

# Your Verdict on the Empty Tomb

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Setting the Scene</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Most Important Question in the World</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The Courts and the Jury</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The Meaning of the Resurrection</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>The Historical Facts</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>The Empty Tomb</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Direct Evidence</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>The Witnesses Examined</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Circumstantial Evidence</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>So What?</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Your Verdict</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>A Step Further</b>	<b>73</b>

## 1 Setting the Scene

'In the world today a person who is religiously inclined is usually regarded as a crank, a killjoy, unhappy and a general bore. I was once one of those people who jeered at Christianity in this way but one day a great change took place in my life; the change from self to Christ.'

I wrote those words over forty years before this book was written, shortly after I became a Christian. As I look back on my life this was certainly the most significant thing that has happened to me. More significant than graduating from university, getting married, becoming a father, becoming a solicitor, becoming a senior partner in my firm or anything else this world has offered me.

As a child I never went to Sunday school and very seldom to church. In my early teenage years I became an atheist, quite convinced that God did not exist. My first encounter with real Christianity was when I went to Oxford University to study law. I must have been fairly intelligent, but I was certainly abysmally ignorant as to what Christianity was all about.

A fellow student at my college started telling me about his faith. He was different from anyone I had ever met before. To him God was real and relevant. I can well remember having many arguments and discussions with him. As an atheist and a budding lawyer I was quite convinced that I would soon refute his arguments about

## *Setting the Scene*

Christianity. But this was not the case. Instead, for the first time in my life, I found myself thinking about the meaning of life and the evidence for the Christian faith. As I argued furiously with my Christian friend, I had a horrible suspicion at times that, after all, he was right and Christianity was true. This made me argue against Christianity more than ever! But one Easter Sunday everything changed.

I awoke in the morning of that day with no thoughts of Christ at all in my mind. I was as full of this world as the next person. Then suddenly the thought came to me that on Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead. He was alive and I could come into contact with him. Something inexplicable happened to me. I suddenly knelt down and talked to Christ. Yes, to Christ. I suddenly knew he was living, that he was near me and that he wanted to enter my life. I talked to him. I said, as far as I can remember, 'Come into my life, Lord Jesus.' As I said this, he came. Yes, he himself. I knew he was mine. A marvellous joy filled my life.

I can now look back on what happened then and can say from personal experience that conversion to Christianity is real and it lasts. Over the years, I have been asked many times how the change from being an atheist to being a Christian took place. I always reply by saying that there are two reasons for my being a Christian. Firstly, I found that Christianity is true. Secondly, I have found that it works in my life. Many people are surprised when I claim that Christianity is true. Somehow they have the idea that to become a Christian is to commit intellectual suicide. It reminds me of the teenager's definition of faith as 'believing what you know isn't true!' My experience is the exact opposite of this. One of the main reasons I became a Christian is not that I stopped thinking but that I started thinking. As I argued with my Christian friend, I saw for the first time there was much evidence in favour of Christianity.

My subsequent career as a lawyer has confirmed this. Again, this may sound surprising. Lawyers are not noted for their Christian faith. In fact, the opposite is true. Many times I have been asked

## Setting the Scene

how I can possibly be both a Christian and a lawyer. I usually reply by saying that I wouldn't want to be a lawyer if I weren't a Christian!

Over the years my Christian faith has strengthened, guided and judged all that I have done as a lawyer. Christianity has given me a new perspective on law, justice and other legal principles. It has also given me a sense of finiteness. Lawyers are tempted to pretend to be God and to be judgmental. Many a time I have been reminded of the saying of the old Puritan when he saw someone being taken away to the gallows to be hanged — 'There go I but for the grace of God.'

Above all, law trains one to think logically. One of my main hobbies is playing chess and the thing that always fascinates me about that game is the sheer logic of working out one's moves in advance. The law has the same fascination. Not only does it train one to think but also to seek for the truth. Lawyers know when a case has been proved and are well used to assessing evidence. When I was an atheist I had an inbuilt prejudice against the Christian faith. It was through examining the evidence that I became a Christian.

