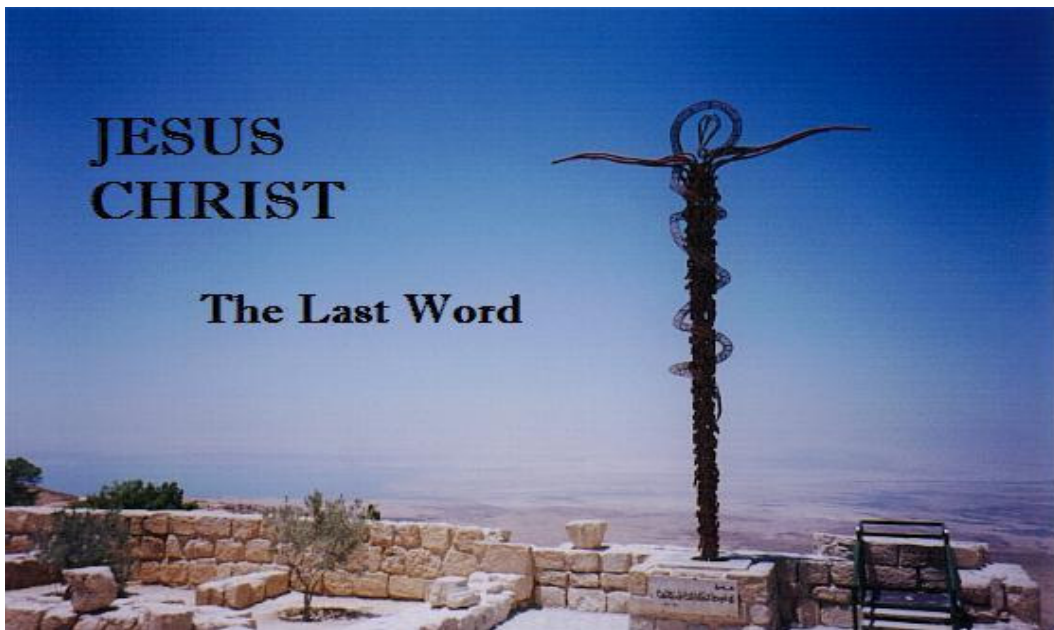


# WAY TO SHILOH

www.waytoshiloh.com



## JESUS CHRIST – The Last Word

I have sought to identify and address the problems of being an atheist. These have ranged from the scientific to the philosophical, from the existence of matter to the origin of life, and from evolution to ethics. As far as I know, I have at least touched on all but one of atheism's major stumbling blocks. The remaining problem is not a scientific theory, a philosophical proposition or a social construct, but one particular human being. Atheists cannot avoid tackling him head-on; this article will show what happens when they do so.

The population of the world is increasing by over 70,000 a day, and the current total of people who have ever lived has been put at about sixty billion. The overwhelming majority of these have lived and died virtually unknown. Some have left behind temporary ripples, and others have influenced thousands or millions of people through their work, teaching or example. Comparatively few can be said to have left a major and permanent mark on the history of our planets with rulers, politicians, philosophers, scientists and religious leaders strongly represented in this select group. Yet one person dominates all the others in such a way as to make him truly unique - a man in sixty billion. Even some of the world's most articulate sceptics have endorsed this: H. G. Wells called him 'easily the dominant figure in history' and concluded that no historian could portray the progress of humanity honestly without giving him the 'foremost place'. This assessment is all the more remarkable when seen in the apparently modest context of his life.

- We have no record of his date of birth, yet all the world's chronology is linked to it.
- He never wrote a book, yet more books have been written about him than about anyone else in history, and the output is still accelerating. The nearest thing we have to his biography has now been translated in whole or in part into over 2,000 languages
  - He never painted a picture, or composed any poetry or music, yet nobody's life and teaching have inspired a greater output of songs, plays, poetry, films videos and other art forms.
  - He never raised an army, yet millions of people have laid down their lives in his cause, and every year thousands more do so.<sup>2</sup>
  - Except for one brief period during his childhood, his travels were limited to an area about the size of Wales,<sup>3</sup> but his influence today is worldwide, and his followers constitute the largest religious grouping the world has ever known.
  - He had no formal education, but thousands of universities, seminaries, colleges and schools have been founded in his name.

- His public teaching lasted just three years, and was restricted to one small country, yet purpose-built satellites and some of the world's largest radio and television networks now beam his message around the globe.
- He set foot in just two countries, yet an organization committed to his cause<sup>5</sup> claims to make regular flights to more countries than any commercial airline.
- He was virtually unknown outside of his native country, yet in the current issue of Encyclopaedia Britannica the entry under his name runs to 30,000 words.
- He is by far the most controversial person in history. Nobody has attracted such adoration or opposition, devotion or criticism, and nobody else's teaching has ever been more fervently received or more fiercely rejected. For centuries, every recorded word he spoke has been relentlessly analysed by theologians, philosophers and others. On the day this sentence is being written (and read), millions of people are studying what he said and did, and trying to apply the significance of his words and actions to their lives.<sup>8</sup>

Even the most dyed-in-the-wool sceptics must acknowledge that this man was something special, and any open-minded student of human history should agree that he deserves meticulous attention. His name is Jesus, who lived and died about 2,000 years ago.

He presents an enormous problem for the atheist.

## Anybody there?

That last sentence needs a rider, as some atheists have tried to dissolve the problem by contesting the fact that Jesus ever existed. To give just one example, Bertrand Russell rehashed ideas put forward by cynical nineteenth-century German scholars and concluded, 'Historically, it is quite doubtful whether Jesus ever existed at all, and if he did we do not know anything about him.'<sup>6</sup> One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry. Quite apart from the mass of data in the Bible, the credentials of which are commented on elsewhere on this web site, at least nineteen celebrated authors in the first and second centuries (who shared Russell's atheism but were somewhat better placed to comment) record more than 100 facts about Jesus. These give details of his birth, life, teaching and death, all without the slightest hint that he was not a real historical person. These writers include the distinguished Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Suetonius, official historian of the Roman Imperial House, Cornelius Tacitus, another eminent historian who was also Governor of Asia, and Pliny the Younger, a Roman proconsul in Bithynia in Asia Minor and 'one of the world's great letter writers, whose letters have attained the status of literary classics'?

Very little literature from their time has survived, making it all the more remarkable that these historians, seeking to record the major events of their day, should devote reams of writing to a penniless peasant who lived in a scruffy little town (Nazareth) in a remote part (Galilee) of one of the world's smallest countries (Palestine), especially as they all rejected the main thrust of his teaching, Tacitus calling it a 'mischievous superstition'.<sup>8</sup> The second-century Greek philosopher Celsus went even further, and in *The True Doctrine* mounted a ruthless, sarcastic attack on virtually every aspect of Jesus' teaching, yet even he made some eighty allusions to New Testament quotations and never once claimed that he was merely deriding a myth, as Jesus never really existed. No wonder the British anthropologist and historian James Frazer concludes that doubts cast on the historical reality of Jesus are 'unworthy of serious attention'.<sup>9</sup> As Paul Johnson wrote in the *Daily Mail* on Good Friday 1997, the argument that Jesus never existed has been 'demolished' ... by 'the march of historical research'.<sup>10</sup>

## One of us

Although Jesus stands out from all the rest of humankind, he is not detached from them. He is a genuine human being, not some kind of biological freak or extra-terrestrial alien. The Bible traces his family tree back through over forty generations,<sup>11</sup> and the ongoing evidence for his normal humanity is overwhelming, as we can easily confirm.

