

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART I

The newly published translation of an inscription found on a stone in the days just before Jesus was born, opens up the question of just what type of Messiah the Jews were expecting and just who Jesus was? So let's get looking.

RETHINKING THE MESSIAH ?

“Go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.” (Daniel 12:9)

So here's the deal. There's not a low profile debate going on in Israel these days, and it involves on some level, whether or not Jesus, (Yeshua in Hebrew), - might indeed be the promised Messiah. It revolves around the work of an Israeli professor at Hebrew University, - one Israel Knohl, - and an eight year old archaeological discovery and his new translation of the inscription on that ancient artifact. First of all let's establish just what we're talking about. What was found was a tablet or stone with ink inscriptions from the period just before Christ. For years it was very difficult to decipher some of the writing but now Professor Knohl believes he has successfully done so; - and the resulting translation could transform what we know about what Jews of that time believed about the nature of their faith. As Knohl puts it, - (and he's not exactly buying into the Christian interpretation), - “The text changes the way we look at the historical Jesus, and provides a missing link connecting Judaism and Christianity”.¹

OK, we'll get technical – but just for a moment. Much of the debate between Judaism and Christianity, (originating as a Jewish sect believing that many prophetic Scriptures had been fulfilled by Yeshua), - centers on just what sort of Messiah was to be expected. Modern Judaism claims almost exclusively now, that what the Scripture called for was a triumphant Messiah who would rule an ascendant Israel. Now much of this controversy centers around the interpretation of portions of Isaiah 53. Let's look at Isaiah 53 verses 3 & 5. **“He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.”** The now unanimous position of traditional Judaism is that the passage refers to the Jewish nation as a whole. The Christian one is that it is referencing the person of the Messiah come first as the suffering servant, and later to return as King Messiah. To the Christian, Christ's suffering and death as the payment for sin, is clearly visible in the phrase **“But He was wounded for our transgressions”**.

The rabbinic interpretation however was not always the case. Even the Babylonian Talmud written as late as AD 1000, held to the Messianic interpretation of the passage.² It was ultimately a famous French Jew named Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, who put a definitive modern spin on the passage in the 11th century. From thence forward Jewish authorities have considered the passage to have in mind the entire nation of Israel.³ The Israeli paper Haaretz summarized it thus: “The premise that the Messiah died and was resurrected is considered the foundation of the Christian faith, one which differentiates it from Judaism”. But getting back to the tablet now, it is characterized as an apocalyptic vision given by the angel Gabriel. According to Professor Knohl, - here's what it says. The beginning of the inscription describes an End Times or eschatological war. Jerusalem is besieged and “residents are expelled from the city in groups”. Then God sends forth “my servant David”, to in turn send the Messiah Son of Joseph to give a sign heralding “the coming redemption”. That's when it gets critically interesting.⁴

Beginning in line 80 it reads “L’ shloshet yamin hayeh”, which is translated “in three days live”. And its in the imperative case. What the entire line reads then is “In three days live, I Gabriel, command you”. So to who is this being said. The next line answers. To the “Sar hasarin” or “prince of princes”.⁵

Knohl boldly goes on to suggest a link between the resurrection claims of Christians and ‘Gabriel’s Revelation’. He finds the link in the fact that the notion of a Messiah that dies and rises in three days is an established part of Jewish thought by the time that Christ walked the earth. In his mind, it was not just an addition of later Christian thinkers. According to Knohl, Jesus saw “His mission” was to be put to death by the Romans “so his blood will be the sign for redemption to come...This is the conscious view of Jesus himself”.⁶ Yehezkel Kaufman, yet another professor from Hebrew University confirms that thought, seeing the “motif” of the resurrection after three days as something “adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story”.^{7 8}

Christian authors like Hal Lindsey have been pointing that out all along. As Lindsey pointed out in a recent broadcast, many early Jewish thinkers were actually expecting 2 MessiahS; - The first, the Son of Joseph, a suffering Messiah, - and later, a Son of David, - or Messiah-King. Luke 4:16-20 records a very enlightening event, when Jesus goes into a synagogue and reads from the scroll of Isaiah. What’s interesting is that Jesus is reading from Isaiah 61 beginning with verse 1, but then stopping in the middle of a sentence, - right where today we find a comma, in the middle of verse 2.. Christ is pointing out the fact that the passage refers to the two phases of His coming. **“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD”** Luke 4:20-21 then records; **“Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’”**. So not only was He claiming to be the very Messiah, but He also did something else unheard of; - He stopped quoting a Scripture in mid-passage. It was a signal as to what was going on. The very next words were clear reference to His 2nd Coming as Judge of the World. The rest of Isaiah 61:2 reads, **“And the day of vengeance of our God”**.

The upshot of all of this seems to be that there is growing evidence that the Christian view, that the Messiah would come as a ‘suffering servant’ was at least present in some 1st century Jewish thought. And that at least some Jewish scholars recognized that there had to be a double manifestation of the Messiah to fulfill the Scriptures. So perhaps, this translation of this fairly recent archaeological find may open that discussion. Despite reasoned argument, Scripture itself tells us that the Jews retain a blind spot when it comes to understanding that Jesus is the Christ, the fulfillment of the Law. **“But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”** (2Cor 3:14-16) But there is good news in even this. That blindness will run its course: It will have its end. Paul explains it in Romans 11:25-26, when he writes, **“that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved”**.

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART II

Headlines suggest that a “Messianic Revival” may be in the making – in Israel! Congregations of Christian-Jews are growing and thriving in the Land of David. One leader of the movement talks of a new openness in Israeli society to consider the claims of Yeshua. There exist probably about 120 congregations with perhaps about 15,000 members; - a yet small number, but gathering in strength and influence.⁹ Still the majority of Jews dismiss the claims of what they see as a Gentile god. It was not always so. Remember, the Church began in Jerusalem, and was originally composed of almost exclusively Jewish believers. So what happened?

PROPHETIC CLAIMS

Prophecy pointed to him, this coming Messiah. The hope of Israel! The light to the nations! By the first century the anticipation among some segments of the population was palpable. The Jews were an unusually religious people. So much of their national life was centered around their sacred writings and customs. Yet despite the fact that the scriptures were so much a part of daily life, the expectation of just who the Messiah would be, and what he would bring, varied among the various groups that made up the Jewish nation. Often this was just the natural response of groups reacting to their own wishes and desires. To a large degree the role that the Messiah would play had become politicized in the popular mind. The yoke of Roman rule laid heavy on the populace. The hopeful eyes of an oppressed nation were focused on the prophecies regarding the ultimate victorious nature of the messianic office, rather than the predicted sufferings found in the same Scriptures. If their hope was misplaced it is understandable to a degree how this could be so.

