

The Apostolic Drama Begins

A*FTER* THE RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION OF Jesus, on the day of Pentecost in the year of 30 C.E., the apostles, along with the relatives and followers of Jesus, witnessed a tremendous growth of those who followed what they called at that time “The Way” (Acts 2:47).¹ Indeed, Luke records that shortly after this miraculous event had occurred, the number of believers had reached a staggering 5000 (Acts 4:4).

This incredible growth was more than the Jewish authorities, who had thought that they exterminated the Messianic cult of Jesus with Jesus’ crucifixion, could stand. As a result, it didn’t take long before the Apostles Peter and John were apprehended by these Jewish religious authorities and thrown into prison. But they could not be held for very long because of the great support that the apostles now had with the majority of the people.

Acts 5:14 goes on to say that “Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, *great numbers* of both men and women.” Again, the High Priests “took action” (Acts 5:17) to do something about this threatening trend. The apostles were rounded up and again put into public prison. But

¹ Luke carefully calls the followers of Jesus, those who were adhering to his teachings, as those who followed “The Way,” echoing back to numerous Old Testament references, such as 2 Sam 22:31: “This God — his *way* is perfect;” Prov 6:23: “For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the *way* of life;” Isa 30:21: “This is the *way*, walk ye in it.” Jesus is quoted as saying in John 14:6 “I am the *way*, and the truth, and the life.” Notice further that Luke’s distinction is marked by the fact that the followers of Jesus were not called “Christians” until Acts 11:26, by outsiders in Antioch, where it appears to be a slur word, a derogatory term for the followers of Jesus that was all but flattering. F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 213, notes: “If we call the early disciples ‘Christians’, we may use this as a term of convenience, but such use at this stage is an anachronism. The name ‘Christian’ did not come into use until the Gentile mission began, several years later; it was Greek-speaking inhabitants of Syrian Antioch who coined it. The disciples themselves called their movement ‘The Way’; to their fellow-Jews they were known as Nazarenes...” For a good discussion concerning the Nazarene phenomenon, see Ray Pritz, et al., *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period until its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 1995).

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this plan was once again thwarted, we are told, because an angel supernaturally released the apostles. And what did the apostles do? They boldly went right back and taught in the temple in utter defiance to the Jewish religious authorities. There is a sense here that the apostles felt that they were untouchable and had the backing of divine protection on their side.

Again, the apostles were apprehended by the Jewish authorities and thrown into prison. However, this time the famous Pharisee Gamaliel² warned the Sanhedrin with his ever so memorable wise admonition that if this phenomenon was a matter of men, then it will amount to nothing, but if it is truly of God, no one can fight it (Acts 5:33-9). In other words, don't tempt the hand of fate until you are sure that this is not a real movement from God. Why would he say such a thing? One almost senses that even Gamaliel was beginning to question his own conscience concerning the miraculous events, and he feared that the Jewish authorities might be witnessing something that was far more than they were willing to acknowledge.³

The Council, respecting Gamaliel's advice, reluctantly acquiesced for the time being, and allowed the apostles once again to go free. And no sooner were Peter and John released than they were right back at the temple to "proclaim Jesus as the Messiah" (Acts 5:42). Additionally, the *Book of Acts* tells us that at this time

the word of God continued to be spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

Now, even some within the priesthood of the temple were beginning to follow the teaching of the apostles. If the Sanhedrin were willing to give Gamaliel's advice a little time in deference to his authority, time had now run out. It appears that the advice of Gamaliel must now be abandoned because unless this unprecedented growth were to be checked, then the entire religious establishment of the Jews would be threatened.