There is the evidence of his physical life. Like any other Jewish boy, he was circumcised when he was eight days old, in accordance with Old Testament law.<sup>12</sup> His physical development was perfectly normal; in one chapter alone he is successively described as a 'baby',<sup>13</sup> a 'child'<sup>14</sup> and a 'boy'.<sup>15</sup> He had to be taught to crawl, stand, walk, feed himself, wash, dress, write and go to the toilet. He knew what it was to be hungry,<sup>16</sup> thirsty,<sup>17</sup> tired,<sup>18</sup> and physically weakened by suffering and stress.<sup>19</sup> Soon after he died, his body was pierced with a spear, and an eyewitness's report of a 'sudden flow of

blood and water<sup>20</sup> is exactly how a layman might describe blood and serum flowing from a post-mortem rupture of the pericardial sac.

There is the evidence of his emotional life. Jesus not only had a genuinely human body and mind, he also experienced a great range of human emotions. He told his followers, 'I have called you friends.'<sup>24</sup> We are told of his close relationship with one particular family that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.<sup>25</sup> There were times when he showed flashes of anger. When his followers tried to stop parents bringing their children to him, he was 'indignant'.<sup>26</sup> When members of a strict religious sect were plotting to have him killed, 'He looked around at them in anger... deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.'<sup>27</sup> Nor was he a great fan of political correctness: he called the crafty King Herod 'that fox',<sup>28</sup> false prophets 'ferocious wolves',<sup>29</sup> the Pharisees a 'brood of vipers',<sup>30</sup> 'blind fools',<sup>31</sup> 'white-washed tombs'<sup>32</sup> and 'hypocrites'.<sup>33</sup> When he saw black-marketeering and swindling going on in the temple in Jerusalem, he drove the racketeers out in an explosion of anger.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps no emotion more clearly illustrated his genuine humanity than his anger, yet it was always righteous anger, with never a tinge of personal pique or resentment. Far from outlawing anger, the Bible commends it and says, 'Be angry, and yet do not sine'.<sup>35</sup> As Martyn Lloyd-Jones commented, 'The capacity for anger against that which is evil and wrong is essentially right and good.'<sup>36</sup>

He expressed great sorrow. Looking over Jerusalem at a time when he knew it was heading for disaster, 'He wept over it.'<sup>37</sup> He showed great sympathy and compassion. When he came across a deaf-and-dumb man, he expressed his feelings with 'a deep sigh';<sup>38</sup> when he saw crowds of people in religious and spiritual confusion, 'He had compassion on them.'<sup>39</sup> When his followers reported on a particularly successful mission, 'He was full of joy.'<sup>40</sup>

There is the evidence of his spiritual life. He knew what it was to be tempted. He underwent at least one extended assault which lasted for nearly six weeks,<sup>41</sup> and in the course of his life he was 'tempted in every way, just as we are'.<sup>42</sup> He prayed - we are specifically told of twenty-five instances, including at least one occasion when 'he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears',<sup>43</sup> but these obviously represent a lifetime of intercession. He regularly attended public worship: we are told that 'On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.'<sup>44</sup> He studied the Bible: he constantly quoted the Old Testament, and with one exception always did so from memory.<sup>45</sup> He also fasted,<sup>46</sup> not because he was on a diet, but as a spiritual discipline laid down in the Old Testament and which he commended to others.<sup>47</sup>

The evidence of his physical life, his intellectual life, his emotional life and his spiritual life establish beyond question that Jesus was one of us, a genuine human being. Yet in several significant ways he was unique. Evidence for this can be found all over the Bible, but for our present purposes we will keep to six specific ways in which Jesus stands alone.

## Great expectations

In the first place, the announcement of his birth was unique. From the time when it was first reduced to writing, the Old Testament was never treated by the Jews as a man-made anthology of unrelated material. Instead, they recognized it as the Word of God, focused on his dealings with their own nation - his 'chosen people'<sup>48</sup> - in particular and with all mankind in general. Woven into this was God's promise that at some point in time he would break into human history by sending someone who would fulfil to perfection the roles of prophet, priest and king, establish God's righteous reign on the earth and meet men's deepest spiritual needs. This great ruler and deliverer came to be known as 'the Anointed One'<sup>49</sup> The English translation of this Hebrew title is 'the Messiah', while we translate the New Testament Greek equivalent, *ho christos*, as 'the Christ'. Prophecies about the coming Messiah can be found throughout the Old Testament, culminating in this assurance by Malachi: 'The messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.'<sup>50</sup> The voice of prophecy then fell silent for 400 years; what is more, all the Messianic predictions remained unfulfilled.

Everything changed when Jesus came on the scene. Invited to read from the Old Testament during a service in his local synagogue in Nazareth, he deliberately chose a Messianic passage written by Isaiah, read it aloud, then added, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'<sup>51</sup> The inference was inescapable: Jesus was claiming that when the prophet wrote about the Messiah he was writing about him. In the weeks and months which followed, Jesus stepped up his insistence that this was the case, and he was soon in conflict with the religious establishment, especially the Pharisees and Sadducees, who had a vested interest in preserving the status quo.

If they felt they could pressurize Jesus into softening or abandoning his claim, they were mistaken, and he was soon drawing on all three sections of the Old Testament - the Law, the Poetical Books and the Prophets to press his message home. When his enemies were plotting to kill him, he referred to their great lawgiver Moses and told them point-blank, 'If you believed Moses, you would

believe me, for he wrote about me.<sup>52</sup> Later, he said that their opposition was in fulfilment of a psalm in which the Messiah says, 'They hated me without reason.'<sup>53</sup> Knowing that the prophet Daniel had spoken of the Messiah as 'one like a son of man',<sup>54</sup> Jesus deliberately referred to himself as the 'Son of Man' no fewer than seventy-eight times.<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere, he pulled the whole of the Old Testament together and claimed, 'These are the Scriptures that testify about me.'<sup>56</sup> His claim was clear and confident, and the New Testament provides convincing data to show that it was valid.

About 2,000 years earlier, God had told Abraham that through his offspring 'all nations on earth will be blessed'.<sup>57</sup> This means that twenty centuries before Jesus was born every other family on earth except Abraham's was out of the running as far as producing the Messiah was concerned. Other Old Testament prophecies indicated that the Messiah would come from a line taken directly through Abraham, Jacob, the tribe of Judah (bypassing eleven others), Jesse and David. This alone precludes most of the human race, but there are two other significant pointers.

One of the Messianic prophecies said that the tribe of Judah would provide Israel with all its kings until the Messiah came 'The sceptre will not depart from Judah ... until **Shiloh** comes..<sup>58</sup> As Judah's government collapsed with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jesus was born just before the deadline.

The second pointer is the prophecy which told where the Messiah would be born:

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.<sup>59</sup>

There were two Bethlehems, one in the region of Ephrathah in Judea and the other seventy miles to the north, in Zebulun. Jesus was born 'in Bethlehem in Judea',<sup>60</sup> a tiny village where no one else of major importance has been born since Micah's remarkable prophecy, which was made some 700 years before Jesus arrived.