The prerogatives of the Jewish leadership had been progressively usurped, culminating in the removal of the power over life-and-death from the Jewish authorities in AD 14. To the minds of many, a Messiah who did not confront and ultimately vanquish the Romans was no Messiah at all. This feeling would have been more pronounced in the circles of power, which no doubt, felt the sting of that loss even more acutely. The politicizing of messianic expectations undoubtedly contributed to the ultimate rejection of Jesus’ ministry. An example of a contrasting result can be seen just a hundred years later, when the Jewish authority put their stamp of approval on the ‘Messiahship’ of Bar Kochba. Rabi Akiva signaled that approval by declaring Kochba, ‘Messiah King’, to tragic results. Thousands of Jews were killed when the Romans took the stronghold of Betar. The political nature of what was expected from the ‘Promised One’, certainly was a major factor in the reaction to Christ by the Jewish nation.¹⁰

But it is not like the prophetic input was not clear. The claims of Daniel 9 were very specific. Micah told of his birth in Bethlehem. His miracles and ministry were written of in detail. Zechariah talked of his entry into Jerusalem on a colt. And once he had been crucified, it could have been confirmed that the circumstances of his suffering, death and burial were accurately predicted in Isaiah 52 & 53 and Psalm 22. To the many who would see, this was the expected Messiah. There are hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the coming and the identity of the Anointed One. Jesus did clearly match the identity of the Promised One in every detail. Christ was the unique fulfillment of those prophecies. What is possibly most amazing to realize is that so many of those Old Testament prophets probably did not even realize themselves the full significance of those prophecies. 1 Peter 1:10-12 speaks to their searching for the **“time and circumstances”** to which their revelations had led them. So let’s look at some of these prophecies.

We'll be looking of course at just those concerning the coming of the Messiah. These were all written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, yet in their precision and detail they can unmistakably refer only to the life of Christ. Some have suggested that Jesus, being a man with a 'messiah complex', arranged his life to have fulfilled these prophecies in order to prove he was the promised Savior. While it is true that he may have been able to have arranged some of his actions to conform to the predictions of scripture, so many more were entirely out of his control. Grant Jeffrey, writing in *Jesus, The Great Debate* conservatively figured the probability of anyone fulfilling just seventeen of the prophecies at one chance in 480 billion x 1 billion x 1 trillion. This was not some easily arranged feat. The specificity of the predictions makes that impossible.¹¹

Let's look at some examples of what was written hundreds of years before Christ, found in the books of the prophets as well as the psalms. These are no general pronouncements, but can be applied only very specifically. They describe in detail the birth, life and manner of death of the predicted Messiah. The Bible does set quite the high standard for itself. Micah 5:2 says, "**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.**" Written approximately 700 BC this passage points not only to Jesus' physical birth in Bethlehem, but also his descent from the line of David, also born in that village. But look at just the circumstances that were necessary to make Jesus' birth in that location possible. In the second chapter of Luke we have the story of the Jesus' birth. In it we have the description of the specific census that made necessary the return of his parents to that location. We now have historical confirmation that return to an ancestral home was indeed required in census taking of that time. Without it Jesus would have failed the very first requirement of the ancient prophecies.

In Isaiah 40:3 we have the prediction of a "**...voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.**" Matthew chapter 3, points to the ministry of John the Baptist as the fulfillment of this passage. John specifically talked about "**...one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**" (Mat. 3:11) Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a colt was predicted centuries prior to the event. Zechariah describes the Messiah's entry into the Holy City. "**Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout Daughter of Jerusalem! See your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**" (Zech. 9:9) Fulfillment of this prophecy is found in Luke 19:28-40.

There are more. Psalm 41:9 speaks of the betrayal of "**...my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread**", referring of course to the actions of Judas. Zechariah 11:12-13 has more to say on the subject of Judas. "**I told them, 'If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not keep it.' So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, 'Throw it to the potter'- the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter.**" To any who are familiar with the story of Christ's death, this is a chilling fulfillment of the account found in the 26th and 27th chapters of Matthew. Thirty pieces of silver was the very price given to Judas by the chief priests. Matthew 27:5-6 describes how after he had handed Jesus over, Judas threw the money into the temple. The priests used that money "**...to buy the potters field**", in which to bury foreigners.

Probably the most important prophetic passage of the entire Old Testament is found in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. So many of the details of Christ's passage are found in that one chapter. Verse 7 talks about his silence before his accusers, and in verse 12 we see how he was condemned with criminals. "He was pierced for our transgressions". (v5) And in 53: 9, Isaiah tells us how he would be buried with the rich. In fact his body was taken by Joseph of Arimathea, a well to do member of the Council who buried him in his own tomb. Psalm 22 is another source of fulfilled prophecy. In it the psalmist foretells remarkable details of the crucifixion, confirmed in the 19th chapter of John. Starting in verse 15 and running through verse 18, it reads, **"...my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."** The story of the crucifixion is well known, and it was predicted hundreds of years before that grisly mode of death had even been invented.^{12 13}

The messianic prophecies I have cited are by no means exhaustive. Various lists can be found which mention many more. My point here was to show that details of the life and death of Jesus were predicted hundreds of years before his birth. The existence and importance of the Messianic Prophecies was known and appreciated by the Jewish scholars of Christ's day. In fact certain writings in the Book of Daniel point to a very specific time for the coming of the Savior. In order to understand the profound significance of the prophetic writings it is important to appreciate the expectations of the Jewish teachers living at that time. Those expectations pointed among other things to his appearance during the first few decades of the 1st century, the very time of Jesus ministry on earth. Jesus was expected, not least of which for the reason of the signal prophecy found in Daniel 9, which we will see, prophesied the coming of the "Anointed One" down to the exact day!

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART III

What did the Jews know and when did they know it? Jesus was not just a blip on the tides of history. He was not just some man that came on the scene with no past and no prophetic perspective. There was a history here and a heritage that meant that the Christ; - the Messiah, - should have been expected, - and recognized. Let's look at the evidence.

WHAT DID THEY KNOW & WHEN DID THEY KNOW IT ?