Isn't it surprising that so many within the Jewish religious community

²Gamaliel the Elder (Rabban Gamliel ha-Zaken) was the son of Shimon and grandson of Hillel the Elder, who was a descendant of King David (*JT Taan*. 4:2; cf. *Kes*. 62, BR 33.3, *Tos.* to *Sanh.* 5). He is said to have taught and judged in the *Lishkas ha-Gazis* (Chamber of Hewn Stones) in the temple (*Mish. Peah* 2:6). He was president of the Sanhedrin at this time, and thus his opinions carried the weight of the Pharisaic School that counter-balanced that of the priesthood (the School of Shammai). The Mishnah relates that "when Rabban Gamliel ha-Zaken died, the glory of the Torah ceased and purity and separation [*perishus*] perished" (*Mish. Sota* 9:15, 49). Luke tells us that the Apostle Paul had studied under him (Acts 22:3).

³Robert Eisenman, *James, the Brother of Jesus* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997), 607, notes: "In Acts 5:38, Gamaliel is someone who urges a more deliberate policy in dealing with 'these men', while in *Recognitions* 1.65, he is a secret supporter."

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would accept Jesus as the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the light of his ignominious crucifixion:⁴ This must point to the fact that many of these people, including the priesthood, were eyewitnesses to the most extraordinary event in human history – the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Either that, or they personally knew people whose united testimony convinced them of that fact.

F. F. Bruce has some insightful remarks concerning what the apostles were up against at this time:

The handicap with which the disciples embarked upon their public witness to Jesus can scarcely be exaggerated. They were bound to compromise themselves in the eyes of the Romans by proclaiming themselves the followers of a man whose execution had followed his conviction in a Roman court on a charge of sedition. And the idea of commending to their fellow-Jews as the long expected Messiah of Israel a man who had been crucified would, on all rational grounds, have been ruled out as absurd and scandalous. A crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms. Practically by definition, the Messiah of Israel was one on whom the divine favour rested in an unparalleled degree; equally by definition, a crucified man was one on whom the divine disfavor rested, for the sentence stood unambiguously in the Torah: ‘a hanged man is accursed by God’ (Deut. 21:23). To many Jews the suggestion that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah must have been intolerably blasphemous. Yet the followers of Jesus, freely acknowledging that their Master had been crucified, maintained that, by raising him from the dead, God had reversed the death-sentence passed upon him together with all that that death-sentence implied. To Jesus’ resurrection they themselves could bear first-hand witness, and Old Testament *testimonia* were available to prove that his resurrection marked him out as the promised Messiah.⁵

⁴ What an amazing testimony to the resurrection of Jesus that many in the priesthood were now becoming believers. It is interesting that Luke punctuates this section of Acts (the growth of the church) with the fact that many in the priesthood became followers of the faith just before the story of Stephen. Stephen denounced the efficacy of the temple. If the priesthood accepted the resurrection story, the very sole of Judaism was now on the line.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 211-12.

THE RESURRECTION FAITH

How DO WE EXPLAIN THE PHENOMENAL GROWTH that the early Church experienced? In order to understand what was happening, we have to put ourselves back to the time when these events occurred.

The disciples of Jesus had forsaken their prior professions and followed Jesus for some three years. But when Jesus was arrested just before Passover in the year of 30 C.E. by a blood-thirsty mob, then brought before a Roman governor, tried by Jewish authorities, then whipped, stoned, beaten, spat upon, jeered at, mocked at with a crown of thorns, and finally speared to death, the disciples “forsook him and fled” (Mark 14:50).

Jesus had been crucified on a tree and hung as the ignominious “cursed thing” (cf. Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13). He had been convicted of the crime of blasphemy; therefore, worthy of the most disgraceful punishment that was possible. Now, the story of Jesus as the predicted Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures had ended in total disgrace and humiliation. The disciples must have asked themselves, how could this be? Didn’t Jesus have the power to heal the sick, walk on water, feed thousands, calm raging storms, and raise people from the dead? Why could not Jesus muster up divine power and thwart his enemies? The disciples of Jesus had banked all of their hopes and their very lives on Jesus. Now, everything seemed to be for nothing. They must have been in a state of total shock over the events that had just transpired.

Peter, only days before all of this, said to Jesus:

‘Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.’
AND SO SAID *ALL THE DISCIPLES* (Matt 26:35).