A student once suggested to me that when Jesus reached he had been born in Bethlehem and into a family descended from David, he decided to stake a claim to fame by fulfilling all the other Messianic prophecies. This is hardly original, and less than convincing. The nineteenth-century Oxford scholar Henry Liddon drew attention to the fact that Jesus fulfilled to the letter no fewer than 332 Old Testament prophecies.<sup>61</sup> These covered his family's social status, his lifestyle, his general demeanour, his teaching and his amazing powers. Even more remarkably, they included minute details of the events surrounding his death. It has been calculated that twenty-nine Messianic prophecies were fulfilled in the final twenty-four hours of his life alone. The prophets said that he would be forsaken by his follow-ers,<sup>62</sup> betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (which would then be used to buy a potter's field),<sup>63</sup> wrongly accused,<sup>64</sup> tortured and humiliated<sup>65</sup> (in response to which he would not retaliate),<sup>66</sup> executed along with common criminals,<sup>67</sup> and put to death by crucifixions (a form of execution never carried out by the Jews). Prophets also foretold that at the time of his death he would pray for his executioners,<sup>69</sup> none of his bones would be broken,<sup>70</sup> his body would be pierced<sup>71</sup> and people would cast lots to see who would get his clothing.<sup>72</sup>

Is it seriously suggested that a hoaxer could (or would) have arranged for all of these things to happen in order to lodge a fake claim to be the Messiah? In *Science Speaks*, Westmont College's Peter Stoner evaluates the biblical data using scientific principles of probability, and at one point calculates the chance of just forty-eight of the Messianic prophecies being fulfilled in one person as one in 10.<sup>157</sup> To illustrate what this means, he uses an electron, something so small that, at the rate of 250 a minute, it would take 190 million years to count a line of them one inch long. At the same rate, a cubic inch of electrons would take 190,000,000 x 190,000,000 x 190,000,000 years to count. Stoner then says that if we took this number of electrons, marked one of them, stirred them all together, then asked a blindfolded friend to find the one we had marked, his chance of selecting the right one would be the same as that of one man fulfilling even forty-eight of the more than 300 Messianic prophecies. He concludes that to reject the Bible's claims that Jesus is the Messiah is to reject a fact 'proved perhaps more absolutely than any other fact in the world'<sup>33</sup> As he refers to the quantum of electrons used in his illustration as 'a large number',<sup>74</sup> we can hardly accuse him of being given to exaggerations! Writing in the *Sunday Times* in 1998, Ludovic Kennedy airily dismissed all the Messianic prophecies as 'bogus'.<sup>75</sup> This may shorten the discussion, but only by shelving the data.

## The 'no-man' man

The second factor which marks Jesus out from the rest of humankind is that his conception was unique. When speaking about the beginning of his earthly life, people usually refer to the 'virgin birth', but this phrase can be misleading, in that there is no evidence of anything unusual about his birth as such. As far as we know, Jesus' actual birth took place in the normal way; what is unique is not how he left his mother's womb, but how he entered it, and the Bible could not be more emphatic. When his mother, Mary, found herself pregnant she declared, 'I am a virgin';<sup>76</sup> Mary's husband, Joseph, 'had no union with her until she gave birth to a son';<sup>77</sup> Jesus was born 'before they came together'.<sup>78</sup> These three statements make it crystal clear that she was *virgo intacta* when she became pregnant, and that she remained so until after Jesus was born.

As there is no other record of human parthenogenesis (the female egg dividing itself without male fertilization) sceptics have produced a wagon-load of theories seeking to undermine the Bible's record. It is suggested that as the Jews were rather prudish about sexual matters, and considered intercourse to be in some way 'unclean', the story was invented to avoid the Messiah being tainted in any way. Yet as there is no hint of Jewish squeamishness about sexuality elsewhere in the New Testament, this idea relies on supposition, not substance. Others have suggested that the story is an attempt to match or outdo tales of how pagan gods and other religious leaders came into being. Buddha's mother claimed that a white elephant with six tusks 'entered my belly'.<sup>79</sup> The mother of the Greek god Perseus was said to have been impregnated with a shower of rain containing Zeus. Alexander the Great was alleged to have been the result of an illicit union between his mother Olympus and Zeus, who had cunningly turned himself into a snake for the occasion. The suggestion that Jesus' virgin conception is another such yarn suffers from two fatal flaws. The first is that there is not a shred of evidence that the New Testament writers had even heard of these exotic fantasies; the second is that their crude sensuality is in stark contrast with the simplicity and purity of the Bible's narrative which, as the scholar Robert Gromacki notes, was 'bathed in holiness'.<sup>80</sup>

## Problems

Because God is said to be involved in the event, atheists will obviously have a Fundamental, presuppositional problem with the Bible's clear insistence that Jesus was born of a virgin, but I suggest that the record poses other difficulties for them.

- Why did the early church invent a story which would immediately invite a storm of ridicule and contempt? As David Kingdon writes, 'You do not invent a story about an engaged woman conceiving a child and claiming that no man was involved if you want [the story] to gain easy acceptance among Jews, for they held pre-marital chastity in such high regard that a woman could be stoned to death if proved to have been unchaste before marriage. Nor would much headway be made among the Gentiles, who were much more relaxed about sexual matters, and would have been likely to dismiss the story as a dirty joke.'

- Why did a medical practitioner like Luke never retract his evidence, despite all the pressure that he must have faced?

- Why have no contemporary records produced a credible alternative story of the birth of Jesus?

- How could the church reconcile the illegitimate conception of Jesus with its insistence that God calls for chastity before marriage?

Both by Old Testament prophecy and New Testament narrative, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus entered the world in a uniquely miraculous way. When Mary questioned her part in this astonishing event, an angel told her that 'Nothing is impossible with God.'<sup>92</sup> Those words remain the ultimate response to contemporary sceptics of every description. A virgin conception led to a virgin birth.

## Words, deeds, character

In the third place, Jesus stands apart from the rest of humanity in that his life was unique, a fact which comes into focus in at least three areas.

From an early age, Jesus was marked out by his words. When he was just 'twelve years old, his dialogue with religious leaders in the temple courts in Jerusalem left people 'amazed at his understanding and his answers'.<sup>93</sup> Eighteen years later, when he claimed to be the fulfilment of

Isaiah's Messianic prophecy, those who heard him 'were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips'.<sup>94</sup> When his religious enemies were closing in, temple guards sent to arrest him were awestruck by his teaching and skulked back to the chief priests and Pharisees complaining, 'No one ever spoke the way this man does.'<sup>95</sup> At the end of what is now known as the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds 'were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law'.<sup>96</sup> Their reaction was hardly surprising. Can finer moral doctrine be found anywhere else? Are there any more fundamental spiritual principles than those contained in his opening words, now known as the Beatitudes?<sup>97</sup> Is there a finer prayer than what we now call 'the Lord's Prayer'?<sup>98</sup> Is there any higher ethical standard than 'Love your enemies'?<sup>99</sup> Can moral instruction rise beyond 'Be perfect'?<sup>100</sup> Has anyone bettered the so-called Golden Rule: 'In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you'?<sup>101</sup>

Broadening his assessment to take in all of Jesus' teaching, Geoffrey Thomas writes, 'He speaks on marriage; he speaks on divorce; he speaks on creation; he speaks on the human heart and its predicament. He speaks on death and on eternity. He pronounces inerrantly on every single item that you and I will ever meet in life.'<sup>102</sup> The American historian Bernard Ramm says of the words Jesus spoke, 'They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken. And where is their greatness? Their greatness lies in the pure, lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast.'<sup>103</sup>

People were not only astonished by Jesus' words, but by his actions, and specifically by the miracles he performed. At one point we are told that in addition to his extensive preaching and teaching ministry he healed people 'who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures and the paralysed'.<sup>104</sup> Elsewhere, he is on record as curing blindness,<sup>105</sup> deafness,<sup>106</sup> dumbness,<sup>107</sup> leprosy,<sup>108</sup> lameness,<sup>109</sup> fever,<sup>110</sup> and paralysis.<sup>111</sup> Virtually all the healings were instantaneous and, in brilliant contrast to the records of 'faith healers' past and present, there is no recorded case of a relapse. On at least three occasions, he brought a dead person back to life: a 'twelve-year old girl within an hour of her death',<sup>112</sup> a man whose body was being carried to the cemetery<sup>113</sup> and another who had lain in the grave for four days.<sup>114</sup>

He also showed authority over the natural elements. During a crossing of the Sea of Galilee, one word from him brought an end to a storm so violent that experienced sailors had been terrified of being drowned.<sup>115</sup> He was able to tell local fishermen exactly where fish could be caught, even when they seemed to think there were none to be had.<sup>116</sup> As a wedding guest, he rescued an embarrassing situation by turning water into the day's finest wine.<sup>117</sup> He once fed over 5,000 hungry people with a handful of bread and fish,<sup>118</sup> and on another occasion did the same thing for a crowd of over 4,000.<sup>119</sup> It has even been suggested that Jesus may have performed more miracles in a given day than are recorded in the whole of the Old Testament.