Let's try and put this all in perspective. What can we really know? We know for instance that the testimony of his contemporaries confirms so much that we know about Jesus. A passage in the Babylonian Talmud, a Jewish book of commentary on the Scriptures, contains references to "Yeshu, the Nazarene". Writings dated to the 2nd century confirm that he was hanged "on the eve of the Sabbath", at the time of Passover. The passage also mentions Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Jesus in his own tomb, and refers to the fact that he was accused of sorcery. This latter reference confirms the reaction of the Pharisees to his casting out of a demon that was described in Matthew 12. Other Talmudic passages speak about Jesus' disciples, identifying at least Thaddeus and Matthew and also speak about the powers of one Jacob who was said to have healed "in the name of Yeshu". This is all evidence that his contemporaries never questioned the fact that Jesus was a performer of miracles. Instead opponents tried to attack him on the grounds that his power was derived from the devil. The public nature of his ministry meant that he could not be so easily dismissed.¹⁴

Other historical confirmation comes from the pen of Flavius Josephus, a priest, Pharisee and generally trusted historian writing in the 1st century AD. Some of Josephus' writings include references to James the brother of Jesus and John the Baptist, whom he described as "a good man". He is also known to have authored a passage specifically about Jesus, found in his work called *'Antiquities of the Jews'*. Though long controversial, experts now agree that the majority of the passage comes from the pen of the historian. In the uncontested version he refers to Jesus as "...a wise man ...For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly." He goes on to talk about his death at the hands of Pilate and the fact that his followers believed him risen from the dead. Additional confirmation exists. Roman historians Tacitus and Lucian both confirmed the execution of Christ under Pilate, Lucian adding that he was considered a lawgiver and worshipped as God. And the work of Caius Suetonius suggests that Christians were known to be able to perform healings and miracles.^{15 16}

A most interesting confirmation of Matthew 27:45 is found in several ancient sources. In that passage Matthew writes, "**From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.**" Luke 23:44-45 states it this way, "It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining." Pagan historian Phlegon of Lydia, writing early in the first century refers to a "great and extraordinary" solar eclipse, dating it according to the Olympic year. He writes, "At the sixth hour the day was turned into dark night, so that the stars in heaven were seen, and there was an earthquake in Bithynia which overthrew many houses in the city of Nice." Tertullian found evidence of this in the Roman archives of his day. The Greek historian Thallus also wrote of that supernatural event, a most fearful darkness accompanied by earthquakes. Second century teacher Julius Africanus points out that this was no eclipse of the sun. An eclipse is a predictable event. Working backwards from that time he points out that an eclipse is impossible when there is a full moon. This was evidence then that this unusual darkness not only occurred,

but also was not due to an eclipse of the sun but was rather an unnatural event.¹⁷ The Scripture too, prophesied that unnatural darkness. In Amos 8:9 written long before the event, we read: **“In that day’, declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight’.”**¹⁸

In fact, in examining the Rabbinical writings, we find that the common beliefs included not only the fact that the Messiah was expected to appear at that time but that he was to be no ordinary man. They believed that he had existed since before the creation. The commentaries on Isaiah and Micah give evidence that it was commonly held that the existence of the Messiah was eternal. The text of Micah 5:2, describes a Messiah **“who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.”** These writings also anticipated his cruel and violent death, the re-establishment of Israel, and redemptive nature of his ministry. Commentaries reveal that they believed that the Messiah would forgive sins because of his position as the “Righteous One”.

Their beliefs were based on ancient Scriptural prophecy and the commentaries on those prophecies. Both the Midrash and the Talmud itself reveal that the Messiah was expected to be the full Son of God. Confirmation of this is found in Psalms 2:7. In the King James version we read, **“Thou art my Son; this day I have begotten thee”**. Predictions of the Messiah were so prevalent that it was the non-Jewish Magi, possibly originating from a class of Zoroastrian priests, who relied on the prophecy of Micah 5:2 to inform the unschooled Herod that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They too expected his imminent arrival to redeem Israel. Much of this speculation was based on the very precise prediction found in Daniel 9:24. The Rabbis of that era were aware that no matter how one interpreted the 70 weeks of Daniel, the arrival of the Savior should occur sometime in the first decades of the first century. This belief was confirmed by the teachings of the Essene community that gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls. They firmly believed that Daniel’s prophecy would be fulfilled during their lifetimes.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD all that changed. The later commentaries on the Scripture reflect the lost-ness and confusion of a people whose earlier hopes now seemed misplaced. Written after that time, the Babylonian Talmud acknowledged the prophecies of Daniel had predicted the coming of the Messiah, but that the time had already passed. Moses Maimonides, working twelve centuries later, recognized this too. Almost cryptically he refers to the censoring of that teaching by the Jewish religious leaders. He tells us they “...have barred the calculation of the days of Messiah’s coming so that the untutored populace will not be led astray.” Grant Jeffrey, writing again in *Jesus the Great Debate*, cites some of the censored Jewish material. The writings confirm the basic account of Christ’s trial and death. Significantly the passage also acknowledges him as a legitimate king of Israel in the line of David and most notably that he was referred to in the prophecies of Daniel. There is little doubt that the Messiah was expected at just the time Jesus came on the scene. Events surrounding an obscure passage in Genesis accentuated the anticipation. Genesis 49:10 reads, **“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the rulers staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes.”** It must be understood that ‘Shiloh’, by general Rabbinical concurrence refers to the Messiah. So what this is saying is that the power to rule, especially the power over life and death, would be secure in Judah until the coming of the Messiah. Throughout all the centuries of Jewish captivity this power had never been removed. Interestingly however the Romans had recently taken this authority. This happened on the occasion of the dethroning of Archelus, the king of the Jews in AD 14. This would have been the same year that Jesus

came up to the temple for his Bar Mitzvah at the age of twelve. In his commentary Rabbi Rachmon describes the consternation of the assembly when this power was removed. They were mourning the fact that "...the scepter has departed from Judah and the Messiah has not come."¹⁹ So many of the expectations of the Jews regarding the imminent arrival of their Savior were based on the remarkable Book of Daniel. We need to look at that prophecy that led to such high expectations.^{20 21}

The prophecy beginning in Daniel 9:25 is as follows. **"Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild the city of Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler will come and destroy the city and the sanctuary."**

When Daniel wrote this, Jerusalem had been destroyed. At that time there was no reason to believe that it would ever be rebuilt again. Secondly, Daniel predicted not only the rebuilding, but also the fact that this second Temple would again be destroyed. Of course as already noted, this occurred in AD 70 at the hands of the Romans. So in just the broadest sense we see that the prophecy was fulfilled. Coincidence? Perhaps, if the prediction it made was just a general statement. But as we read in Daniel chapter 9, we see it contains a claim of the exact timing of its fulfillment. The Jewish community of course understood the meaning and significance of its reference to the seven 'weeks' plus sixty-two 'weeks'. And for them it was this specific phrase that led to the widely held expectation of messianic fulfillment around the time of Christ.

