: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe the good news."⁴⁵

Notice that the good news which Christ announced was that God's own kingdom was about to be established and he asked men to believe it. He also announced that the kingdom would be established with power during the lifetime of that generation of people (Mark 9:1). Then he demonstrated that power in his own bodily resurrection. It is by faith in that historic event that men believed the good news of that kingdom and were baptized into it (Acts 8:12; Colossians 1:13-14). If we separate faith from that historical resurrection there would be no good news concerning the kingdom and Christianity would be nothing more than an idealistic sentiment. Either the New Testament records the actual truth of Christ's divine power in his miracles and resurrection, or, if it is not historic fact, then there is no hope for the human race beyond the grave.

I. THE CRITICAL VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Due to the great volume of liberal literature and an appreciable degree of success to equate this "higher" criticism with true Bible scholarship, and coupled with the fact that this generation has generally accepted the evolutionism of the nineteenth century, many are now questioning the relevancy of the scriptures to their lives. When this is taken together with another fact, that the Bible is constantly being thrust into liberal

interpretation, not only in literature, but from the lowest to the highest levels of classroom instruction, and more increasingly by the film media, it should appear essential for the Christian to know something of the real nature of this modern approach to the Bible.

A. LIBERALISM REJECTS THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS

Christians should not be naive to the fact that not all who deal with the Bible believe it to be historically reliable. Many so-called theologians speak of their belief in Christ and even express their appreciation for his ethical teachings but will make it clear that they do not believe that they are set in a truly historical framework; that the gospel miracles like the virgin birth and resurrection are not factual, but actually detract from the true picture of the historical Jesus.

1. *Liberalism Recommends a Demythologizing Of The Gospels.* Liberalism's rejection of the historical trustworthiness of the gospels is manifest in the glib recommendation, which most university students have heard, that the Gospels should be demythologized. Back of this approach to the scriptures lies the debunking efforts of men like Karl Barth, Soren Kierkegaard, and Rudolph Bultmann who taught that the facts of history are not necessary to have faith in Christ, and that the gospels, the apostles' teaching about the supernatural Christ, and the kingdom of God are all mythology.⁴⁶

This demythologization is illustrated in the modern claim that the church over a period of some thirty years exaggerated the truth about Jesus and developed a supernatural, bodily-resurrected Christ and attributed to him divine claims and miracles for which he himself was not responsible. By the time the first gospel was written (c. 60-62 AD) Mark was not supposed to know the difference between the mythical Jesus and the real Jesus. Apparently it does not bother the critic at all that there is no evidence for this claim—not a shred. This “church produced” myth is purely the result of conjecture, nothing more, which is based upon the presupposition that miracles could not have happened. The fact that there is evidence in the gospels of a totally historical and verifiable sort that miracles and the resurrection did take place is of no consequence to the critic. He still clings to his bias against miracles and sets about to debunk the gospels as historically reliable. Furthermore, the critic seems completely oblivious to the fact that the historic church was established just fifty-three days after the crucifixion on the belief that Jesus was the resurrected son of God. It should be evident that fifty-three days is hardly enough time to develop a legend around a person who had so recently been in their midst and to pass that legend off on a generation that knew better.

It is amazing that any Bible student would seriously consider the modern view based, as it is, on mere conjecture without evidence, and in

total disregard for the historical evidence available to us.

2. *Liberalism Assumes That The Gospels Are Theology And Therefore Not History.* Charles Augustus Briggs of a past generation but of the same critical persuasion, says of his view of the Bible's infallibility in relation to faith and practice, that,

They (the Scriptures) are infallible in all matters of divine revelation, in all things where men need infallible guidance from God. We do not thereby claim that a writer dwelling in Palestine had an infallible knowledge of countries he had never visited, of dates of events beyond his own experience where he had to rely upon tradition or doubtful or imperfect human records. We do not affirm that he gave an exact and infallible report of words spoken centuries before, which had never been previously recorded; or an infallible description of events that happened in distant lands and ages... We do not thereby claim that the writer of the poem of the creation knew geology and astronomy, and natural history better than the experts of modern science, but to teach us the science of God and redemption, and the art of living holy, godlike lives the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”⁴⁷

The idea that the Bible is the infallible rule of faith and practice but at the same time cannot be completely relied on or believed is an inconsistency which most persons would surely reject. But not the critic; he does not believe that the Bible has to tell the truth to be worthy of producing an infallible faith!