If Jesus' teaching and actions left his contemporaries baffled, his character has drawn endless admiration, sometimes from the most unlikely sources. The famous nineteenth-century British historian (and sceptical rationalist) William Lecky referred to Jesus as 'the highest pattern of virtue' and 'the strongest incentive to its practices, and admitted that his life 'has done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists'.<sup>120</sup> Lecky's contemporary, the German theologian David Strauss, who set out to debunk most of the Bible, was forced to concede that the life of Jesus 'remains the highest model of religion within the reach of our thought'.<sup>121</sup>

These are stunning character references, but the Bible goes even further and declares that although 'tempted in every way, just as we are' he was 'without sin'.<sup>122</sup> The evidence for this comes from his enemies,<sup>123</sup> his followers (including Saul of Tarsus, who once led a personal crusade to destroy Jesus' early followers but was eventually persuaded that he 'had no sin')<sup>124</sup> and his inner circle of friends who, after scrutinizing him at close quarters for three years, came to the conclusion that he was righteous<sup>125</sup> and 'without blemish or defect'<sup>126</sup> and that he 'committed no sin'.<sup>127</sup>

Yet perhaps the most remarkable testimony is Jesus' own claim to be sinless. The Bible and subsequent history are full of great men's confessions of personal sin. Israel's king David acknowledged, 'I have sinned greatly'.<sup>128</sup> The great prophet Isaiah admitted, 'I am a man of unclean lips'.<sup>129</sup> Job, the most upright man of his day, cried out, 'I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes'.<sup>130</sup> The apostle Paul called himself 'the worst of sinners'.<sup>131</sup> Augustine wrote of his 'foulness' and of the 'carnal corruptions of my soul'.<sup>131</sup> In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, who was possibly the finest theologian and philosopher America had ever produced, and was once described as 'one of the most holy, humble and heavenly-minded men the world has seen since the apostolic age',<sup>133</sup> said that as far as he was concerned the wickedness of his heart looked 'like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell'.<sup>134</sup>

Jesus presents a totally different picture, in that he showed no consciousness whatsoever of personal sin. Speaking of his relationship with God, he said quite openly, 'I always do what pleases

him.<sup>135</sup> Has anyone else in history ever credibly made such a claim? Faced with a highly critical audience steeped in biblical teaching on morality, and looking for any excuse to humiliate him, he threw down the gauntlet by asking, 'Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?'<sup>136</sup> Not even his severest critic dared to pick it up. Elsewhere, he claimed complete mastery over temptation by stating that the devil 'has no hold on me'.<sup>137</sup> Jesus never blushed with shame, never had a guilty conscience, never regretted anything he said, thought or did, never had any reason to apologize and never asked or prayed for forgiveness. Small wonder that the famous nineteenth-century French humanist Ernest Renan once wrote of him, 'His beauty is eternal, and his reign shall never end. Jesus is in every respect unique, and nothing can be compared with him.'<sup>138</sup>

## 'I am'

The fourth way in which Jesus stands out from all other human beings is that his claims were unique. When he was at the peak of his career, the great American boxer Muhammad Ali used to promote himself by claiming, 'I am the greatest!' and other people over the centuries have made similar boasts about their talent, power or influence. Yet Jesus is beyond comparison. He fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, he was born of a virgin, he lived a sinless life, his teaching has never been equalled and his miracles were astonishing in their range and number. This tends to put even the finest boxing champion in perspective! Although the Bible's verdict on his life means that he could never be accused of conceit, he often spoke about himself, and in the most extraordinary terms. He claimed, 'I am the bread of life,' and promised, 'He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.'<sup>139</sup> He claimed, 'I am the light of the world,' and pledged, 'Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'<sup>140</sup> He claimed, 'I am the way and the truth and the life,' and added, 'No one comes to the Father except through me.'<sup>141</sup> Nobody else in history has ever made credible claims to meet other people's spiritual hunger, give infallible wisdom and be the exclusive means of entering a right relationship with God, yet Jesus made another set of claims which transcended even these. Taken together, they amounted to this: he claimed to be God. Although he is never on record as using the phrase 'I am God', there are at least six instances in which he made the same stupendous claim using other words.

When nit-picking religious leaders complained about him healing a paralysed man on the Sabbath day, Jesus answered them by saying, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.'<sup>142</sup> That may seem innocuous to us, but there is more to it than meets the modern eye. Jesus was telling them that God was not bound by their legalistic interpretation of the Sabbath law. What is more, Jesus claimed to be working in the same way that God was working. Whatever one was thinking and doing, so was the other. The Jews had no doubt what he meant; he was 'making himself equal with God'<sup>143</sup> -and Jesus did nothing to correct their interpretation of his words.

In a later discussion about the Old Testament patriarch Abraham, Jesus responded to a question by stating, 'Before Abraham was born, I am!'<sup>144</sup> This was certainly an unusual answer, especially as they were not asking him about his age, but about his identity: 'Are you greater than our father Abraham?'<sup>145</sup> What makes the reply so startling is that 'I AM' was one of the names by which God revealed himself in the Old Testament. When giving Moses certain instructions for his people, God said, 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I Am has sent me to you."<sup>146</sup> 'I AM' is a title which speaks of absolute, timeless self-existence, qualities which can be true only of God, yet Jesus quietly used it about himself. Those listening to him had no doubts about what he meant; they immediately 'picked up stones to stone him',<sup>147</sup> a clear sign that they were accusing him of the blasphemy of claiming to be divine. As J. C. Ryle, the first Bishop of Liverpool, commented, 'All claims to evade this explanation appear to me to be so preposterous that it is a waste of time to notice them.'<sup>148</sup>

Later still, Jesus brought a teaching session to an end by stating, 'I and the Father are one.'<sup>149</sup> The crucial point here is that 'one' is not masculine, but neuter; Jesus was not claiming to be one in person with God, but one in essence or nature. Once more, his enemies 'picked up stones to stone him',<sup>150</sup> and again they made it clear why they did so. When Jesus asked them, 'I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which these do you stone me?',<sup>151</sup> they replied, 'We are not stoning you for any of these ... but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.'<sup>152</sup> If this was a catastrophic misunderstanding on their part, why did Jesus not correct them?

When one of his disciples asked him, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us,' Jesus replied, 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father?" Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?'<sup>153</sup> Jesus was not claiming to be the

Father, but was indicating that in his own distinct life and personality he was revealing all of God's nature and character that it was possible and necessary for any human being to know on this earth; it was a clear claim to deity.

The fifth incident took place a few hours before his death, when Jesus prayed, 'And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.'<sup>154</sup> The phrase 'in your presence' is a rather weak translation of words which mean much more than 'alongside' or 'in the same place'. Literally, they mean 'belong with yourself'. They speak of Jesus taking up again a heavenly status which he had possessed by divine right before time began. This either makes the prayer blasphemous balderdash or tells us that Jesus is addressing God on equal terms. In the light of what we have already discovered, is it difficult to decide between those two alternatives?