It is the Hebrew word 'shabuim', which is translated into the English word 'weeks', in this passage. By common custom we know that this word was often used to refer to a 'week of years', or seven years in the Hebrew language. This is the context in which it is used here. Now there are to be sixty-nine weeks of years before the appearance of the Messiah. This works out to 483 years **"From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One"** comes. Taking this one step farther we multiply the 483 years by 360days. This was the length of a year in the Jewish calendar. This comes out to 173,880 days from the issuing of the decree. Now the critical question becomes, when did the decree go forth?

By turning to the 2nd chapter of Nehemiah we begin to get an answer to that question. That passage describes a command by King Aratxerxes Longimanus to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. This happened in the 20th year of his reign on the first day of the month of the Jewish month of Nisan. The date of Atrxerxes ascension to the throne is even an easier matter. It can be found in the Encyclopedia Britannica. Counting twenty years from that date we find that day of the decree is fixed as the 1st Day of Nisan in the year 445 BC. Working through astronomical calculations at the end of the 19th century, Sir Robert Anderson confirmed that this date fell on the 14th of March of that year. It is from that date that we begin counting forward the 173,880 days. What we arrive at is April 6th AD 32.

So what's so significant about that day? That's the first Palm Sunday; - the day that Jesus rode in to Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey to the affirmation of the praising crowds of Jerusalem. He was coming into His kingdom.

Confirming evidence can be found in the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luke states that Jesus was about 30 years of age when baptized by John. This was the beginning of his ministry and Luke specifically identifies it as the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Scholars concur that this puts Christ's baptism in the autumn of 28 AD. That would put the final Passover of Jesus' three and a half-year ministry on April 10th of AD 32. The Sunday before that was April 6th. The British Royal Observatory confirmed that date. So traveling this other route, through the history of the gospels, we arrive at the same date that Daniel did in his writings hundreds of years before. More than some vague otherworldly pronouncement, the prophecy in Daniel 9 turns out to be a precisely calculated mathematical prediction, accurate to the very day that Christ presented himself as King and Savior.^{22 23 24} The precision and accuracy of that prophecy given to Daniel is nothing less than breathtaking. By any objective standard, by a preponderance of the evidence, it can only be seen as a remarkably accurate, historically verifiable, confirmation of unambiguous truth.

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART IV

So the prophets revealed with perfect accuracy and extreme detail many of the particulars of Christ's first coming. Daniel revealed the day and Luke's gospel confirmed it. Today we'll look at how the currents of history came together to work God's perfect will.

THE EVIDENCE OF PROPHECY AND SCRIPTURE

Yet everything in history was leading up to this moment; the fulfillment. Steve Brown of Key Life Ministries points out the historical pattern. It can be found in the cultural mores of every people. The sacrificial system is found among primitive people, anywhere on the globe, at some point in their history. We see it in the ancient pagan cultures that developed around the Mediterranean. We find it in the New World cultures of the Aztecs and the Mayans. We see it in Africa and Asia. It is all tied up in the religious notions of all peoples, everywhere. It is as if God prepared the very thought forms of every nation to understand this. It is a universal notion. Without blood there is no getting right with 'the gods', with God. The God of Abraham revealed the sacrificial system through the Passover. It was the blood of the lamb without blemish that protected the Israelites from the plagues in Egypt. So it was that all peoples could appreciate the notion of sacrifice. It was around 1800 BC, that God, chose a group of ignorant desert wanderers, the Hebrews, and began to reveal to them the most highly developed system of "ethical monotheism the world has ever known". There is no explanation for this in purely naturalistic terms. Anthropology is at a loss. The Hebrews, (and Hebrew means wanderer), were not a very sophisticated people in any other sense. Yet the supposed civilized nations around them, definitely their marked superiors in cultural and military matters, were woefully backward when it came to the development of a system of ethics. They were worshiping multiple gods and still sacrificing their children, or passing them through the fire, as the Jews were developing a scriptural and cultural heritage that pointed them to the One God of the universe.

For centuries, as the world wallowed in the practices of paganism, the Jewish nation awaited a Messiah, who, Scripture promised, would provide them with a spiritual deliverance. This emphasis on the spiritual rather than the material was in marked contrast to the notions of the dominant cultures of the age. Notice the distinction too between the sacred significance with which the Israelites held their religious practices and the pagan practices of the nations around them. In the ancient world paganism was rife with the association of rampant sensuality, with the supposedly sacred. (Actually this is still present today in some forms of Hinduism, neo-paganism, Satanism and the New Age, - to name a few.) There were many examples of religiously sanctioned, wine driven orgies. The existence of the temple-prostitute-priestess was common practice across the pagan world. However, the development of the Jewish nation was different not just in degree but also in kind.

Now along about 700 BC the Greco-Roman civilization began to develop. Through Alexander, and later the Romans, it came to dominate the known world. Its' influence dominated the fields of art, architecture, writing and philosophy. With the conquering of the Holy Land by Rome, the notions of what became known as Greek philosophy was imported to that region too. Through military might and that ubiquitous philosophy that accompanied it, the world was united. And with the subjugation of Israel, the Romans had brought forth the intersection of those two themes of history. So it seems not by accident did the Messiah arrive at this time.²⁵

This then was Jesus' world. It was a world of a captive Judaism. Any real understanding of the person of Jesus must necessarily start from the fact that he was a Jew. Further, we know that he was a teacher in the rabbinical tradition. As such he used the technique, common to that profession, of question and answer to drive home many of his most controversial points. There are many examples of this in the Gospels. In Matthew 22 for example, he discusses whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome. (This was a hot and sensitive subject given the political realities of that day.) In Mark 10:17-22 he talks about what is necessary to inherit eternal life. The other technique we see so often applied is the use of the parable. These are found throughout the Evangelists' accounts. These two can best be understood in the context of their Jewish-ness. Many of them refer specifically to the religious history of the Jewish nation, especially in regards to their repeated rejection of the prophets. This theme is one justification for the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan.