This experience of examining the evidence and then being converted to Christianity is by no means unique to me. One of America's leading lawyers a few years ago was Charles Colson. At the time of the Watergate scandal he was serving as Special Counsel to President Nixon. He was at the height of his legal career and was well known as Nixon's 'hatchet man', described by *Time* magazine as 'tough, wily, nasty and tenaciously loyal to Richard Nixon'. Suddenly in the crisis of Watergate his life was changed. He first began to consider the claims of Jesus Christ when visiting a business friend. Colson was startled to find his friend talking as if Jesus were real. Up to then, as far as Colson was concerned, Jesus was just a historical figure. His friend explained that Jesus is alive today and that his Spirit is part of today's scene. Before he left, his friend gave him a copy of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis and urged

## Setting the Scene

him to read it for himself. A few days later the opportunity came to do this. Colson was on holiday in a cottage by the sea. He recalled in his book *Born Again*:

I unpacked Lewis's book and placed a yellow pad at my side to jot down key points, not unlike the way I prepared to argue a major case in court... All my training insisted that analysis precedes decision, that arguments be marshalled in two neat columns, pros and cons... On the top of the pad I wrote: Is there a God? I opened *Mere Christianity* and found myself... face to face with an intellect so disciplined, so lucid, so relentlessly logical that I could only be grateful I had never faced him in a court of law. Soon I had covered two pages of yellow paper with pros to my query, 'Is there a God?' On the con side were listed the conventional doubts so prevalent in our materialistic, science-has-all-the-answers society — we can't see, hear or feel God. Or can we?... As a lawyer I was impressed by Lewis's arguments about moral law, the existence of which he demonstrates is real, and which has been perceived with astonishing consistency in all times and places... The central thesis of Lewis's book, and the essence of Christianity, is summed up in one mind-boggling sentence: Jesus Christ is God (see John 10:30). Not just part of God, or just sent by God, or just related to God. He was (and therefore, of course, is) God. The more I grappled with those words, the more they began to explode before my eyes, blowing into smithereens a lot of comfortable old notions I had floated through life with, without thinking much about them. Lewis put it so bluntly that you can't slough it off: for Christ to have talked as he talked, lived as he lived, died as he died, he was either God or a raving lunatic. There was my choice, as simple, stark, and

## *Setting the Scene*

frightening as that, no fine shadings, no gradations, no compromises. No one had ever thrust this truth at me in such a direct and unsettling way. I'd been content to think of Christ as an inspired prophet and teacher who walked the sands of the Holy Land 2,000 years ago — several cuts above other men of his time or, for that matter, any time. But if one thinks of Christ as no more than that, I reasoned, then Christianity is a simple palliative, like taking a sugar-coated placebo once a week on Sunday morning. On this sunny morning on the Maine coast with fresh breezes picking up off the ocean, it was hard for me to grasp the enormity of this point—that Christ is the living God who promises us a day-to-day living relationship with him and a personal one at that... And so early that Friday morning, while I sat alone staring at the sea I love, words I had not been certain I could understand or say fell naturally from my lips: 'Lord Jesus, I believe you. I accept you. Please come into my life. I commit it to you.'

In this simple way Colson's whole life was changed. Ahead of him lay seven months in prison because of his involvement in Watergate. Afterwards, he abandoned his law career and is now giving all his time to the ministry of Prison Fellowship, working amongst prisoners in many countries.

Charles Colson certainly had to do some thinking before his encounter with Jesus Christ. My aim in writing this book is to start you thinking. Before I became a Christian I was ignorant about the Christian faith. Like so many people today, I was quite sure that the Gospels were full of contradictions, but I had never even read them! It always amazes me how many people are still in that position. They are extremely knowledgeable about life, politics and every other subject under the sun. But they have never really examined

## *Setting the Scene*

the claims and teachings of Jesus. Sir Norman Anderson in his book *A Lawyer among the Theologians* has pointed out:

Lawyers are predisposed by their training to accept the propositions that documentary evidence should, as far as possible, be allowed to speak for itself; that an honest attempt should be made to sift and assess oral testimony and not to jump to any premature conclusions that it is mutually contradictory; and that circumstantial evidence may, on occasion, be exceedingly persuasive. A lawyer, and especially a judge, is always face to face with the problem of how to evaluate evidence and distinguish the reliable from the misleading.