The sixth of these claims was made at the end of his last day of freedom, when Jesus was being taken into custody by a detachment of soldiers. Fully aware of what was about to happen, Jesus asked the approaching troops, 'Who is it you want?' When they replied, 'Jesus of Nazareth,' he told them, 'I am he.'<sup>155</sup> This all seems perfectly straightforward, yet the soldiers' reaction was amazing: 'When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.'<sup>156</sup> At that point, Jesus was offering no resistance and appeared helpless, yet an entire detachment of hand-picked troops collapsed in a heap - hardly commando material! The only credible explanation seems to lie in the phrase Jesus used to identify himself. Translators have added the word 'he' in order to round out the sentence, yet what Jesus actually said was 'ego eimi' ('I am'). But why should four syllables flatten a squad of soldiers? The only answer that fits is that there was something about the majesty and glory of the words (the divine title we noted earlier) and the way in which they were spoken that swept the troops to the ground in a spectacular demonstration of the presence and power of God.

When we put these six claims together, and add the other available biblical data, we can easily agree with the American educator William Biederwolf when he wrote, 'A man who can read the New Testament and not see that Christ claims to be more than a man can look all over the sky at high noon on a cloudless day and not see the sun.'<sup>157</sup> Sceptics sometimes try to evade the central issue here by conceding on the one hand that Jesus was an outstanding moral example while denying on the other hand his deity, but C. S. Lewis has long since torpedoed this ploy: 'I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice... You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to'.<sup>158</sup>

Endorsement of Jesus' claims to deity are to be found all over Scripture. I have examined many of these elsewhere,<sup>159</sup> but we can note two here. Their particular significance is that they speak of Jesus doing things which only God could do - create and sustain the universe. Paul says of Jesus, 'By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.'<sup>160</sup> It would be difficult to make a statement of that importance clearer or more comprehensive. Paul then goes on to say of Jesus that 'In him all things hold together'<sup>161</sup> - in other words that it is his power and wisdom which prevent our cosmos from becoming chaos. It is perfectly clear that only of God could these two statements be made, and that no other human being in history has been credibly able to match Jesus' claim.

## The substitute

The fifth way in which Jesus stands out from the rest of humanity is that his death was unique. Biographers seldom spend much time on the deaths of their subjects - it is their lives that matter - but Jesus is a striking exception to the rule. It has been calculated that about 40% of the Gospel of Matthew, 60% of the Gospel of Mark, over 30% of the Gospel of Luke and nearly 50% of the Gospel of John are given over to the events leading up to and surrounding the moment when Jesus was put to death by crucifixion when he was in his early thirties. Later, the apostle Paul who wrote most of the New Testament, summed up his message by saying, 'We preach Christ crucified,'<sup>162</sup> and reminded friends at Corinth, 'I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'<sup>163</sup> If we include the contributions of the other writers, it is impossible to disagree with Leon Morris when he says, 'The cross dominates the New Testament.'<sup>164</sup>

It is equally obvious that Jesus saw his death as being the consummation of his life, not merely its conclusion. As the time drew near he said, 'It was for this very reason I came to this hour.'<sup>165</sup> Two



earlier life-threatening situations had been defused 'because his time had not yet come',<sup>166</sup> but on the night of his arrest he began a prayer with the words: 'Father, the time has come.'<sup>167</sup> For Jesus, death was to be a triumphal climax to his life's work. As John Stott puts it, 'The hour for which he had come into the world was the hour in which he left it.'<sup>168</sup> This explains why 2,000 years later the universally recognized symbol of the movement Jesus started is not one which relates to his conception, character or creed, but a cross, a replica of the cruellest instrument of execution in the ancient world, and one which was banned nearly 1,500 years ago.

What is so special about the death of Jesus? After all, death itself is universal and inescapable; the whole world is a hospital, and every person in it a terminal patient. Nobody has to ask, 'Is there death after life?' but everybody should surely ask another question: 'Why?' 'Why should every one of us have to face what J. I. Packer calls this 'malevolent monstrosity'?'<sup>169</sup> In the course of my work in the Registrar-General's office in Guernsey, I wrote out hundreds of death certificates, and I can still remember the strange emotion I often felt when completing the column headed 'Cause of Death'. Sometimes, the words were frighteningly long - 'arietiosclerotic degeneration of the myocardium' - while at other times 'cancer' said it all, yet these and countless others tell us only part of the story. To discover the rest, we must turn to the Bible.

Our first parents were created in God's perfect moral and spiritual image, but that perfect relationship was shattered by their catastrophic rebellion. They died spiritually and began to die physically, and it was in this fallen and dysfunctional state that they became the original ancestors of the entire human race. This means that whereas they became sinners, we were born that way; David acknowledged, 'Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.'<sup>170</sup> What is more, we share Adam's guilt as well as his corruption, the penalty as well as the pollution: 'Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in thy way death came to all men, because all sinned.'<sup>171</sup> Here is the answer to the 'Why?' By his sin, Adam ruined all those he represented, and the evidence for man's inherent spiritual death is his inevitable physical death.

The Bible links sin and death so fundamentally that it speaks of 'the law of sin and death'.<sup>172</sup> Elsewhere it warns, 'The wages of sin is death'<sup>173</sup> and that 'Sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.'<sup>174</sup> The law of sin and death is part of the moral fabric of the universe. Before man sinned, death was impossible; since he sinned, death has been inevitable, and the ultimate and eternal outcome for those who die physically while still dead spiritually is to be 'punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power'.<sup>175</sup> This is the background to the Bible's insistence that the death of Jesus was unique in two ways.

Firstly, it was the only truly voluntary death in human history. Death is not an option for any one of us; in the Bible's words, we are all 'destined to die'.<sup>176</sup> Not even suicides decide to die - they merely choose the day, the time, the place and the method. Death is the final item on our earthly agenda and we cannot avoid reaching it. We are all sinners and we all die. As Jesus was without sin he was not subject to 'the law of sin and death'; he was outside of death's jurisdiction. Yet he died, and made it crystal clear that he did so of his own volition. On one occasion he told his hearers, 'No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.'<sup>177</sup> At the time of his arrest, he rejected violent resistance and told one of his companions, 'Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than 'twelve legions of angels?''<sup>178</sup> Jesus could have been delivered at any time he wished, but he chose otherwise. Even clearer evidence comes from the moment of his death, when he 'cried out again in a loud voice' and 'gave up his spirit'.<sup>179</sup> Both phrases are important. The first tells us that Jesus did not die of physical exhaustion, unable to continue any longer. The second literally means, 'He sent his spirit away,' like a master dismissing a servant. The Bible specifically states, 'No man has power to retain the spirit, or authority over the day of death,'<sup>180</sup> yet here again Jesus proved the exception to the rule and showed that he had complete authority over the entire process of dying. As Augustine wrote some 400 years later, 'He gave up his life because he willed it, when he willed it and as he willed it.'<sup>181</sup>

Secondly, it was the only truly vicarious death in human history. We are all moved by stories of those who sacrifice their own lives to rescue others, or even take the place of the condemned, yet what Jesus did was infinitely more significant. When he died on behalf of others and in their place, he took upon himself the penalty for sin which they had incurred. The uniqueness of Jesus' substitutionary death lay in the fact that, although he was innocent of all sin, his death was a sin-bearing and atoning sacrifice. This tremendous truth is to be found in Old Testament prophecy and in New Testament narrative and teaching. Isaiah had written about a suffering servant who would bear the sins of others and die in their place<sup>182</sup> and, at a last meal with his disciples, Jesus quoted from the passage concerned and told them that 'What is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.'<sup>183</sup> Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul writes, 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us';<sup>184</sup> Peter says, 'Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God';<sup>185</sup> and John adds, 'Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.'<sup>186</sup> God's perfect holiness demands

that all sin - every sin - must be punished, and when Jesus took the place of others, he became as accountable for their sins as if he had been responsible for committing them.