Besides the office of Rabbi, Jesus also fulfilled the role and duties of a prophet. Christ spoke as one with authority. He claimed to speak for God. It is recorded in the Gospels that many times he began a saying with the words, "Truly I say to you." After reading the words of Isaiah 61:1-2 referring to the promised Messiah, he claimed the anointing of the authority of the Spirit of the Lord by saying, "**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**" (Luke 4:21) With that claimed authority, during the Sermon on the Mount he called for an intensification of the commandments of the Law. "**You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement.**" (Matt. 5:21-22) He continues in verses 27 and 28, "**You have heard it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**" In Matthew 5:17 he makes an audacious claim. "**Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.**" Just three verses later he tells his listeners that in order to be saved, their righteousness must surpass "**...that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.**"²⁶

But his audacity does not stop there. Significantly, Jesus goes on to claim much more. As documented in all of the Gospels, Christ goes on to assert not only Messiahship, but actual equality with God by being the beloved Son of God. Before we look at exactly what Jesus said, we must understand the momentousness of that claim to an observant, believing Jew of the first century. The pride of the Jewish nation is their unique relationship with and understanding of the One True God. His claim of equality with God spoke directly to the most central belief of Judaism. It spoke to the unity of God. The Scripture known as the Shema is the most important expression of that unity. Found in Deuteronomy 6:4 it states, "**Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One.**" This was the scripture ingrained in every Jewish believer since childhood. So even indirect claims that he shared in the essence of the godhead must have been greeted with some confusion among his followers and outright consternation on the part of the religious elite. Christ too, accepted the truth of the Shema. In Mark 12:29 we hear him respond to a question on which is the most important commandment. "**The most important one,**" answered Jesus, "**is 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.'**" Now in the Hebrew the word used for 'One' in this case is echad. The word echad is used to describe a plural one-ness. It is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the union of husband and wife as constituting one flesh. In Mark 12:30 Jesus finishes his statement on the greatest commandment. "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**" Geisler and Bocchino in their work, *Unshakeable Foundations*, render that passage from

Deuteronomy with more of the sense that it would have had in the original language. It would read, “Yaweh, our God, Yaweh is a plurality within an indivisible unity.” The authors point out how, “The law of God is based upon the nature of God.” They go on to elaborate. The law is not a collection of arbitrary commands but is rather, “primarily concerned with relational harmony...the plurality of God and the unity of God are both the standard and primary example of this truth.” When Jesus uses this language from Deuteronomy to answer the question, he is not so subtly pointing to that plurality. When taken in context with his other statements on his identity, he is arguing for the plurality that would include himself as a member of the godhead. The Gospel of John records for us another of those occasions when Jesus makes such a claim. Jesus is speaking with the Pharisees regarding his identity. They had asked him to answer directly if he is the Messiah. After chiding them for their unbelief and again pointing to his miracles as proof of his office, he speaks of those that believe in him. **“My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my hand. I and the Father are one.”** Here again is that claim of One-ness in essence, while at the same time maintaining the distinctness of his personality. (John 10:29-30)^{27 28}

Now to those familiar with the promises of Scripture, these reminders may have been just enough to see the validity in Christ’s claim to be the Messiah. Inherent in the Scriptures is the notion that the Anointed One would somehow be an expression of the Divine Personality. Isaiah 7:14 tells us that he would be called Immanuel, meaning ‘God with us’. And just a couple of chapters later in Isaiah 9:6 we are told that his titles will include, **“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, [and] Prince of Peace.”** So any claim that he is the Messiah is tantamount to a claim to be God Himself. These assertions were of monumental significance. Yet as we have seen, it was a question on the minds of the Pharisees, with a predisposition to disbelieve. It was also on the mind of Jesus’ followers. Even with the incredible miracles they were seeing, drawing the inference that a man was somehow divine was not an easy step. These were Jews steeped in the Shema. **“Hear O Israel...the Lord is One.”** And this was a claim of such uniqueness and importance that even John the Baptist was led to question what he believed to be true. John, who had identified the approaching Christ as the ‘Lamb of God’, who had baptized Jesus, to his own consternation, and had testified that he had seen, **“the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him”**, even he had questions. (John 1:29-34) Alone with his thoughts in the seclusion of his prison cell, this same John sent his disciples to inquire of Jesus, **“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”** Jesus’ answer is interesting in that he laid out the nature of the evidence to be considered when considering the validity of his claim to be the Anointed One. **“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”** Jesus was pointing to the evidence all had seen. John was undoubtedly familiar with the prophecies of Isaiah and Daniel. Jesus was saying, ‘open your eyes and see what I am doing’. This was his evidence for being the Messiah.

Still, some will argue that Christ was just a *good man*, a *great teacher*; - that He never claimed to be the Messiah or the Son of God. This was just made up by his followers at a later date as a means of asserting power. This is just wrong-headed and against the evidence, - as we shall see next time.

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART V

The identity of Jesus is the central question of all time. On it, hinges the salvation of all men and the fate of the world. But reason tells us He cannot just be a good teacher. Here's the claim in Christ's own words.

“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” (John 3:18)

“BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM ?”

Despite what the skeptics may claim, Jesus was not ambiguous about just who He claimed to be. Let's get right to the point and begin with his most direct assertions of divinity. Going back to Exodus God gives His own name as “I AM WHO I AM.” (It is from the Hebrew pronunciation of this name that we get the word Yaweh, the Hebrew term for Lord.) This is the holy name of God. Isaiah 43:11 identifies that name with the Savior. **“I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior.”** Now Jesus referred to himself in those very words on several occasions. In John 8:58 he is facing a crowd of unbelieving Jews. **“I tell you the truth,”** Jesus answered, **“before Abraham was born I am.”** The crowd understood what he was saying. The use of that term angered them so much that they wanted to stone him. Later John tells us of Christ's use of the term when he is betrayed and the mob comes to seize him. **“I am he,”** he declares and the crowd is knocked to the ground by just the power inherent in that statement when expressed by the Son of God. Apparent in the meaning of the term, “I Am,” is the notion of the eternal. That is the intended sense of the term. Again in John we find Christ's personal confirmation of his claim. **“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had before the world began.”** He is declaring not only his glory, but also the eternal nature of that glory.