Jesus, of course, knew that Peter not only would deny his master, but would in fact do so on three separate occasions (v. 34). It wasn’t long afterward that Peter was put to the test on the night that Jesus was arrested. Peter was spotted by a hand-maiden of the Priests who said to him:

“You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” ...[Later on] the servant girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This is one of them.” But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of

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them, for you are a Galilean.” But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about” (Mark 14:67-71).

The story would have been over at the crucifixion of Jesus, except for the fact that something out of the ordinary happened that was so profound upon the apostles and witnesses to the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, that in less than two months time, these frightened and humiliated men returned back to the public’s eye as bold champions of a newly established faith.

Jesus had returned to life, just as he said he would, after three days of being dead. How could this be possible? This not only defies the laws of nature and science, but it can only be seen as something that could never be explained by human reasoning or science. Yet, as a result of Jesus’ reappearances to the disciples and to no less than five hundred witnesses (1 Cor 15:6), many became believers.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE 50 DAYS MAKES

THE 11 DISCIPLES OF JESUS WERE NO LONGER frightened little lambs. They now had been transformed into mighty and bold lions of a new religious faith. They no longer feared the Romans. They no longer feared the Jews. They boldly went straight on with the utmost sense of mission than anyone could ever have. They were all unified with no hesitancy on any of the disciple’s part. Why?

Leon Morris observes:

It is important to realize the depths out of which faith came. The crucifixion had crushed the disciples. One may argue that the appearances engendered a contagious and growing enthusiasm. But how did it start? Apparently no follower of Jesus retained faith and optimism after the crucifixion. Only gloom and emptiness prevailed, and these elements did not produce a contagious faith. But what happened on Easter morning made the difference.⁶

It was on the day of Pentecost in 30 C.E. that the church of Jesus was born. And not long after that event, the apostles went on a world-wide campaign to preach the gospel message concerning the resurrection of

⁶ Leon Morris, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 4:151.

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Jesus and what it meant to everyone in the plan of God.

Ernest L. Martin observes:

All eleven of the original apostles were consistent in their teaching. Is it possible to believe that they were all lying? The understanding of basic human psychology suffices against our believing that eleven individual men could one after another deceptively tell a crowd they once feared that Christ was now alive from the dead. They were jeopardizing their lives before that crowd by preaching Christ's resurrection.⁷

By the end of the first century, the momentum had gained such strength by these apostolic campaigns far and wide that it resulted in the birth of a new world religion. By the second century, churches were established all over the Roman Empire. Millions became believers in the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. It would certainly defy all rationale to believe that such a phenomenon could take hold so quickly, if not for the fact that the original message of the apostles had shown everyone of their absolute conviction concerning this fact — especially as expressed in their writings.

Peter lived nearly four decades after the resurrection of Jesus, as well as many of the other apostles. Their continued conviction all the rest of their lives resulted in one thing: people were at least satisfied that the apostles were absolutely convinced about the resurrection of Jesus.⁸ Indeed, the Apostle Paul, writing twenty-four years after the resurrection, challenged the Corinthian congregation to look up some of the living 500 witnesses to the resurrection (1 Cor 15:6) in order to verify the veracity of his testimony of the resurrection of Jesus.⁹ How could he leave himself so wide open to censure if what he wrote was not true?

Leon Morris notes:

⁷ Ernest L. Martin, "Design and Development of the Holy Scripture" (Ph.D. diss., Ambassador College Graduate School of Theology, 1965, 1971), 20-21.

⁸ William Lane Craig, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 154, notes: "Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White remarks that in classical historiography the sources are usually biased and removed at least one or two generations or even centuries from the events they narrate, but historians still reconstruct with confidence what happened (A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 190). In the Gospels, by contrast, the tempo is "unbelievable" for the accrual of legend; more generations are needed (Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 2d ed. [London: Macmillan, 1935], 92-92). The writings of Herodotus enable us to test the tempo of myth-making, and the test suggests that *even two generations are too short a span to allow the mythical tendency to prevail over the hard historic core of oral tradition*. Such a gap with regard to the Gospel traditions would land us in the second century, precisely when the apocryphal Gospels began to originate."