Ever since I became a Christian I have carefully examined the evidence for the resurrection, the physical return from the dead of Jesus Christ. My purpose in writing this book is to present this evidence to you. I claim that logic must point in the direction of his resurrection on an actual day and date in our history when, if you had been there, you could have touched the living Jesus and heard him speak. There is another reason why I have written this book. For far too long the Christian faith has been under attack. Of course, it does not really need a lawyer to defend it. As a famous preacher said many years ago, 'Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion!' But, despite this, I feel it is high time someone spoke up for the Christian faith. I maintain that not only does it stand up to examination, but it is the most relevant thing in the world today.

## 2 The Most Important Question in the World

‘If you could meet any person of the past and ask just one question, whom would you meet and what question would you ask?’ When asked this, Professor Joad, then professor of philosophy at London University and not a Christian, answered, ‘I would meet Jesus Christ and ask him the most important question in all the world — “Did you or did you not rise from the dead?”’ Professor Joad was right. The most important question in the world is whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is alive today. In other words, did Easter really happen?

To start with, the resurrection is the very heart of the Christian faith. In connection with a television programme called *Credo*, a book was published entitled *In Search of Christianity*. Amongst the contributors was Colin Buchanan, the Bishop of Aston, who stated ‘The Jesus Christ to whom Christians respond is not the dead (though appealing) person of the past, but the Living Lord of the present. He is the same Jesus Christ who is presented to us in the Gospels.’ Any search for Christianity must begin here. Personally, the importance of the resurrection really came home to me when I was asked to speak to a university group on ‘The Message of the Early Church’. In order to find out what it was, I read carefully through all the thirteen messages or sermons in the book of Acts — seven by Paul, five by Peter and one by Stephen. As I read them, I

## *The Most Important Question in the World*

was impressed by the fact that, as recorded by Luke, they were brief and simple. Also I realised that every one of them had one thing in common, namely, Jesus is alive and he can change your life.

Peter sums it up in his message on the day of Pentecost: *This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses* (Acts 2:32). Every sermon was an Easter sermon. The resurrection is mentioned more than one hundred times in the New Testament and nearly every book refers to it. This is what Christianity is all about: that Jesus Christ not only lived and died but on the third day he rose again from the dead. Without the resurrection there is no gospel. As Paul says, *If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile* (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Any consideration of what Christianity is about must begin here. Yet, amazingly enough, in these days when Jesus is often in the news, this is something we have forgotten. The rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* ended with Jesus in the grave. Incredibly it missed out the most vital thing about the life of Christ. His death was not the end. He rose from the dead. As a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Michael Ramsey, has said, 'For the first disciples, the gospel without the resurrection was not merely a gospel without its final chapter; it was not a gospel at all.'

The resurrection also makes Christianity unique. In the global village in which we live people are increasingly asking, 'What is the difference between Christianity and other religions?' The answer is basically very simple. Christianity is the only religion in the world based on the resurrection from the dead of its founder.

No Buddhist has ever claimed that Buddha rose from the dead. When he died it was a passing away in which nothing whatever remained behind. The same applied to Mohammed. According to tradition he died on the 8 June 632AD at the age of 61 in Medina, where his tomb is annually visited by thousands of devout Muslims. But down the ages the claim of Christianity is that Jesus not only died but rose from the dead and is alive today, changing people's lives. If this is true, then Christianity stands by itself. There is no real

## *The Most Important Question in the World*

comparison with other religions because their founders are dead. Christians claim that the founder of their faith is still alive.