Other assertions of his divinity were laid out in a series of statements in which he assumed the prerogatives of God as laid out in the ancient Scriptures. As far back as Genesis 2:7 it was declared that God was the giver of life. There it was written that it was the **“breath of the Lord”**, that made man a living being. We find in John 5:21 Jesus' clear assertion of this power when he states, **“...even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.”** Later he states that **“eternal life”** comes from him, and positively affirms **“I am the resurrection and the life.”** (John 10:28 & 11:25) He also held that he could exercise the godly prerogative to forgive sins. He told a paralyzed man, **“Son, your sins are forgiven.”** And to answer the objections of the rabbis and establish that prerogative he continued, **“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...”** He said to the paralytic, **“I tell you, get up, take up your mat and go home.”** Even in his assertions of divine authority he was not unaware of the difficulty of belief and provided evidence of his authority.

Other examples abound. In Matthew he spoke of his coming judgement of the nations referred to by the prophet Joel. John 5:27 justifies that claim stating that he was given that **“authority to judge because he was the Son of Man.”** Elsewhere in John's account we find that Jesus said, **“I am the good shepherd”**, and **“I am the light of the world”**, (John 10:11 & 8:12), both referring back to Old Testament passages. The claims of some critics that Jesus was just a great moral teacher but did not see himself as the Son of God are sheer nonsense. As we have seen above, the Gospels were written during the lifetimes of many witnesses to the events described in them. There was no chance for mythmaking. Jesus clearly felt he was, and claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God. No ‘great moral teacher’ could make such a claim if it were not so. Such a lie

would automatically disqualify him as a 'great moral teacher'. Jesus said, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** (John 14:6) He is saying, all access to the Father must come through him. The aggregate significance of all these claims taken together is weighty indeed. He was the forgiver of sins, the giver of life, the judge of all the nations, the light of the world, existent for all eternity. If he were wrong about any of these things he would be either hopelessly deluded or a deliberate liar. In either case not the mettle of some great moral teacher. But he was no liar. He followed those convictions to death.

Looking at the evidence it can be confidently said that Jesus truly believed himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God. But what of those who knew him the best? Peter, when asked by Jesus, **"Who do you say I am?"** replied, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** (Matthew 16:15-16) No more straightforward answer could be forthcoming. Thomas, seeing him for the first time after his Resurrection called him **"My Lord and my God."** (John 20:28) These were no mere words. Both of these apostles paid with their lives for holding to those beliefs. John's testimony can be found throughout the Gospel he authored. Paul converted from one who's overriding aim was the persecution of members of the new Christian sect to one who would eventually give his life for the faith. The author of Hebrews called Jesus the **"...radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."** (Hebrews 1:3) The Apostles who had lived with him side by side during his lifetime all worshipped him as God, eventually giving their lives for the cause. In Matthew 14:22-32, we have the story of Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm. At the conclusion of that account we are told of Jesus' companions, **"Then those who were in the boat worshipped him saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'."**

But it was not just the apostles that bore witness to his divinity. Many of those who saw him preach or felt his healing touch also paid him homage. It would have been anathema for any Jew steeped in the Shema to have worshipped any but the One True God. Yet many saw Jesus as a member of that godhead and did give him worship. (Significant too, is the fact that unlike his disciples, Jesus accepted it.) It began very early on. The second chapter of Matthew records the successful search of the Magi to find the Christ and worship him. Later we are told a leper came and knelt before him to beg for healing. (Matthew 8:2) A newly healed blind man worshipped him also. (John 9:38) There are many other examples in the Gospel accounts. Perhaps the most compelling, however, is recorded by Matthew. (Matthew 28:16-17) Speaking of the eleven remaining disciples, those same who had lived the better part of three years with him, witnessing all he had done, Matthew writes: **"When they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted"** That last little note brings an extra ring of truth to the passage. Of course we can understand the human sense of uncertainty that must have crept in. This after all was the Jesus that they had taken their meals with, at whose side they had traveled the Judean countryside. Yet in the end we know that all these overcame their doubts and gave the most perfect form of worship, the work of their hands and the sacrifice of their lives.²⁹

The pattern is beginning to become clear. The ancient Scriptures pointed to the appearance of the Messiah somewhere during the first part of the 1st century. Jesus specifically fit the identity of that Messiah as laid out in the Old Testament. He pointedly claimed that office and was accepted as such by those who knew him best. They saw his very life as a testimony of his holiness. Peter described him as a "lamb without blemish", and quoting Isaiah 53:9 wrote of him, **"He committed no sin, and no deceit was in his mouth."** (1 Peter 1:19 &

2:22) John wrote of his purity in his first epistle. (1John 3:3) Jesus himself challenged his enemies on this very point. **“Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?”** (John 8:46) His question was met only with silence. Even at the trial that eventually condemned him only false and contradictory witnesses could be found. This sinless-ness, this perfected moral character is one of the keystones to the validity of his claims. This is not the pattern of saintly men throughout the ages. The Buddha, Mohamed, Ghandi, the great church saints and others were all overwhelmingly aware of their moral failings once they contemplated the perfection of the All-Mighty. Yet neither Jesus nor his enemies could ever find fault in his actions. A fitting apostrophe was put on this fact by a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council named Nicodemus. Speaking for more than just himself he told Jesus, **“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”** (John 3:2)^{30 31}

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART VI

We have reviewed the witness of fulfilled prophecy and history and the claims of His followers and of Christ Himself. But what of the many miracles attributed to this man from Galilee? Are these but legendary? Or could they be real evidence of the Divine?

MIRACULOUS EVIDENCE

This brings us to another compelling form of evidence for the divinity of Christ, his miracles. As noted by the testimony of Nicodemus, and the attitude of the authorities, the fact that Jesus could perform healings and signs was never challenged by his enemies. Having just witnessed the healing of two blind men and the casting out of a demon from a mute, they were amazed and challenged instead the source of his power.

“Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel....It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.” (Matthew 9:28-33) Searching the ancient records, it was not unknown for rabbis to be able to perform exorcisms, or even successfully pray for rain. But it was the nature of Christ’s miracles that set him apart. As we have seen when he walked on the water and calmed the raging storm, nature itself responded to his commands. The very order of his miracles was greater than any performed by those other Rabbis. Jesus healed the blind and the deaf, caused the lame to walk, multiplied loaves and fish, and raised the dead. Furthermore he did it all on his own authority.³² But miracles such as these did not go unpredicted. In fact this is just further evidence of Jesus’ Messianic identity. In Isaiah 35:5-6 I it is written, **“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”**

These miracles were not questioned at the time. In fact they were among the most important tools used by the Apostles in the early spread of Christianity. In his address to the crowds on the first Pentecost, Peter relied on the very fact that the miracles of Jesus were well known and accepted to make his case. **“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.”** (Act 2:22) *“As you yourselves know.”* The miracles of the recently crucified Christ could serve as a tool only because they were so widely known and accepted by the populace. Jesus’ miracles were not denied by his enemies because they could not be. They were performed in public before believers and non-believers alike. And amazingly they demonstrated a wide mastery over the forces of nature. Jesus not only healed the sick and the lame, but also calmed the storm, fed the multitudes, and raised the dead. His was an overwhelming demonstration of divine power. That is what it was intended to be. Yet those miracles were always performed with an end in mind. Jesus repeatedly refused the demands of the crowds to perform a sign as a form of entertainment or to satisfy their curiosity. In fact such demands for a sign always seemed to come on the heels of some great miracle just performed. In the 12th chapter of Matthew we are told of an exorcism Jesus performed on a man, restoring at the same time his ability to see and to speak. Hearing of this the Pharisees did not question the miracle but instead attacked him for tapping into the power of Beelzebub to cast out demons. Later they demanded a miraculous sign. But Jesus refused to play their game. Instead he rebuked them for the disingenuous of their request. Like the atheist who has determined that no amount of evidence could ever convince him of the possibility of the supernatural, the Pharisees were impervious to any weight of proof. To admit that Jesus was the Messiah would have challenged their position and undermined their authority.

Miracles were the signs that Christ used to validate his case, demonstrate God's love, and give glory to the Father. They were always an expression of spiritual truth, never to gain the approval of the crowd or any personal advantage.³³

Now there are critics out there who will claim that the miracles of Jesus were an invention of the Gospel authors. They begin with a totally mechanistic view of nature. Their argument goes something like this; *Miracles are impossible because they violate the laws of nature. The Gospels contain accounts of miracles. Therefore we can't trust the Gospels in this matter. If we can't trust the Gospels then we have no reasonable evidence that the miracles ever occurred.* Of course this is circular reasoning and against the evidence we have for the reliability of the Gospels.³⁴ Again we know two facts about the existence of miracles. The teachings of Christ, that relied so much upon the reality of the miracles to validate it's message, were being broadcast to the populace less than two months after his execution on the day of Pentecost. Eyewitnesses to the contrary would surely have fatally wounded any effort to spread the new belief. Instead at the very first teaching by the Apostle Peter, three thousand people came to believe in Jesus. This would not have been possible in Jerusalem if the miracles of Christ were not well known. Secondly, Jesus' closest disciples, the witnesses to so many of the wonders, ultimately gave their lives as testimony to the truth of those teachings. They fully believed, and they were in a position to know.

It all comes down to the supremacy of God. If an all-powerful, creator God exists, then miracles become imminently possible. We must follow where the evidence takes us. It has brought us a long way thus far. We have been led to the existence of God by the very real presence of the moral law, and by the very fact of our existence. The unbelievably complex design of our universe and all of its component parts confirm this for us. We have been led to the God of the Bible by the inexorable logic of the existence of evil and sin and the need for atonement that that entails. The demonstrated reliability of that book and the fulfillment of its prophecies have confirmed this. The evidence has taken us to the threshold of the divine. An all-powerful God, existing outside of time and space; one responsible for the creation of the universe with all its natural laws would have no problem with the miraculous. These natural laws are not the problem. To quote Paul Little in *Know Why You Believe*, "Natural laws do not cause anything in the sense that God causes and creates. These are merely descriptions of what we observe to be happening." The problem then lies in the assumptions one brings to the question. If science brings the assumption of naturalism of course it will find no evidence for the miraculous. It would be wrong because it would be passing judgement on a subject outside of its bailiwick. This is true first of all, because natural laws are descriptive and therefore cannot forbid phenomena from occurring. Secondly, because the proposition is that God caused the 'miracle', while operating outside of the natural law, proof that an occurrence violated natural law would just establish that an event was indeed miraculous. It all comes down to the existence of God. If God 'is', by definition the supernatural is possible.³⁵

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART VII

But while the world may be ready at some level to accept the notion of signs and wonders, - miraculous cures etc, - if you will, - the notion of man that conquers the grave, - that rises up from the dead, - is a little too fantastic to believe. Or is it? Is this the final confirming and convincing evidence of God's power? We'll look at the evidence.

HE GOT UP!

What we know to be true for his many public miracles, would certainly hold true for the greatest sign of all, his resurrection from the dead. *If God exists: Miracles are possible!* And the Resurrection is the touchstone of the Christian faith. If Christ did not rise from the dead, Christianity is a meaningless exercise in good morals. The validity of Jesus' very message hinges on the truthfulness of that claim. Paul expanded on this in a letter to the Corinthian church. **“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith....And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”**

(1Corinthians 15: 14 & 17) The disciples were raising a very high hurdle for themselves. They were claiming not just some spiritual appearance that would have been so difficult to disprove, but they were saying that Jesus was raised in the flesh. If they were lying their opponents need only produce the body to shatter their claims. But they were convinced of the truth of the matter. They had to testify to that truth.

Now there are many critics out there that say that the resurrection is merely a legend, or a lie perpetrated by Christ's early followers. This contention defies all logic. To what end would such a lie be put forth? Persecution and communal sharing characterized the early church. Its leaders sought neither fortune nor power. We know already the eventual price they paid for that belief. This was no lie. Neither could it have been a legend. This was the teaching of the Apostles just weeks after Christ's death. This is recorded by Luke's account of Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost, found in the Book of Acts. We have already demonstrated Luke's record for historical accuracy. It is further confirmed by Paul in 1Corinthians 15:3-8. Scholars believe this to be a restatement of a very early 'creed' Paul received when he became a follower of Christ. There is overwhelming agreement that this creed dates certainly within 20 years of the crucifixion. Many scholars date it even earlier, to within a couple of years of Jesus' death. This creed passes on the very early held beliefs that Christ died to pay for our sins and rose from the dead again. That passage reads: **“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers, most of whom are still living though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as one abnormally born.”** This passage, documenting so early the beliefs of the Church, contains several significant aspects that need to be looked at.³⁶