A conservative writer, Leon Morris, presents the critic's view of the historicity of the gospel of John in the following words:

But because he (John) is a theologian and undoubtedly presents theology in this book, questions arise: What are we supposed to make of the incidents he relates? Are these meant to be stories of things that actually occurred? Or is he simply manufacturing incidents (as the Master composed parables) that will serve his purpose of edification? Perhaps he is taking a basis of fact and erecting upon it a superstructure which, while sound theologically, is questionable when it comes to matters of historical fact.⁴⁸

What this amounts to is clearly stated by the critic himself, that the gospels are "questionable when it comes to matters of historical fact." But, as he says, that is supposed to be all right as long as the structure is "sound theologically." And if we are worried

that this kind of a theological structure is shaky since it is erected upon events that did not actually take place, the critic quickly justifies it on the basis that even “the Master composed parables.”

However, this approach is tragically wrong on at least two counts. First, consider how we know that “the Master composed parables.” Is it not because the gospel writers said that he did? Therefore, the critic has admitted that the gospels contain some events which did happen which are clearly historical in nature. So, according to the modern view it is a matter of historical truth that the Master composed parables. But if the modern view is right, that in matters of historical fact the gospels are questionable, then even here the matter of the Master composing parables is also questionable!

The critical view at best is theological double-talk. By applying its own methods to itself, it can be seen that nothing in the Bible could be known to have happened, thus abolishing any solid basis upon which to construct any kind of theology.

And second, consider the plain, unveiled statements of the gospel writers that they earnestly desire for us to receive what they wrote as matters of historical fact. Luke’s literary works (Luke and Acts) are the result of careful research and an accurate accounting of

the historic events that transpired during the very time in which he and his auditor, Theophilus, lived. He makes a plain statement that the very purpose of such precision was that he (Theophilus) might “know the certainty concerning the things” about which he had been taught (Luke 1:1-4). John records in his account the Messianic and divine claims which Jesus made for himself, he records the miraculous signs which Jesus worked, and then records Jesus’ own appeal to those works as a proof that he and God are one (John 10:37-38). Then, as if to answer the critic of today, John says that his testimony is true and that the reason for writing his gospel is that we may believe in the risen Lord (John 19:35; 20:30-31). According to the gospels, saving faith is located in the historically crucified and risen Jesus. The only thing left for the reader of the gospels to deduct is whether the historical evidence sustains the divine claims.

The whole point of the gospel testimony is that God acted through Jesus in history that men might make a certain judgment for their eternal welfare (cf John 9:39). And that action took place in a sequence of events which can be located at specific times and places.

3. *Liberalism Conjectures That The Gospel Writers Invented The Speeches Of Jesus.* It is not difficult to find liberal writings which tell us that men of antiquity composed fictional stories and speeches for their heroes in order to

bring out ethical truth. Morris explains that those who take such positions make little effort to prove them:

They assert that in antiquity this was a recognized and respected procedure. If we wanted to bring out the truth about Jesus, they might say, we would distinguish carefully between, for example, what Jesus actually said and what we deduce from his words. But in the first century a man would regard it as perfectly acceptable, for example, if he were quite convinced that Jesus thought of Himself as the Messiah, to report that Jesus had claimed this. Thus, we must expect that John would compose “sayings” of Jesus, and manufacture incidents in which Jesus’ character and claims are made plain.⁴⁹