Many years ago a fellow lawyer, Frank Morison, started to write a book disproving the historical resurrection of Christ. He felt that the evidence for it rested upon insecure foundations. A remarkable thing happened as he was doing research for his book. As he studied the life of Christ, sifted the evidence at first hand and formed his own judgment, a revolution took place in his thinking. Instead of writing a book disproving the resurrection, the overwhelming evidence in favour of it compelled him to write a book proving it! Its first chapter was entitled 'The Book that Refused To Be Written', and his book *Who Moved the Stone?* was a bestseller for very many years.

In his play *The Vigil*, Ladislas Fodor cleverly constructs a court scene in which the evidence for the resurrection is examined. A gardener is accused of stealing Christ's body, witnesses are called and evidence is brought in court for and against him. The audience is the jury. They are drawn into the play by being asked to give a verdict at the end of it.

In the same way I want you to imagine that you are a member of the jury while I, the lawyer, present to you the evidence for Christ's resurrection.

### 3 The Courts and the Jury

It may be helpful first to describe how a court works. Perhaps you have never been to court. If this is so, I would certainly recommend going to see one in action. All sorts of disputes come before English courts. In fact, there are different courts for different types of cases. One basic starting point is to decide whether any case is criminal or civil. Usually this is pretty obvious. In a criminal case someone is being prosecuted for a criminal offence and in a civil case someone is being sued, say, for money he or she owes.

But whatever their differences, all court cases have one common factor. There are two parties with conflicting interests. The way of resolving their dispute is for it to be adjudicated upon by an independent person. In a serious criminal case such as murder or manslaughter this is, of course, a judge. As two parties are involved, each of them will have their own lawyer to represent their case. Each of these lawyers will call witnesses to present evidence in favour of their client. In criminal cases in the Crown Court there will also be a jury. The case must be decided by the law of the land.

Lord Denning sums it up well in a judgment of his: 'To every subject in this land, no matter how powerful, I would use Thomas Fuller's words over 300 years ago: "Be you never so high, the law is above you"'. The task of the judge, besides giving sentence at the end of the case, is to see that the law is observed. It is interesting to find that the red robe which judges still wear was originally a

## *The Courts and the Jury*

cassock, rooting English law with the Christian faith, stressing that the law was above self and national interest. One basic principle of English law is that a person charged with committing a crime may only be tried by his equals. Generally speaking, therefore, everyone who appears before an English criminal court will have the question of guilt or innocence determined by lay men or women. If tried in a Magistrates Court it is usually determined by lay magistrates. If tried in the Crown Court it is determined by a jury. A jury consists of twelve people aged between 18 and 65 who have been resident in this country for five years. Over 200 years ago Sir William Blackstone, the great English lawyer, said in his Oxford lectures on law: 'Trial by jury ever has been, and I trust ever will be, looked upon as the glory of the English Law. It is the most transcendent privilege which any subject can enjoy, or wish for, that he cannot be affected either in his property, his liberty or his person, but by the consent of twelve of his neighbours and equals.'

I hope that I have helped to set the scene before presenting to you the evidence for the resurrection. Like the audience in the play *The Vigil* I want you to imagine that you are on a jury faced with the responsibility of giving a verdict at the end of the case.

But before I deal with your duties it is necessary to mention what lawyers call the 'standard of proof'. Suppose you are involved in a car accident and someone is injured. You are then sued in court for damages and the court has to decide whether or not you have been negligent. How does it do this? What would constitute proof?

The leading legal text book on evidence states: 'The standard of proof required in civil cases is generally expressed as proof on the balance of probabilities. If the evidence is such that the tribunal can say "We think it more probable than not", the burden is discharged, but if the probabilities are equal it is not.' When considering the evidence for the resurrection, we must apply the same 'standard of proof'. In other words, what is the most likely thing that happened?

## **The jury**

With this in mind, let me go over the duties of a jury. One of these is that it must be unbiased. We must not be like the foreman of a jury who, when asked to give its verdict, said ‘Seven of us find the prisoner guilty as charged; three of us find him as guilty as they come; and two of us find him guilty from the word “Go”!’