Remember again that Paul was writing at a time when many of the witnesses to the events were still alive. By mentioning specific names and by claiming that Jesus had appeared to as many as 500 people at one time, he was inviting inquiry. Paul was so confident of his message that he wanted his readers to check out the evidence. Secondly, and this is very important to understand, when Jesus appeared to Paul, he was an enemy of the Christian faith. In fact, he was consumed by a passion to stamp out what he saw as a dangerous heresy, if need be by killing off those who professed that heretical creed. It was Christ's appearance that changed the

direction of his life. Here was an example of a hostile witness converted by the evidence. Finally, in that passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul is alluding to the fact that Jesus appeared to people in various locals on several different occasions. There are at least nine post-mortem appearances described in the Gospels. This does not include his appearance to Paul on the Damascus road described in Acts. These appearances ranged from the individual, as in the case of Mary Magdalene, (John 20:10 –18), to much larger groups as in the 24th chapter of Luke. This was no will-of-the-wisp, no shadowy manifestation of desire or imagination. On these occasions he spoke with them; they ate with him and touched him.

Neither were these mere hallucinations. The appearances happened to different people at different locations and times. These were unconnected events, and not just to people expecting their occurrence. To the contrary, the disciples testify that they little grasped the meaning of Jesus' words when he prophesied his death and resurrection. In fact this was a truth that had been predicted, both in the ancient Scriptures and on several occasions by Jesus himself. In Psalm 16:9-10 we read, **“my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.”** Matthew records Jesus' prediction of his death and raising in chapter 16 and elsewhere. And Luke 9:22, puts it perhaps most clearly. He quotes Jesus as saying of himself, **“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”** But his followers neither accepted nor understood these predictions when Jesus revealed them. Peter told him at the time, **“Never, Lord!...This shall never happen to you!”** (Matthew 16:22) It was not till after they had seen the risen Christ that Jesus' words had meaning for them.

And Jesus showed himself to both skeptics like Thomas, and outright enemies such as Paul. No, these events show none of the marks of hallucinations. Immediately following Christ's death, the disciples were a confused, cowering lot. They had run away during the trial and execution, and in the case of Peter had even denied association with the Lord. They were living in fear and despair. But in every case, the appearance of Christ became the catalyst for a radical transformation. Peter, went from on the one hand, denying his Lord to a servant girl, to on the other hand, preaching before thousands in just a matter of weeks. Paul went from avowed enemy participating in the mob killing of the martyr Stephen, to a tireless worker for the faith. The doubter Thomas was murdered many years later while preaching the Gospel in India. In every recorded case, those who reported seeing him after his death, became the committed witnesses of that truth.

Finally, if the Jewish authorities had produced the body, the early death of Christianity would have been assured. But they could not. The tomb was empty. There are a number of reasons we know this to be true. First of all, if the tomb was not empty, the apostles would never have been able to make that claim right in the city of Jerusalem, where the recent events had taken place. It would have been too easy to check. This fact is confirmed both in the writings of Josephus, and in the Toledoth Jeshu, a compilation of 5th century Jewish writings. Neither of these sources could be considered sympathetic to the cause of the Gospel.³⁷ Then we have Matthew's account of the events that followed the death of Jesus. In chapter 28 he describes the generation of a rumor that the disciples had stolen the body. In his account he tells how the assembled chief priests and elders bribed the guards to say that Jesus' followers had come during the night and taken the body while every member of the dozen or so Roman guard was asleep. Of course critics can say that this was just Matthew's attempt to cover up the fact that the disciples did indeed steal the body. But that assertion will not

stand up to scrutiny for several reasons. First of all, how could the guards possibly have known what was going on while they were sleeping? Then there is the character and mindset of the apostles to consider. This was a cowardly bunch. Now, after the public execution of their leader, with the Jewish leadership and the power of Rome against them, they were supposed to have taken on the Roman guard, facing a certain and horrible death if they were caught, in order to perpetuate a hoax. And if they did generate enough courage, they would have had to find a way to roll back a stone weighing as much as two tons, moving it uphill just to get at the grave. They would have had to accomplish all this while not disturbing the sleeping guard. The final absurdity is that all of them in on this deception would live out their lives in support of this lie, not recanting even in the face of torture and death.³⁸

To the early Christians, as unbelievable as it may have seemed at the beginning, the Resurrection was a fact. They were sure because they had seen the evidence. They realized the temporary nature of this life and the eternal nature of the next. The disciples had come to know Jesus as no one else. They had seen a man that was at once meek and humble and yet filled with courage and the righteousness of God. This was a man that would on one occasion, gather the little children to himself and on another take on the religious authorities, or chase the moneychangers from the Temple. This was a man who felt compassion for the multitudes, and at home in the wilderness. They had been witnesses to his many signs and wonders, his healings, his mastery over nature. They had seen Lazarus raised from the dead. When at first they had seen him arrested and killed they were crushed and defeated. But once they had seen him, and touched him, and eaten with him after his death, they were transformed. So when the disciples died martyrs deaths they were testifying to the truth of the Gospel they had learned at Jesus' feet. They were affirming the reality of the miracles and the healings. When Peter died on his cross, or when Stephen or Paul were murdered, they were acknowledging the truth they had come to know.

So who is Jesus? He was a man of impeccable character. No one could find fault with him. Even the Jewish authorities that eventually put him to death, did so strictly on the basis of selfish interests, trying to preserve their authority. As they of anyone should have seen, he was the fulfillment of prophecy. The ancient Scriptures predicted the circumstances of his life, and the exact timing of his appearance. He acknowledged this and proclaimed often that he indeed was the Messiah. He performed many signs and public miracles as evidence of this. He healed as a sign of God's love. In his ministry he called for repentance and promised forgiveness of sins for all that would acknowledge him and make him Lord of their lives. He taught that he was **“the way, the truth, and the life.”** And he promised eternal life to all that would come to him. He predicted his own death and rising from that death. And then to prove once and for all that he was indeed the Truth, he fulfilled that final prophecy and rose up from the grave

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- ¹ Ofri Ilani, Dead Sea tablet suggests Jewish resurrection imagery pre-dates Jesus, Haaretz, July 6, 2008
 - ² Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98
 - ³ Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki), Jewish Virtual Library
 - ⁴ Joel C Rosenberg, Missiles & The Messiah Making News, July 8, 2008
 - ⁵ Ancient Tablet Ignites Debate on Messiah and Resurrection, New York Times, July 6, 2008
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