

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 to 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.¹

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 1Corinthians, 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 Toledeth Jeshu, a compilation of 5th century Jewish writings. Neither of these sources could be considered sympathetic to the cause of the Gospel.² 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.³

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 self-interest; - as they scrambled to preserve their authority. As they of anyone should have seen, He was the fulfillment of prophecy. The 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.

WHAT ARE WE THINKING ?

"The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" (Genesis 12:1-3)

It is one of the most heard and yet seemingly ignored, - (or misunderstood) verses in the Scriptures. The great nation that God is talking to is Israel, - and the promise of the Lord Almighty is clear. Elsewhere God repeatedly refers to the land of Israel as **"My land"** and in Joel 3:2 promises judgment against Israel's enemies **"On account of My people, My heritage Israel, Whom they have scattered among the nations; They have also divided up My land"**. Clear enough? Apparently not! The countries of the world seemed determined to divest Israel of its God-given heritage. And the United States is going much further down that road than should be comfortable for any Bible believing Christian.

In these last days of the Bush administration Secretary of State Rice is pressing ever so hard to get Israel and the Palestinians to sign a document that would lay the basis for a Palestinian State by the end of the year. That deal would necessarily entail the division of Jerusalem, with the Palestinians controlling the Arab neighborhoods. Sources reveal that Rice is pushing for just such a guarantee from the Olmert government. World Net Daily reports that meetings are taking place almost daily "at the highest levels". A deal is said to be close at hand. Olmert, under criminal investigation himself, is working to complete a deal by September. The peace now being considered would give the Palestinian Authority, (not Hamas), - control of the vast majority of the West Bank - (the Biblical lands of Judea and Samaria), - and set up a joint-patrolled passageway between Gaza and the newly surrendered territory. Israel would formally forfeit parts of the Temple Mount. The plan would be phased in over a number of years. Right now that number is five.⁴ This newsletter as in the past, has drawn the clearly demonstrable connection between specific incidents of American government pressure on the Israeli government to give away God's Land and various disasters that that struck the United States at the same time. Bill Koenig begins his account with George Bush Senior's Madrid Conference of 1991 that saw what was called the "Perfect Storm" form in the Atlantic and even strike the President's home in Kennebunkport. Hurricane Andrew hit six months later on the same day that the same conference moved to Washington. In '94 Clinton was offering up the Golan to Syria and a 6.9 earthquake struck California within 24 hours. In all there have been dozens of examples of these 'coincidences' that have followed US pressure, or even Arafat visits to the White House that included storms, tornadoes, earthquakes and

even stock market drops.^{5 6} Still the scoffers will scoff at such connections being drawn. Yet God's word stands clear: Blessings for blessings – Curses for curses. And judgment falls because they **“have also divided up My land”**.

THE RUMORS ARE BACK

There is certainly something going on and the only difficulty is in trying to find out exactly what that is. Here is what we know. A combined naval / air force of American, British and French vessels are at or on their way to the Persian Gulf, including 3 carrier groups. That's an enormous amount of fire power. But the question is what is it doing there. Is it a demonstration, a bluff, reaction to Iranian threats or the necessary gathering of forces for some future action? The Russian paper RNIA Novosti believes that it is a blockading force, - the next tool of the Western Powers against Iran, - once they admit that sanctions have definitively failed to stop the Iranian nuclear program. A blockade would attempt to close down the Persian Gulf, cutting off about 2/5 of the Iranians refined fuel supply. It could also be there to strike those facilities or support an Israeli attack.⁷

An American led strike is just what the Dutch press is saying will happen. The Netherlands reportedly suspended a “successful” infiltration and sabotage operation of Iranian weapons manufacturing because they believe strongly that an American attack is coming in the next several weeks. According to the Dutch reports, the attacks will be made using drones or unmanned aircraft against strategic targets, - a first in military history. Meanwhile, the Iranians are preparing a counterstrike by arming their proxy Hezbollah with long-range rockets capable of striking anywhere in Israel. An Iranian General warned that an attack on his country would bring on the onset of World War III.^{8 9} Tehran has further warned that it is ready to close off the Strait of Hormuz through which so much of the world's oil flows, as well as activating terrorist sleeper cells located throughout the Middle East and elsewhere.¹⁰

Now according to other sources, Israel has decided it will be forced to take out the Iranian nuclear facilities before they become operational, - in the next 18 to 24 months. If compelled to take on the task without American help, Israel has made up their mind to undertake the operation which will be a virtual suicide mission for the Israeli pilots taking part. Unable to sustain a major atomic attack with its hundreds of thousands or even millions of casualties, “Israel will not agree to allow Iran to achieve nuclear weapons and will take whatever means are necessary to prevent Tehran from achieving its nuclear goals”.¹¹ The price of a strike on Iranian targets, from whatever quarter it is launched, - would be high indeed. It is generally believed that oil would be pushed to over \$200 a barrel with the very first shots being fired. For whatever its worth, according to the most recent polls, the American public seems willing to accept that price, with 63% approving military action against Iran once diplomacy fails.¹² And Iran's response will be the determining factor as to the extent and scope of the war that ensues. Many are betting that Tehran will limit that response to unleashing its clients like Hamas and Hezbollah and Syria and sundry; - that it does not yet want to take on the American war machine or the wrath of the Israeli nuclear arsenal.¹³ I believe that the prophetic evidence backs them up. Though we see it forming, Ezekiel's Gog / Magog invasion of Israel is not in sight here. That must only come when Israel is living in peace and feeling secure in their **“land of unwalled villages”** living as a **“peaceful people”**. (Ezekiel 38:11) What I believe we must look for first is the war against the inner ring of Arab states; - the war of Psalm 83 - including the likes of Syria and the Palestinians, - that will set up that time of temporary peace. It is only then that the Persians (Iranians) will dare to undertake the invasion of the Promised Land as part of the Magog Confederacy. As for now, while I'm not saying it *will* be so, - an attack to take out the Iranian nukes could bring about that war of the 83rd Psalm, where Israel wins a decisive victory, expands its land, - and sets up those very **“unwalled villages”**.

-
- ¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ*, Zondervan, 1998, pg 308-309
 - ² Josh McDowell, *Evidence For The Resurrection*, Leadership U, 1992
 - ³ Josh McDowell, *Evidence For The Resurrection*, Leadership U, 1992
 - ⁴ Condi pulls a Solomon: Split Jerusalem in 2, *World Net Daily*, August 25, 2008
 - ⁵ Bill Koenig, *Land For Peace: God's Response*, Koenig's International News, 2001 – monitored September 2, 2008
 - ⁶ Bill Koenig, *Palestinian State, Earthquakes and National Gay Pride Day*, June 19, 2002
 - ⁷ Will economic blockade of Iran be the first step to conflict?, *RNIA Novosti*, August 25, 2008
 - ⁸ Dutch sabotage agent recalled from Iran..., *DEBKAFfile*, August 31, 2008
 - ⁹ Report: Holland believes Iran to be attacked soon, *YNet News*, September 1, 2008
 - ¹⁰ Nissan Ratzlav-Katz, *Dutch Spies Recalled...*, *Arutz Sheva*, September 2, 2008,
 - ¹¹ Military analyst JD Longstreet quoting the *Israeli Insider*, in his article entitled *Will Israel Strike Iran without U.S. Assistance?*, *Family Security Matters*, September 2, 2008
 - ¹² *Americans Approve Military Strike on Iran if Diplomacy Fails*, *Middle East Times*, August 28, 2008
 - ¹³ Andrew Richter, *Israel and Iran: the Armageddon scenario*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, August 23, 2008