

## Was Jesus More Than a Great Moral Teacher?

### INTRODUCTION:

Jesus of Nazareth is often lumped into the same group of "*great moral teachers*" as Buddha, Gandhi, Mohammed, Confucius, and others.

This is how many see Him. They may have gotten this idea from attending Sunday school at an early age or from one of those "*Jesus movies*."

Perhaps they don't know why He might be a great teacher, but it sounds good and doesn't offend anyone.

**The truth is, most of what we know about Jesus comes from the New Testament, a collection of letters written by His followers who were also called His disciples.**

These letters record the things He did and said and also offer us a glimpse into the early years of the "*religion*" He founded, namely Christianity.

These same followers also wrote that Jesus rose from the dead, and, more amazingly, that He claimed to be the one, eternal God!

Suddenly we find Jesus in a group by Himself.

For no other great moral teacher ever claimed to be God, let alone rise from the dead.

**How did His followers, the apostles, come to make such fantastic claims?**

Were they lying? Or mistaken? Or being truthful?

If their claims prove false, what would happen to Christianity which is built upon those beliefs?

If their claims prove true, that Jesus is God, that He did rise from the dead, how should we respond to them -- and Him?

Let's investigate...

**There are three possibilities regarding Jesus' apostles and their claims that He is God and rose from the dead:**

- 1) THEY WERE LYING.
- 2) THEY WERE MISTAKEN.
- 3) THEY WERE TELLING THE TRUTH.

**Here's how we are going to approach this:**

We will scrutinize the two claims made against the apostles: They

were **lying** or they were mistaken.

If either one stands fast under heavy questioning and is a reasonable explanation of what really happened, it follows that Possibility 3 (they were telling the truth) must be untrue. Jesus is not God, nor did He rise from the dead. Christianity is a false religion and ought to be rejected.

However, if Possibilities 1 and 2 collapse, only one alternative remains.

Let's begin by inspecting...

### **POSSIBILITY 1: THE APOSTLES WERE LYING.**

If this is true, the apostles are being accused of forging a deceitful plot, and an incomprehensibly large one at that. SOME QUESTIONS...

#### **1. Why is there no scholarly book written about the "plot"?**

The Jews and Romans in power in Jesus' day were educated, intelligent people. Why would these people, the ones most intimate with the facts surrounding the events of Jesus' life and most eager to expose him as a fake, not expose an apostolic plot?

The apostles were very open about their claims. They didn't hide anything.

If the apostles were lying, why isn't there a shred of written work by any first century eyewitness showing us what really happened?

Where are the reputable books and writings of the last 2,000 years proving a plot?

John R.W. Stott says that the silence of Christ's enemies, those who would most readily expose a lie, *"is as eloquent a proof of the resurrection as the apostle's witness."*

#### **2. What was their motive?**

What drove His followers to conspire together in what would be the biggest and most successful Lie in recorded history?

What material benefit did any of the apostles derive?

They were flogged and scourged, beaten and abused, shipwrecked and imprisoned, stoned and starved.

They had no political power, no harem, and they were poor.

They were martyred by, among other methods, being crucified, sawn in two, stoned to death, and torn apart by animals.

Where are the selfish motives?

And why would they endure all of this for what they knew was a lie?

There is no evidence that a single one of them changed his story under torture or threat of death.

If this were a plot surely one of them would have admitted the lie. But -- Who? Where? When?

Again, the silence of history is deafening.

### **3. Why do the apostles make themselves and Jesus sometimes look so bad?**

The Gospels (the biographies of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) sometimes record the disciples making some very simple-minded statements.

They often behave irrationally.

Several times they receive strict and direct rebukes from Jesus.

Jesus Himself appears afraid and doubtful in Gethsemane before His arrest.

Why would liars make themselves look so ignorant and cowardly -- so human?

Why would these master conspirators sometimes make Jesus appear as less than a confident almighty hero?

### **4. Where is the collusion?**

You may have seen in movies or read in books incidences where a group of people were plotting to deceive the authorities. It was always important that they *"got their stories right"* to make their lie more believable. This would be an example of collusion.

Now, if the apostles got together and cooked up this whole idea of Jesus' divinity and resurrection, why don't their stories, when examined together, show that?

Why aren't their recollections straighter, neater, more like one another as we would expect if there were collusion?

Why, when reading the Gospels, does it seem almost like we are reading four different accounts of Jesus' life; but four different accounts which, when put together and resolved, give us one big and non-contradictory story?

### **5. How did they manage to get James and Paul into this?**

Besides the mystery of how they pulled off this plot in the first place is the question, *"How did they recruit James and Paul into it?"*

James was a half-brother of Jesus who, at first, did not believe Him and was even embarrassed by Him. Later, we read that he became very prominent in the early church.