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Importantly Paul made the claim early, for his letters, the oldest available documents that record this claim, were written within twenty or thirty years of Jesus' death. Paul says that "most" of the five hundred to whom Jesus appeared were still alive (1 Cor. 15:6); thus they could be interrogated. That there is no evidence of any serious attempt to refute the testimony to the resurrection is significant.¹⁰

The Apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost and the birthday of the church, could now go daringly before all of Jerusalem and give a powerful testimony to what he had seen happen:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, AS YOU YOURSELVES KNOW – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified ...But GOD RAISED HIM UP, having freed him from death. ...David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption [Ps 16:10].' THIS JESUS GOD RAISED UP, AND OF THAT ALL OF US ARE WITNESSES (Acts 2:22, 23, 24, 30-32).

Now we see the disciples, instead of being like the cowering bunch that they were when they had fled the crucifixion scene, had the courage to come back and face the Romans and the Jews head on. They could now, undauntedly, face beatings, jail, torture, and ultimately martyrdom. Why? Why on earth would anyone do so to support a myth? What

⁹ The fact that Paul ends this passage with "most of whom are still living" begs the invitation for people to go and check Paul out on this fact. Again, William Lane Craig (ibid.) notes: "The witnesses listed in 1 Corinthians 15 continued to live and move in the early community and would exercise a control over the appearance traditions. Similarly, if persons like Mary Magdalene and the women did not see Jesus, it is difficult to see how the early tradition could arise and continue in opposition to the better knowledge of first generation believers." Obviously, the Apostle Paul would not subject himself to the ridicule of being exposed as a liar if he were trying to promote a myth. Nevertheless, we cannot help ourselves in citing Burton Mack's strange appraisal of Paul's resurrection conviction: "It was Paul who focused attention on 'the cross' (1 Cor. 1:18) instead of the resurrection and who added an apocalyptic framework to the mythology of Jesus Christ as lord. He did this to counter a fascination with the mythology of the resurrection he thought dangerous." It should be apparent to anyone who has the ability to read and understand the thrust of First Corinthians 15 that the Jesus Seminar revisionists are completely out of touch with the message of the Apostle Paul. The relationship between Paul's understanding of the cross and the resurrection is: "For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, MUCH MORE SURELY, having been reconciled, will we be SAVED BY HIS LIFE" (Rom 5:10).

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *ibid.*

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possible motivation would there be on their part (or anyone's for that matter) to risk death for a myth? Are we to believe that every one of them did such an amazing turn of about face because of what they all knew to be a total lie? Indeed, after being flogged by the Jewish authorities, we see that

Peter and the apostles ...rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name [Jesus]. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:29, 41-2).

Again, Leon Morris notes:

What caused this astounding transformation? It must have taken hard evidence to convince people like Peter, Thomas, and Paul. Yet they were convinced that Jesus had risen. That people were imprisoned and that Stephen and James suffered death is significant. People do not usually run such risks unless they are very sure of themselves. When confronted with such great perils they are apt to look for an alternative explanation of that for which they may be put to death. But the disciples were quite firm. They were sure of the Resurrection.¹¹

The growing phenomenon of the follower's of the Way was due to the fact that the resurrection of Jesus was seen as a reality by hundreds of witnesses. As witnesses to these events that the apostles wrote about, they spread the "Word" fully aware that they would be facing martyrdom. What greater testimony to the truth of their message can there be?

THE RESURRECTION AND MODERN CRITICS

*T*ODAY, THERE ARE MANY WHO BELIEVE THAT the gospel message of the resurrected Jesus is all a fabricated myth. They would not only have you believe that the disciples died for a lie, but that they did it KNOWINGLY. But is this truth, or are modern critics, who were certainly not there to witness the facts, guilty of creating their own modern myths in order to justify their predisposed agnosticism? One thing is certain. Critics cannot be said to have the persuasive argument on

¹¹ Leon Morris, *ibid.*