But to be unbiased is very often more difficult than it appears, as all of us have inbuilt prejudices. A striking example of this is the Frenchman Ernest Renan, who wrote a book, *The Life of Jesus*, in which he denounced the resurrection of Christ. Yet, by his own admission, Renan started with the presupposition: ‘There is no such thing as a miracle. Therefore, the resurrection did not take place!’ Such an attitude would not be tolerated in a court of law. We must be as unbiased as we can when examining the evidence. Above all, the duty of a jury is to give a verdict. In fact, the one thing that a judge never does in a criminal case is to judge. The judge presides over the court, sums up at the end of the hearing and pronounces the sentence. However, it is the jury that has to decide whether the accused is guilty or innocent, and it has a responsibility to bring in a verdict.

The evidence for the resurrection also demands a verdict. We must examine it and make up our minds as to whether or not Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

## 4 The Meaning of the Resurrection

What does the Bible mean when it mentions the resurrection of Jesus? What actually happened on the first Easter Sunday morning?

Resurrection is not the immortality of the soul. This was the view of Greek philosophy. The body is the prison of the soul and when it dies, the soul is released from its bondage to go to heaven. This view is reflected in the well-known words of the dying Socrates when he said, 'Catch me if you can.' Also, in the popular song about John Brown whose 'body lies a-mould'ring in the grave, but his soul goes marching on'.

Is the resurrection, then, reincarnation? This idea is found in many Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. In Hinduism the same soul may be in one life a god, in another a human, in a third an animal or even a plant. Everything depends upon how one lived in the previous life. Any evil in this life is a punishment for the soul's behaviour in the past. This process of birth and rebirth must go on unceasingly until the ultimate state of 'nirvana' or nothingness is reached. One is then beyond feeling either pain or pleasure.

But this is not the Christian view of our future. The Bible clearly teaches *it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment* (Hebrews 9:27). Above all, resurrection means eternal life and not eternal extinction.

## *The Meaning of the Resurrection*

Is the resurrection the mere bringing back of a corpse to life? The New Testament records six instances of this. The son of the widow of Nain, Jairus's daughter, Lazarus, the saints raised at the time of the death of Jesus, Dorcas and Eutychus. But in all these cases the return to life was only temporary. Each one of these people had to die a second time. This does not apply to Jesus: *We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him* (Romans 6:9).

So, the resurrection of Jesus adds a new dimension to these views. As Professor F. F. Bruce has pointed out in his 1968 book *Christianity Today*, 'To the disciples themselves, and to all other Jews of that time, resurrection meant bodily resurrection.' This is different from a mere resuscitation. Jesus, after his resurrection, was not a revived corpse. Paul states that he had a 'spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15:44). This is a body no longer subject to the laws of nature. Jesus could suddenly appear to the disciples and then just as suddenly disappear. But Jesus was not a disembodied spirit. Not only did he expressly deny this, but he drew attention to the scars of the crucifixion. These would assure the disciples of his identity, and to handle his body would convince them of his reality (Luke 24:39). A wonderful change had taken place. Jesus was the same person and yet in other ways not the same.

The resurrection was certainly not just in the minds of the disciples. As James Dunn has said, 'By resurrection they clearly meant that something had happened to Jesus himself. God had raised him, not merely reassured them. He was alive again, made alive again with the life which is the climax of God's purpose for humankind, not merely retrieved from the jaws of death but conqueror over death, "exalted to God's right hand". It was this glowing conviction which lay at the heart of the chain reaction which began Christianity.'

## 5 The Historical Facts

How does a lawyer begin a legal case? Contrary to popular opinion, he or she does not begin by considering how much they intend to charge! They start with the facts. Any consideration about the resurrection of Jesus Christ must begin here.