Those who see the death of Jesus as nothing more than an example of how to endure suffering with meekness, courage and dignity are missing the central thrust of the Bible's message, as one illustration will be sufficient to demonstrate. Jesus spoke of his death as being 'for the forgiveness of sins',<sup>187</sup> but how could an example, however brilliant, achieve this? As John Stott explains, 'A pattern cannot secure our pardon... An example can stir our imagination, kindle our idealism and strengthen our resolve, but it cannot cleanse the defilement of our past sins, bring peace to our troubled conscience or fetch us home to God.'<sup>188</sup> The death of Jesus was an example, but it was much more than that. It was the only occasion in human history when one human being volunteered to take upon himself the appalling yet just penalty which God imposes on sinners. It was unique.

We are faced with the amazing fact that when Jesus died on the cross, God himself was suffering in the place of others, and paying the penalty for their sin. Far from insulating himself against suffering, God is the supreme sufferer in the universe. In the person of Jesus Christ, he has come to us in our desperate and self-imposed plight. He has entered into the deepest suffering of the human race, and in the death of 'his own Son'<sup>189</sup> has provided the means by which the punishment for human rebellion can be turned aside and he can graciously forgive evil and bring the evildoers concerned into a living and eternal relationship with himself.

Two things stand out when we give serious thought to this. The first is that God's justice was not compromised. The Bible tells us that 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,'<sup>190</sup> and that 'The wages of sin is death,'<sup>191</sup> yet also makes it clear that when Jesus died in the place of others, and on their behalf, he became as accountable for their wickedness as if he had been responsible for it. As a result he received in his own body and spirit the full fury of God's holy anger against evil.

The Bible specifically says that God acted in this way 'to demonstrate his justice'.<sup>192</sup> The death of Jesus involved no 'back-room deal' or sleight of hand. Nor was it a spectacular but empty gesture.

Isaiah anticipated the true meaning of it when he wrote:

He was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.<sup>193</sup>

Secondly, the death of Jesus reveals God's amazing love. Just as emphatically as the Bible tells us that the death of Jesus demonstrates God's unflinching justice, his unwillingness to gloss over sin and 'let bygones be bygones', so it tells us that in that death 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'<sup>194</sup> In what some believers would call the greatest statement in Scripture, Jesus himself said, 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'<sup>195</sup>

Those who claim that there cannot be a God of either justice or love have failed to grasp that in the death of Jesus he is seen to be both. As Alister McGrath puts it, 'God suffered in Christ. He knows what it is like to experience pain. He has travelled down the road of pain, abandonment, suffering and death... God is not like some alleged hero with feet of clay, who demands that others suffer, while remaining aloof from the world of pain himself. He has passed through the shadow of suffering himself ... and, by doing so, transfigures the sufferings of his people.'<sup>196</sup>

## Man alive!

We can now return to the sequence of factors which mark Jesus out from the rest of the human race. The sixth way in which this is true is that his resurrection was unique. Jesus died at about three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and was buried less than three hours later in a cave carved out of a rock face in a nearby garden, after which the entrance to the tomb was covered by 'a big stone'.<sup>198</sup> To prevent Jesus' disciples from removing the body, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate posted a detachment of soldiers at the tomb and had his own official seal attached to the stone.<sup>199</sup>

By Sunday morning, the body had gone. At least five people who visited the site said so,<sup>200</sup> and not a single contemporary is known to have doubted it. What is more, Jesus' followers were soon risking their lives on the streets of Jerusalem by branding his murderers as 'wicked men'<sup>201</sup> or announcing that he had been raised... from the dead'.<sup>202</sup> Their message has been the linchpin of the Christian church ever since, and has successfully withstood every attempt to dislodge it. I have written elsewhere about these attacks,<sup>203</sup> but a thumbnail sketch of some of them will be useful here.

'The tomb was not empty.' This is woefully weak: why did the authorities not encourage people to visit it and see for themselves?

'The first visitors all went to the wrong tomb.' Yet we are specifically told that at least two of them had been present at the burial just thirty-six hours earlier and 'saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it'<sup>204</sup> What is more, the tomb had been donated by Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent local citizen;<sup>205</sup> would he have forgotten the location of his own carefully chosen burial plot?

'The body was stolen by a person or persons unknown.' There is not a shred of evidence for this, let alone any opportunity or motive. As Norman Anderson wryly comments, 'A Jew of that period could scarcely be suspected of stealing bodies on behalf of anatomical research!'<sup>206</sup>

'The Roman authorities removed the body.' They obviously had the opportunity, but why would they have done so? Why post a guard in the first place? If they had moved the body elsewhere, why did they not produce it when Jesus' followers began to announce his resurrection?

'The Jewish authorities removed the body.' As they were hand in glove with the Romans, and knew of prophecies that Jesus would rise from the dead after three days, they had both opportunity and motive for hiding it elsewhere for four days, when they could then squash the 'Jesus movement' at birth. Then why did they resort to arresting, imprisoning, flogging and executing the first Christian preachers when they could have killed off their movement by producing the body? The Jewish authorities' silence speaks volumes.

'Jesus' disciples removed the body.' This was the story cobbled together by the frantic religious authorities, who circulated the rumour that the disciples had snatched the body while the guards were asleep,<sup>207</sup> but it runs into an avalanche of problems. Would every one of the guards have fallen asleep on duty, knowing as they must have done that such an offence attracted the death penalty? How did the disciples manage to break open the seal, roll away the massive rock and take the body away without a single soldier noticing what was going on? If the guards were asleep, how did they know who had stolen the body? Did the body-snatchers leave a visiting card? If the guards were awake, how land why, did a handful of men who had run into hiding 'with the doors locked for fear of the Jews'<sup>208</sup> suddenly pluck up enough courage to tackle an armed squad of soldiers and risk the death penalty for breaking the governor's official seal - all for the purpose of taking possession of a body already in the safe keeping of one of their friends? Why is there no record of their ever being charged with a capital offence? The brilliant second-century Theologian Tertullian scornfully dismissed all the body-snatching theories by adding another that perhaps a gardener had removed the body to prevent crowds of visitors from damaging his vegetables'

'Jesus never actually died.' This is the so-called 'swoon theory' which was popularized in the eighteenth century, but has long since been comprehensively discredited, not least by pointing out that Pontius Pilate called for an official report from the officer in charge of the execution squads and only released the body to Joseph of Arimathea when he had this first-hand confirmation of the prisoner's death.<sup>209</sup> The swoon theory asks us to believe that after a succession of savage beatings by Roman soldiers, and being left for hours nailed by the hands and feet to a wooden beam and a vertical pole, Jesus lost consciousness, but remained alive, even when his body was ripped open by a soldier's spear in order to ensure that he had died. We must believe that nobody noticed any sign of life throughout the removal and burial of the body, and that later, revived by the cool air or the strong-smelling spices with which he had been embalmed, Jesus came out of coma, wriggled free from the tightly-wound grave-clothes, pushed aside the rock sealing the tomb, overcame the soldiers, ran off naked (the grave-clothes were left behind) and, by the time he met with his disciples a few hours later had made such a complete recovery that he persuaded them he had conquered death and begun a radiant new life. Surely only the grossly gullible could swallow such nonsense? Even if we did, we also have to believe that after more than thirty senseless years Jesus was suddenly transformed into a monstrous liar. It is hardly surprising that even an arch-sceptic like David Strauss had no hesitation in dismissing this whole scenario as 'impossible'.<sup>210</sup>

## **On the other hand...**

Evidence for the truth of Jesus' resurrection is plentiful and persuasive, and is backed up by some surprising credentials. In the first place, there is no description of the resurrection. If the disciples had made up the whole story, surely they would have included a dramatic eyewitness account?