An example of this very thing is illustrated in Hugh J. Schoenfield’s, *The Passover Plot*:

But also we cannot ignore that in the interests of theological doctrine, contemporary circumstances, and effective storytelling, nothing wrong was seen in creating views for Jesus to express, altering the sense of traditional sayings of his, supplying and coloring episodes with the help of non-Christian literature.⁵⁰

In other words, liberalism asserts that the speeches recorded by the gospel writers which are attributed to Jesus cannot really be trusted to have come from the lips of Jesus, but were inventions originating in the minds of gospel writers who might even have employed the languages and/or ideas which they found in some non Christian literature! But where is the proof? Morris answer that, “Though it is widely assumed that this procedure was rife in the ancient world little evidence can be found for it. That is to say, little evidence can be found that careful and serious writers practiced it.⁵¹

Morris goes on to quote A. W. Mosely from his *Historical Reporting In the Ancient World*, that,

Several scholars have already studied this matter and the general conclusion has been that sometimes ancient historians felt at liberty to compose speeches for their reports. Even this is now being questioned. But our survey has shown that these same historians did not feel free to invent stories of past events...Several writers (especially Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Dionysus, Lucian, Cicero, and Josephus) had set out plainly the standards by which historical reports should be described as they happened.⁵²

According to both Morris and Mosely’s research the liberal view that men of antiquity were ready to invent speeches and events which did not happen *in order to bring* out a truth is merely an assumption.

Mosely is careful to say that ancient writers did not hesitate to compose speeches when necessary and put them into the mouths of historical characters, but that they did not regard themselves as having unlimited freedom in this matter, and that they were careful to make the speeches from reliable reports of what the original speakers were likely to have said. And he further makes the very important point that, while they composed speeches in this way, they did not compose stories of events. Thus Morris concludes that, "The wide-spread modern view that men of antiquity were quite ready to distort the facts if only they could bring out the truth, is not supported by the statements of the men themselves. It is simply assumed."⁵³ In other words, when speeches *were* composed by ancient reputable writers and historians there was historical and factual foundations for them.

Morris makes an interesting observation on both ancient and modern writers as it relates to this matter of inventing speeches and events without any historical basis:

But only the second-rate did this (for that matter the second-rate in modern times are not exempt from guilt in this matter; but we do not therefore argue that this is standard practice).⁵⁴

To take some examples of second-rate writers from antiquity who invented speeches and events without historical basis and then to affirm that this was the way men wrote in the first century is not an accurate

application of the material. The evidence showing us the established historical procedure makes it clear that such was not the way men normally wrote in the first century, says Morris.

The modern critical view has at its base a disrespect for the Scriptures and manifests by its glib approach to them an obvious prejudice against believing. No other literary production has been so unfairly treated, especially in the face of so much established historical evidence.

It must be remembered that the writers of the New Testament when recording the claims and deeds of Jesus asked us to believe that they were actually true; not theologically true, but historically true. Their productions are written in the plain, easy-to-recognize style of the historian, the space-time dimension. They have the sane and sober appearance of historical documents. If upon investigation we find their productions are not true as they affirmed, then let us denounce them as either lies or naive deceptions. But to build a theology upon inventions and then to ask men to believe that this is the way God communicates to us his eternal truth is nonsense.

B. LIBERALISM CLAIMS THE GOSPEL MIRACLES MEAN SOMETHING ELSE

Of what possible value could such literature possess if it claims to record the truth of God's intervention into history, if it did not actually happen? Liberalism says that New Testament literature, though untrue historically, nevertheless has

theological value; that back of the literary invention is theology. That this is accepted by many is seen in the references to it made in encyclopedic articles which are relied on to record facts. For an illustration, *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA* records,

It is now widely agreed that a sign as John portrays it is neither a rent in the natural order nor an affront to man's higher intelligence, but a story symbol of extraordinary penetration, comprehensiveness, and imaginative genius. The marriage feast at Cana (John 2:1-11) may serve as illustration: the water is Judaism, the mother is the faithful community in Israel, and the wine is the new life in Christ.⁵⁵

Of course, we raise the question, Who “is now widely agreed” with this sort of interpretation? Those who hold the modern view, of course. But to state without qualification that “it is now widely agreed,” as if this were the general consensus, is untrue.