Some years ago I took part in a mock court of inquiry into the resurrection of Jesus Christ at the College of Law at Chester. This was arranged by the Christian Union at the college, who challenged the Humanist Students' Group to hold this inquiry. At it there were counsel both for and against the resurrection. Also, expert witnesses were called. Before the inquiry, I was interested as to what line the other side would take and was somewhat surprised to find it maintaining that the whole of Christianity is a myth. Jesus Christ never existed! I had been asked to appear at the court of inquiry to give evidence for the facts about Jesus Christ. This meant that my evidence was crucial.

In my proof of evidence I stated that history tells us three facts about Jesus Christ, namely:

1. He is a historical figure who lived nearly two thousand years ago.
2. He was crucified on a cross and died.

3. After his body had been buried his tomb was found to be empty three days later. From that moment onwards the early Christians claimed that Jesus had risen from the dead.

These facts can be proved in three ways.

## **Jewish writers**

The most important of these is Josephus, who was born in Jerusalem about AD37 into a distinguished Jewish family. He was well educated as a young man and, after studying the various schools of Jewish thought, became a Pharisee.

In AD64, the year of the burning of Rome, he visited that city as a member of a Jewish embassy. Clearly he was impressed by what he saw, and became friendly with members of the Emperor's family. When he returned to Jerusalem he found his own country ready to revolt against the Romans. Josephus appears to have advised against this, but was loyal to the Jewish nation. In its rebellion against Rome he became commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee.

After their defeat, he surrendered to the victorious Roman general Vespasian. He then prophesied that one day Vespasian would become emperor. Vespasian was impressed by this and kept Josephus as his prisoner. When this prediction came true in AD69 he was freed. He then joined the Roman general Titus in his siege of Jerusalem and was there when it fell in the summer of AD70.

After this, Josephus went to live in Rome where he became a close friend of the Emperor and a Roman citizen. He devoted the second half of his life to writing numerous books on the history of the Jews. One of these was a twenty-volume history of the Jewish nation covering the period from its earliest origins down to his own day and the revolt against Rome.

Josephus refers to many figures of the New Testament — Pilate, Annas, the Herods, John the Baptist and (twice) to Jesus Christ. The first reference is very brief and is about James, 'the brother of Jesus,

who was called Christ'. The second reference is longer, and far more important, but it has been questioned. This is because in this text, Josephus says not too little but too much. He states that Jesus was the Messiah and that he appeared to the disciples alive again on the third day. It is argued that, as a Jew, Josephus would not have believed this and that some early Christians must have tampered with the original text. But, despite this, the text as it stands is supported with only slight variations by all the manuscripts which we have.

This question as to the original wording may be resolved by an Arabic manuscript released in 1972 by Professor Schlomo Pines of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This manuscript omits the disputed portions and reads:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

To summarise, these two passages in Josephus tell us the following facts about Jesus:

1. The time when he lived.
2. He was the brother of James.
3. He was called the Messiah by some.
4. He was known as a wise and good man.
5. He had many disciples, both Jews and Gentiles.

6. Pilate condemned him to death by crucifixion.
7. The disciples reported that Jesus had risen from the dead and that he had appeared to them on the third day after his crucifixion.
8. As a result the disciples continued to proclaim his teachings.

There are other references to Jesus in Jewish literature, the most important of which is that preserved in the tract Sanhedrin. This confirms that Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve and that this was an offence against Jewish religious laws.

## **Pagan writers**

It is interesting to find that the first mention in Roman literature of Christ and the Christians is in the police news of that day. According to the Romans, Caesar was Lord, but according to the early Christians Jesus was Lord. This inevitably brought them into conflict with Rome and its Emperor.

Cornelius Tacitus (AD55-120) was a Roman historian who lived through the reigns of over half-a-dozen Roman emperors. He was son-in-law of Julius Agricola, Governor of Britain from AD80 to 84. He has been called 'The Greatest Historian of Ancient Rome' and is generally acknowledged amongst scholars for his moral integrity and essential goodness.