Secondly, at a time when a woman's testimony was thought so worthless that it was not considered binding in Jewish law, the first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus is said to have been to a woman.<sup>211</sup> Would the disciples have scuppered their own scheme by building on such a flimsy foundation? Thirdly, while the different narratives agree on the essentials, they are not identical, and it is virtually impossible to fit them into a precise chronological order. This may seem like a weakness in the case, but it is exactly the opposite: if the disciples had invented the story, would they not have made sure that all the loose ends were tied up?

The positive evidence begins with the fact that the Bible records six independent, written testimonies (three of them by eyewitnesses) telling of eleven separate appearances over a period of forty days. Sceptics have suggested that these 'appearances' were hallucinations, but this line of attack founders on the fact that they fail to meet the necessary criteria. Those to whom Jesus appeared included a number of women,<sup>212</sup> a sceptical brother,<sup>213</sup> several fishermen,<sup>214</sup> a brilliant intellectual engaged in a vicious crusade to wipe out his followers,<sup>215</sup> and a close friend who had remained deeply sceptical even when others assured him that they had met the risen Jesus face to face.<sup>216</sup> He appeared in a garden, in a home, on a roadside, out in the country, on the seashore and on a hillside. He appeared at many different times of day, and hardly ever in places where he and his disciples had spent time together. What is more, he appeared not merely to individuals but to two, three, seven, eleven and on one occasion several hundred people at once.<sup>217</sup>

It is difficult to discount the force of this accumulation of evidence. Writing as a distinguished medical expert, Arthur Rendle Short says that 'The resurrection appearances break every known law of visions.'<sup>218</sup> A friend of mine once shocked 200 students at a school assembly by cutting the headmaster's tie in two with a pair of scissors. She then went on to say something like this: 'Imagine that on your way home this afternoon you met a friend and told him that you had seen the assembly speaker chop the headmaster's tie in two. Your friend would probably think you were pulling his leg, but supposing three other students who were there at the time told him the same story, and then that tomorrow nine others did so. Now imagine that by the end of the week all 200 students present at the assembly told your friend the same thing. Would it be reasonable for him to doubt them?' My friend made a good point. When Paul told friends at Corinth that Jesus appeared 'to five hundred of the brothers at the same time' he added, 'most of whom are still living'.<sup>219</sup> Those who doubted Jesus' resurrection were at liberty to interrogate hundreds of witnesses, all of whom would have confirmed the fact. As one scholar has explained, 'Hallucination involving five hundred people at once and repeated several times is unthinkable.'<sup>220</sup>

One other thing: why should hallucinations convince the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead? They had been utterly demoralized by his death, and resurrection was the last thing they expected. The first women at the tomb went to anoint his remains, not to arrange a press conference announcing his return to life! In their contemporary culture, it would have been much more natural to presume that they had seen a ghost. Francis Bridger points out that 'This would have been much more plausible to their contemporaries, since belief in resurrection was uncommon and outlandish. If they truly had wanted to convince as many people as possible, they would have been much better off avoiding the notion of the resurrection altogether.'<sup>221</sup>

A second striking piece of evidence for Jesus' resurrection is the sudden transformation of the disciples from a dejected, faithless and depressed rabble, cowering behind locked doors, to a fearless and dynamic band of believers, prepared to face persecution, imprisonment and execution rather than deny their convictions.<sup>222</sup> Something objective must have happened to kindle such a radical change, and this tremendous transformation from cowardice to courage leads Norman Anderson to claim that it is 'far and away the strongest circumstantial evidence for the resurrection'.<sup>223</sup> The disciples' transformation was what convinced Charles Colson that the biblical account of Jesus' resurrection was true. The Nixon administration had tried to cover up its burglary of the Democrats' Watergate offices but, in less than a month, three of those involved had gone to the Department of Justice to turn state evidence, and Richard Nixon's presidency was doomed. Some time later Colson wrote, 'In my Watergate experience I saw the inability of men - powered, highly motivated professionals - to hold together a conspiracy based on a lie... Yet Christ's followers maintained to their grim deaths by execution that they had in fact seen Jesus Christ raised from the dead. There was no conspiracy... Men and women do not give up their comfort - and certainly not their lives - for what they know to be a lie.'<sup>224</sup> As John Stott comments, 'Hypocrites and martyrs are not made of the same stuff.'<sup>225</sup>

The next piece of evidence brings the previous one up to date. Within a few years, enemies of the new movement accused its leaders of having 'caused trouble all over the world'.<sup>226</sup> By the early part of the fourth century, the movement was recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire, which had tried to kill it off at birth. Some 2,000 years later, it has become the largest religious movement the world has ever known, and its origin is to be found, not in some new moral teaching,

nor in an original slant on social issues, nor in a trendy new style of worship, but in one simple, stupendous fact: the resurrection of Jesus.

How convincing is the evidence for the resurrection? In a document found among his private papers, Lord Lyndhurst, one of the greatest minds in British legal history, wrote, 'I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet.'<sup>227</sup> The distinguished legal counsel Sir Edward Clarke was just as certain: 'As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study for the events of the first Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling.'<sup>228</sup> Lord Darling, a former Chief Justice of England, concluded: 'There exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.'<sup>229</sup> Small wonder that American author D. James Kennedy writes, 'The Grand Canyon wasn't caused by an Indian dragging a stick, and the Christian Church wasn't created by a myth.'<sup>230</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus is unique in the most radical sense: he is the only person raised from the dead and never to die again. There are several instances, in both Old and New Testaments, of people being miraculously raised from the dead, but in each case the person concerned had to suffer the trauma of death all over again. However, 'Since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.'<sup>231</sup> Having submitted to death once, on behalf of others, he has triumphed over it for ever, and countless millions of people, in every section of society, testify to the moral and spiritual dynamic he brings to their lives.

## The fly and the elephant

In *God in the Dock*, C. S. Lewis wrote, 'What are we to make of Jesus Christ? This is a question which has, in a sense, a frantically comic side. For the real question is not what we are to make of Christ, but what is he to make of us? The picture of a fly sitting deciding what it is going to make of an elephant has comic elements about it.'<sup>232</sup> Lewis' analogy is brilliant, yet the two questions are linked by the Bible's teaching that a person's assessment of Christ is fundamental in determining his or her destiny. The birth, life, claims, death and resurrection of Jesus clearly constitute a serious problem for the atheist, and brushing them aside is an escape hatch not open to the honest, serious thinker. Jesus demands a verdict and there are just four options available.

The first is that he was evil - specifically, that he was a blasphemous liar, a blatant hypocrite and a callous deceiver. On this view, he knew perfectly well that he was not divine, yet he desperately toyed with people's tangled emotions. When he saw them groaning under the burden of religious rules and regulations which brought them no relief, 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd',<sup>233</sup> he cruelly promised the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who trusted him,<sup>234</sup> knowing full well that he was lying through his teeth. Does that chime with the record of a loving, gracious, gentle, sympathetic teacher, who so clearly had his finger on the pulse of spiritual reality, who 'went around doing good',<sup>235</sup> and who caused people to be 'amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips'?<sup>236</sup> Even an entrenched sceptic like John Stuart Mill called Jesus 'the ideal representative and guide of humanity',<sup>237</sup> while the nineteenth-century arch-liberal Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose thinking was permeated with pantheism, was forced to admit that Jesus was 'the most perfect of all men that have yet appeared'.<sup>238</sup> If Jesus was a charlatan, how has he become the inspiration for so much goodness in society, especially in the giving of help to those in need? If the character of Jesus and his influence on others point to something essentially evil, rational discussion is pointless.