Another question must be raised, How do we know that John’s account of the wedding feast miracle of changing water to wine is a “story-symbol?” You cannot get that idea from reading John’s account. And further, how do we know that the interpretation given by the critic is the correct interpretation? And if it is, how shall he prove it to us?

If one will read the gospel account of Jesus changing water to wine, he will find no indication that the writer was telling a story which was to be symbolically interpreted. Rather, he will see that the writer asked us to believe that the event actually happened and that was the reason why the disciples believed on him and that is the reason why we should also believe on him (John 20:30-31). Even later in the gospel (4:46-48) the same miracle is once again mentioned as an historical fact sufficient to cause a noble man from Capernaum, whose son was sick, to go to Cana to seek out Jesus that he might heal his son. There is no warrant for reducing the account to a mere "story-symbol." Such a treatment of the text is a contradiction of the writer's claim that he recorded what he said (John 19:35), and is also a contradiction of the writer's stated purpose for recording the event (John 20:30-31).

The writer, John, claimed to be an eyewitness of this event and insists that it actually happened in space and time just as he wrote it (19:35; 20:30-31). If it can be determined that this event was not historically true, then John must be convicted of lying. But the critic will not jeopardize his theology by admitting to a lie; he prefers to refer to the language as "extraordinary penetration" and "imaginative genius."

In his Daily Study Bible, Professor William Barclay illustrates this modern view of rejecting the gospel writer's statements as historical fact and is telling us

that they really mean something else. Commenting on Matthew's account of the virgin birth, he says,

The Virgin Birth is a doctrine which presents us with many difficulties; and it is a doctrine which our Church does not compel us to accept in the literal and physical sense. This is one of the doctrines on which the Church says that we have full liberty to come to our own belief and our own conclusion. At the moment we are concerned only to find out what this means to us.⁵⁶

In addition to brushing aside the inspired account of the virgin birth as though it does not mean what it says, he proceeds to ask, "What then does it mean to say that in the birth of Jesus the Holy Spirit of God is specially operative?" He then explains that, "We must interpret it in the light of the *Jewish* idea of the Holy Spirit."⁵⁷ In other words, Matthew's account of the virgin birth is not the word of the Holy Spirit, but his own peculiar Jewish idea.

But there are at least three things to be reckoned with between the Gospel writer's account and Professor Barclay's commentary. First, to read the account is to get the very definite impression that Matthew wants us to believe that what he is saying is exactly what happened. This is sufficiently clear in his introduction of the subject by the words, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found

with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). And if that is not sufficient to convince us that Matthew wants us to understand how Jesus got here he also records the explanation which the angel made to Joseph that, "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). And, finally, Matthew explains that this Holy Spirit impregnation and consequent virgin birth is the fulfillment of the prophecy which was made by the Lord when Isaiah said, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, And they shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). This is how the apostle, directed by the Holy Spirit to say so, explained how Jesus is what his prophetic name implies, "God with us."

Second, the virgin birth presents no problem whatsoever to those who regard the Scriptures as historically reliable. If the virgin birth was an historic reality and Matthew wanted to tell us about it, could he have said it any clearer than he did? How can we determine what Matthew really intended to say if he did not mean what he said?

Third, the church is not the authority in Christianity. It has no prerogative to release itself or anyone else from believing what the Holy Spirit has said is true (John 14:26; 16:13; 12:48). The Scriptures are the authority, not the church.