Paul was originally a Pharisee, a member of a powerful Jewish religious group. He actively opposed and rounded up the followers of Jesus and even supervised some of their executions. Then suddenly he joined up with them and spent the rest of his life in poverty and preaching!

What did either of them gain by joining the Plot? What ulterior motives made them both make a 180 degree turn and enjoin themselves to this Lie, even to the point of martyrdom? (James was executed in about AD 62, Paul in about AD 68.)

## **POSSIBILITY 2: THE APOSTLES WERE MISTAKEN**

Here again, there are many weighty questions that must be answered if we are to believe this claim to be true -- questions such as...

### **1. How could the disciples have been mistaken about Jesus' divinity?**

Where did they get the idea that Jesus was God?

**Did they just think it up?** Any of us can spot flaws in others, even in those people we hardly know. The apostles would surely have seen a sinful and imperfect nature in Jesus after walking with Him for three years!

Had they seen Him sin once they would have, being Jews, discounted any notion that Jesus was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob -- the Almighty God.

**Did they get this idea from Jesus?** Was Jesus mistaken about His alleged Godhood? But surely one who is a mere mortal, imperfect man and thinks himself to be the Creator God of the universe suffers the worst type of delusion and is completely insane!

But did an insane lunatic give us the Sermon on the Mount, the Parables, the Golden Rule, the Lord's Prayer, and the Beatitudes?

Take time and read these for yourself. They are not the rantings of a deranged madman.

And no reputable scholars challenge the sanity of the Preacher from Galilee.

**Then maybe Jesus was lying about his divinity?** If so, he was NOT a

great moral teacher as so many claim. He, by his horrific untruth, was a first order hypocrite and was responsible for the martyrdom of hundreds of thousands.

And if Jesus did lie then He was the greatest of fools because he was tortured and crucified clinging to the LIE.

## **2. How could the disciples have been mistaken about Jesus' resurrection?**

Were they hallucinating? Hundreds of people, though, were said to have seen Jesus alive after his death; people with all kinds of psychological make-ups. There were doubters and skeptics, the hopeful and the wary, men and women, young and old. This is not a scenario for mass hallucination.

And why did these "*hallucinations*" suddenly stop about six weeks after His crucifixion, the same time the Bible claims Jesus physically left the earth and ascended into Heaven?

Some claim Jesus never died at the crucifixion. He was only unconscious when He was put into the tomb then "*came to*" hours or days afterwards. The disciples and others then "*mistook*" Him for being resurrected.

If so, how did Jesus survive the sword that was plunged into His side? How did He survive those hours with no medical attention? How did He undo yards of tightly wound burial garments? How did He roll away the stone? How did He trick the Roman guards assigned to his tomb to let Him go and then to lie about it? How did He walk around on wounded feet? Why didn't He tell his disciples the truth? When and how did he really die?

Which leads us logically to the question: "*If He did die and was not raised, where is His body?*"

**Did the Jews take it?** The Jews, of all people involved here, were the most eager to prove Jesus a false Messiah. They would have paraded Jesus' body to let everyone know this man was justly executed.

**Did the Romans take it?** An out-of-the-way Jesus was one less problem for the occupying Roman government in troubled Palestine. What motive would drive them to pull off a stunt which would only add fuel to this already out-of-control land?

**Did the disciples steal the body?** If so, this was a plot and we must return back to Possibility 1 (they were lying).

Finally, if Jesus' teachings led the disciples either to devise the greatest hoax in history or to be so horribly mistaken about His true nature, then He was one lousy moral teacher!

**CONCLUSION:**

If the first and second possibilities are unreasonable and collapse under the weight of the questions presented, then the apostles' claims that Jesus is God and rose from the dead still stand. There are no other choices than the three we considered. They cannot all three be false.

This lesson is not meant to be an exhaustive study on the subject. There are many good books which tackle this issue infinitely better and more thoroughly.

**Our purpose here is two-fold:**

**1)** We hope to show you that Faith and Reason are not necessarily mutually exclusive, that they might actually coexist. If God is the Source of Reason, we would expect Him to work in Nature and reveal Himself in a reasonable way. Though some aspects of the "true" faith -- that faith which we hold to be Christianity -- may be beyond reason due to our limited mental capacity, they ought never to be illogical, nonsensical, or anti-reasonable.

**2)** If Jesus is God, as we are confident He is, then His promises hold true for you and me. Our God does love us. He does want us to turn from our evil, self-destructive ways and be reconciled to Him. Jesus did die in our place to accomplish this reconciliation. If we commit our lives to Him, we do become His sons and daughters. We can have joy and peace and forgiveness and hope. We will spend eternity in His holy presence. We need not fear ever again.

Please open your heart to the possibility that He was more than just a man, that He is Our Lord.

**C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *Mere Christianity* (p. 56):**

***"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."***

**What He has left open to us is to either follow Him or reject Him.**

**And ultimately, because He loves us. . . THE CHOICE IS OURS.**