The second option is that he was deluded, especially about his own identity. This sounds a more promising approach, enabling us to dismiss his claims while commending his character, but it misses the point that his teaching and his claims were welded together. To give just one example, he spoke not only about 'the kingdom of God',<sup>239</sup> and 'the kingdom of heaven',<sup>240</sup> but also about 'my kingdom',<sup>241</sup> and clearly inferred that these were identical. The distinguished historian Kenneth Scott Latourette points out the significance of this: 'It is not his teachings which make Jesus so remarkable, although these would be enough to give him distinction. It is a combination of the teachings with the man himself. The two cannot be separated'.<sup>242</sup> Jesus was either much more than a great teacher, or he was much less, and to say that he was right in the whole flow of his teaching but wrong on its greatest theme is to be neither sensible nor honest.

The third is that he was mentally deranged. This is certainly radical, but far from original. In his own day there were those who said, 'He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?'<sup>243</sup> Insanity is frightening and mysterious, and sometimes leads people to make the most absurd claims about themselves. Norman Anderson tells of playing football for his school against a team from what was then known as a lunatic asylum, one of whose patients firmly believed that he was a poached

egg.<sup>244</sup> Yet such absurd claims are matched by unstable character traits in those concerned. Is this what we find in the life of Jesus? Far from being emotionally unbalanced, irrational, eccentric and self-absorbed, we find him balanced, utterly composed and constantly taken up with the needs of others, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, encouraging the sad and comforting the bereaved. Bernard Palmer's medical expertise leads him to this diagnosis: 'There are no mood swings, depressive episodes or the schizophrenic's tendency to be out of touch with reality. On the contrary, 'his biographers' paint a picture of somebody who is eminently sane, balanced and reliable - a tough, compassionate, practical man who drew love and respect from all who met him.'<sup>245</sup> His teaching clearly reflects this. If the Sermon on the Mount is an expression of insanity, we urgently need a global epidemic of it! Those who honestly examine the character of Jesus, listen to his words and conclude that he was a madman are telling us nothing about Jesus, but a great deal about themselves.

This leaves just one alternative. Writing to people who lived in a culture in which heretical ideas about God and man and their relationship to each other were rife, Paul told them that Jesus was 'the image of the invisible God',<sup>246</sup> that 'God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him',<sup>247</sup> and that 'In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form',<sup>248</sup> Elsewhere, he referred to 'our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ'<sup>249</sup> and stated that, in the person of Jesus, God 'appeared in a body'<sup>250</sup> The writer of Hebrews was equally clear, and described Jesus as 'the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being'.<sup>251</sup> These statements all confirm that when Jesus claimed, 'I and the Father are one',<sup>252</sup> he was telling the truth.

No other option is available. If Jesus is not evil, deluded or deranged, he is exactly who Scripture declares him to be- 'the 'true God and eternal life'.<sup>253</sup>

Where does that leave the atheist?  
Where does it leave you?

---

The last word **1** American Magazine, July 1922. **2.** David Barrett, editor of World Christian Encyclopaedia, cited in Evangelical Times, December 1987, puts the figure at 330,000.

**3.** Wales is just under 7,500 square miles, about the same size as New Jersey, the fifth smallest state in the U.S.A. **4.** See the 1998 Guinness Book of Records. **5.** Mission Aviation Fellowship. **6.**

Russell, Why I am Not a Christian. **7.** E. F. Bruce, Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament **8.** Cited by Benton, Is Christianity True? p.58. **9.** Cited by Rost, Thinking Carefully About God and Science, p.188. **10.** Daily Mail, 28 March 1991. **11.** See Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38. **12.** See Luke 2:21. **13.** Luke 2:16. **14.** Luke 2:40. **15.** Luke 2:43. **16.** Matthew 21:18. **17.** See John 1:18. **18.** John 4:6. **19.** See Luke 23:26. **20.** John 19:34. **21.** Mark 6:38. **22.** Mark 9:21. **23.** John 11:34. **24.** John 15:15. **25.** John 11:5. **26.** Mark 10:14. **27.** Mark 3:5. **28.** Luke 13:32. **29.** Matthew 7:15. **30.** Matthew 12:34. **31.** Matthew 23:17.

**32.** Matthew 23:27 **33.** Matthew 15:7. **34.** See Matthew 21:12-13. **35.** Ephesians 4:26, New American Standard Bible. **36.** D. M. Lloyd-Jones, Darkness and Light, Banner of Truth Trust, p.226.

**37.** Luke 19:41. **38.** Mark 7:34. **39.** Matthew 9:36. **40.** Luke 10:21. **41.** See Matthew 4:1-11. **42.** Hebrews 4:15. **43.** Hebrews 5:7. **44.** Luke 4:16. **45.** The exception is at Luke 4:18-19. **46.** See Matthew 4:2. **47.** See Matthew 6:16. **48.** Isaiah 65:9. **49.** Daniel 9:25. **50.** Malachi 3:1. **51.** Luke 4:16-21. **52.** John 5:46. **53.** John 15:25; see Psalms 35:19; 69:4. **54.** Daniel 7:13. **55.** e.g. Matthew 16:13. **56.** John 5:39. **57.** (Genesis 22:18, **58.** Genesis 49:10. **59.** Micah 5:2. **60.** Matthew 2:1. **61.** Cited in William Hendriksen, A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Banner of Truth Trust, p.430. **62.** See Zechariah 13:7; Mark 14:50.

**63.** See Zechariah 11:12-13; Matthew 26:15; 27:1-10. **64.** See Psalm 35:11; Matthew 26:60. **65.** See Isaiah 50:6; Matthew 26:67-68. **66.** See Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 27:14. **67.** See Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38. **68.** See Psalm 22:16; Luke 23:33. **69.** See Isaiah 53:12; Luke 23:34. **70.** See Psalm 34:20. **71.** See Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37. **72.** See Psalm 22:18; John 19:23-24. **73.** Stoner, Science Speaks, p.110. **74.** Ibid., p.108. **75.** Sunday Times, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1998. **76.** Luke 1:34. **77.** Matthew 1:25. **78.** Matthew 1:18. **79.** Cited by Thomas Boslooper, The Virgin Birth, Westminster Press, p.139. **80.** Robert G. Gromacki, The Virgin Birth, Baker Book House, p.180. **81.** Cited by G. W. H. Lampe, The Virgin Birth, Yonkers Book Co., p.7.

**82.** J. N. D. Anderson, Jesus Christ: The Witness of History, Inter-Varsity Press, p.80. **83.** The Times, 13 July 1984. **84.** Isaiah 7:14. **85.** Joel 1:8. **86.** Edward J. Young, Thy Word is Truth, Banner of Truth Trust, p.144. **87.** Jeremiah 31:22. **88.** (Genesis 2:11, 13. **89.** Psalm 71:21. **90.** Zechariah 13:7. **91.** David Langdon, Banner of Truth magazine, cited by Canton, Is Christianity True?, p.56. **92.** Luke 1:37. **93.** Luke 2:47. **94.** Luke 4:22. **95.** John 7:46. **96.** Matthew 7:28. **97.** Matthew 5:3-12. **98.** Matthew 6:9-13. **99.** Matthew 5:44. **100.** Matthew 5:48. **101.** Matthew 7:12. **102.** Evangelical Magazine of Wales, October-November 1996, p.12. **103.** Bernard Ramm, Protestant Christian Evidences, Moody Press, p.170. **104.** Matthew 4:24. **105.** See Matthew 9:27-30.