Professor Barclay continues in his commentary on John's gospel to say that what the writer said is not just exactly true. His modernistic view of the resurrection of Lazarus once again asks us to

believe that John's account means something other than what it appears to say. He begins by saying that the account in the other three gospels of people being raised from the dead can be explained by believing that the person raised was in a coma or a trance. From that point he proceeds to say that in the other three gospels there is no mention of the raising of Lazarus, and had Lazarus actually been raised, the other gospel writers would surely have mentioned it. Then, after relating some four alternative explanations to the historical fact of the raising of Lazarus, he offers this:

... we are in the end compelled to say that we do not know what happened at Bethany, but undoubtedly something tremendous did happen . . . But we do know for certain the truth which this story teaches ...It does not really matter whether or not Jesus literally raised a corpse to life in AD 30, but it matters immensely that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life for every man who is dead in sin and dead to God in AD 1955.⁵⁸

However, that is making much less of the story than John did. We wonder just how Jesus could possibly be meaningful to us as the resurrection and the life if he cannot in fact raise the dead to life?

Personally, I am quite fond of Professor Barclay, if not his theology. His schedule was not too busy to include me and my traveling companion, Dr. Edward Myers of Harding University, in a

prearranged meeting at his home in Glasgow in the early part of April, 1970. I had written earlier from India requesting an interview to discuss critical questions of the fourth gospel and kept our appointment on our return trip. It was there that I asked him to explain why he believed the account of the empty tomb in John 20 was of an historical nature but that the account of Lazarus in chapter 11 was not. His immediate answer was, "It is not recorded in Mark." That was the occasion of an interesting observation inasmuch as the professor makes much of John's historical account of the grave cloths in the tomb which is not recorded in Mark either! Do we not have a right to expect, at least, consistency in our theology!

It is conclusive that the critical view of the Gospels contradicts the very language of the Gospel writers themselves. It should be evident that the gospels are either historically true or they are not. And if not, they offer us nothing for a sure foundation for a present theology or a future hope of eternal life.

II. WHAT IS THE VALUE OF THE LIBERAL VIEW?

If the liberal view is at all valuable to us, surely those values can be objectively stated. Is this view valuable historically? Do we now have more information of the historical facts of Christianity's origin and spread? Of the people of those days or of the response of those people to the gospel? Let the historian, A. M. Sherwin-White answer,

It is astonishing that while Graeco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the twentieth century study of the gospel narratives, starting from no less promising material, has taken so gloomy a turn in the development of form-criticism that the more advanced exponents of it apparently maintain, so far as an amateur can understand the matter, that the historical Christ is unknowable and the history of his mission cannot be written. This seems very curious.⁵⁹

It is indeed curious that historians of Greece and Rome grow continually more and more confident of the culture and conditions and life-style of those ancient nations through the materials they have, while the “higher” criticism, working with materials like the Gospels which are just as reliable and informative, grow more and more uncertain of the historical events that surround Jesus. They have only cluttered the picture. They have taken the garment of Christianity and have cut it in shreds, leaving us mere patches which do not fit. Of what value are these rags? J. V. Langmead Casserley sums up the modern view very well.

From within the biblical tradition we must insist and confidently expect that the more profoundly and validly we understand and interpret the Bible, the greater the religious depth with which it will challenge and speak to us. It is precisely here that modern biblical scholarship has proved itself so insipid and unstimulating. We are confronted with the paradox of a way of studying the word of God

out of which no word of God ever seems to come, with an imposing modern knowledge of the Bible which seems quite incapable of saying anything biblical or thinking biblically.⁶⁰

Is the value of the modern view of the gospels objective? Can we know what God through Jesus said and taught and required of us? And can we by the modern approach know that having done what God has said know that we are saved? And can we know it so certainly that we can share it with others and know when they have either accepted or rejected it?

The answer is an unqualified, No. Nothing seems to be certain from this modernistic viewpoint, except that the Bible does not mean what it says. This is due to the very approach which the modernist takes to both the historical framework in which the Gospel accounts are set and the doctrine which takes its rise from it: that which seems to be history is not history at all, the events described did not really happen, the claims were not really claimed! The modern approach is totally subjective. It has enthroned religious subjectivism, having abandoned totally the authority of the scriptures.

Our conclusion is that the modern critical view of Scripture is neither valid nor valuable. It is prejudice which is being perpetrated against Christianity in the sophisticated garb of scholarship and the respectability of theology. In the final analysis it is not theology at all, as per the actual meaning of that word. Rather it is disbelief, pure and simple. It is great swelling words of vanity. Nor is it worthy of being called scholarship when the facts are continually brushed aside for philosophical

presuppositions, when it refuses to consider and draw conclusions from bonafide evidence. The critical view is in fact not so much a view of the Bible as it is a manifestation of that kind of opposition to the Bible against which the Holy Spirit warned us to beware: “Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit” (Colossians 2:8). And again he says, “O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee, turning away from the profane babblings and oppositions of the knowledge which is falsely so called; which some professing have erred concerning the faith” (1 Timothy 6:20, 21).

ENDNOTES

1. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, p. 113.
2. Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 555.
3. *Ibid*, p. 555.
4. British Museum Syriac MS. Mr. F.F. Bruce observes that the date of the MSS is seventh century; the letter itself is some centuries earlier. The writer's historical information about Athens and Samos is very inaccurate, he says. (*Jesus And Christian Origins Outside The New Testament*, pp. 30-31.)
5. Epistles, 10:96.
6. Epistles, 10:96.
7. Life of Claudius, 25:4.
8. Durant, *Op. Cit.*, p. 555.
9. Josephus' Antiquities, 18.3.3.
10. Bruce, *Op. Cit.*, p. 119.
11. Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*, New York, Schribner's and Sons, 1977, 200.
12. H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History*, Vol. I, p. 420.
13. Durant, *Op. Cit.*, p. 557.
14. *Ibid*.
15. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, p. 82.
16. Brian M. Fagan, *The Rape Of The Nile*.

17. Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology And The Old Testament*, p. 10.
18. J.A. Thompson, *The Bible And Archaeology*, viii. Thompson also cautions that the Bible student must not make exaggerated claims for archaeology in an appeal to it to “prove” the Bible. It is not possible to authenticate all that is in the Bible by archaeology; so many of the Bible’s statements lie beyond the sphere of archaeological investigation (pp. 3-4).
19. (cf. Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, xviii. 2; Tacitus, *Annals*, xii. 43; Dio 19 Cassius, *History*, lx. ii; Eusebius, *Chronicle*, *Year Of Abraham* 2065; Orosius, *History*, vii. 6.17).
20. Sir William Ramsay, *The Bearing Of Recent Discovery On The Trustworthiness Of The New Testament*, Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of the New Testament*; F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*.
21. Bruce, *Op. Cit.* p. 18, 19.
22. One can satisfy himself in regard to this matter by reading Sir William Ramsay’s, *Paul The Traveler And The Roman Citizen*.
23. The title, “most excellent,” is recorded three times in Acts (23:26; 24:2-3; 26:25). In each case the title was used of officials in the network of Imperial Rome.
24. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, pp. 16, 17.
25. *Ibid.* *Op. Cit.* p. 18, 19.
26. Arnold Toynbee, *The Crucible Of Christianity*, p. 14.
27. David Flusser, *The Crucible Of Christianity*, p. 216.

28. W. Ward Gasque, *Sir William Ramsay - Archaeologist And New Testament Scholar*, p. 28.
29. Ramsay, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 7, 8.
30. Ramsey, Sir William, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery*, p. 22.
31. Jewish guards would not have placed Caesar's seal upon the tomb nor would it have been at all necessary for the Sanhedrin to have bribed their own guards. In addition, only a Roman guard would have feared that the incident at the tomb would have "come to the governor's ears." (Matt. 28:11-15). Dereliction of duty on the part of his own Roman guard would have infuriated Pilate. Thus the large sum of bribery money and the assurance from the Sanhedrin to rid the soldiers of care if the matter came up to Pilate. All seems conclusive, then, that this was a Roman guard stationed at the tomb.
32. Paul offered to the Corinthians as an evidence of the resurrection that the Lord "appeared to above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some are fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6). Those five hundred brethren, said Paul, were at that time yet available to testify that they had seen the Lord after his resurrection. However, they have long since fallen asleep and are not now available to testify to the resurrection outside the Corinthian letter. We today accept the fact of that large-scale eyewitness experience on the ground of Paul's testimony. We are dependent on the apostles' testimony for evidence of Christ's resurrection.

It should also be explained that the gospel accounts of Mark and Luke, while not eyewitness accounts, record the eyewitness testimony of the apostles. As Luke explains, the

information in his account was received from “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,” that is, the apostles. Later, Paul quotes Luke 10:7 referring to Luke’s account as Scripture (1 Timothy 5:18). This is one of the proofs that Luke wrote his histories (Luke and Acts) by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Also, both Paul and Peter give Mark their apostolic endorsement (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13).

33. See 1 Corinthians 15:8 for post-resurrection appearances of the Lord to the apostles.

34. It is obvious from this context that the Lord intended his statement, “ye shall be my witnesses,” to apply to his apostles, not to the church. No Christian today can bear witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Ours is to relate the apostles’ testimony just as we have received it from their writings.

35. Durant, *Op. Cit.*, p. 555.

36. For an example of this particular view see Will Durant’s *Caesar And Christ*, pp. 580, 581.

37. This argument is a restatement of the material in F.F. Bruce’s book, *The New Testament Documents*, pp. 76-79.

38. In the original language “It is finished” is one word, *TETELESTAI*. It meant that a debt had been paid in full.

39. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, p. 62.

40. H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History*, Vol. I, p. 420.

41. It is acknowledged that liberal theologians will affirm they believe in Jesus. But their faith is not in the virgin born, miracle performing, bodily raised, divine son of God of the

New Testament. Therefore, their faith is not a product of the New Testament.

42. Will Durant, *Op. Cit.*, p. 562-563. Even here a bias against such miracles as the resurrection is detected, but the matter of Jesus' miracles is so much a part of the historical fibre of the Gospels that total rejection is unthinkable to Durant.

43. H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History*, Vol. I, p. 420.

44. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 100,101.

45. F.F Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, pp. 7,8.

46. Rudolph Bultmann's *Theology Of The New Testament*, Vol. II, will illustrate this.

47. *The Bible, The Church, And The Reason*, pp. 93, 94.

48. Leon Morris, *Studies In The Fourth Gospel*, p. 65.

49. *Ibid. Op. Cit.* p. 68.

50. Hugh J. Schoenfield, *The Passover Plot*, pp. 220-221.

51. Morris, *Op. Cit.*, p. 68.

52. Morris, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69.

53. Morris, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69.

54. Morris, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69.

55. Vol. XVI, p. 160, 1967 Edition.

56. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. I, p. 10.

57. *Ibid*, p. 11.

58. Barclay, *The Gospel Of John*, Vol. II, p. 118-120.

59. *Roman Society And Roman Law In The New Testament*, Oxford, 1963, p. 187.

60. *Toward A Theology Of History*, London, 1965, p. 116.

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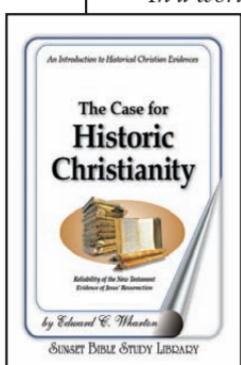
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In this volume Wharton establishes the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament as the foundation upon which the claims for the resurrection and deity of Jesus are sustained. Included is a brief examination of liberal criticism's view of Christ and the New Testament.

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