One of his works is the *Annals* covering the history of Rome from the death of Augustus in AD14 to that of Nero in AD68. In this he mentions the famous fire of Rome in AD64 and Nero's attempt to blame the Christians for this instead of himself:

To kill the rumours, Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices — the group popularly known as 'Christians'. The founder of this sect, Christ, had been put to death by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was Emperor. Their deadly superstition had been suppressed

## *The Historical Facts*

temporarily, but was beginning to spring up again — not now just in Judea but even in Rome itself where all kinds of sordid and shameful activities are attracted and catch on.

First those who confessed to being Christians were arrested. Then, on information obtained from them, hundreds were convicted, more for their anti-social beliefs than for fire raising. In their deaths they were made a mockery. They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire — so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night. Nero opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena where he mixed with the crowd, or stood dressed as a charioteer on a chariot. As a result, although they were guilty of being Christians and deserved death, people began to feel sorry for them. For they realized that they were being massacred not for the public good but to satisfy one man's mania.

This account shows how fair Tacitus was as a pagan to the early Christians. It has been pointed out that his evidence is not as direct as that of Josephus. He only records what was believed about Christ at that time. Notwithstanding this, his account is important. There was hardly enough time between that of Christ and his account for any legend to have developed. His account must, therefore, have a factual basis. It has even been suggested that Tacitus may have obtained his information from one of Pilate's reports to the Emperor, to which he would probably have had access because of his standing with the government.

Tacitus, then, gives us the following information:

1. Christians were named after their founder, Christ.
2. Christ was put to death by Pontius Pilate.

## *The Historical Facts*

3. This was during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (AD14-37).
4. His death ended the 'superstition' for a short time, but it soon broke out again.
5. It was especially popular in Judea where it began.
6. It then spread to Rome.
7. When the Great Fire of Rome destroyed a large part of the city, Nero blamed the Christians.
8. They were arrested and persecuted for their faith.
9. This was recognised as being unjust, and many Romans felt sorry for the early Christians.
10. It was recognised that they were being punished not for the public good but to satisfy the mania of Nero.

Shortly after this, Pliny the Younger gives a full and interesting account of Christianity in a letter written to the Emperor Trajan in AD112. He had a habit of writing to the Emperor on every occasion and has been described as one of the world's great letter writers. For example, from him we learn about the terrible eruption of Vesuvius in AD79. Pliny was a typical civil servant always asking for instructions. During his time as administrator of the Roman province of Bithynia in north-west Asia Minor, Christian influence was so strong that the pagan temples had become deserted. Pliny was unsure of how to deal with the Christians and wrote to the Emperor for instructions. In his letter we find an account of the early Christian worship of Christ:

They [the Christians] were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up: After which it was their custom to separate, and then re-

assemble to partake of food — but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.

From this letter we learn several more facts about Jesus and early Christianity:

1. The early Christians met regularly (probably on a Sunday).
2. They sang hymns.
3. They worshipped Christ as God.
4. They pledged themselves not to do anything wicked.
5. They lived exemplary moral lives.
6. There is a probable reference to the Lord's Supper in the remark about their re-assembling to eat food of an ordinary kind.

## **The New Testament**

Sometimes opponents of the Christian faith try to rule out the evidence of the Gospel writers, but this cannot be done. Their accounts are either those of eyewitnesses or based on the testimony of those who were eyewitnesses. It is illogical to dismiss them by saying that they were Christians. Their evidence should be accepted along with that of anyone else. Otherwise it is like a judge in a murder case refusing to admit the evidence of anyone who has seen the murder!

When assessing the reliability of ancient historical documents, four points should be noted:

1. The date of the original writings.
2. The date of the earliest copy available.
3. The time span between the original writing and the earliest copy.
4. The number of copies available.

When these tests are applied to the evidence of the Gospel writers, we find their reliability outstanding.

## *The Historical Facts*

1. Jesus was crucified in the early 30s and the earliest Gospel was probably written by the 60s. This gives a time gap between Jesus and the first Gospel of about 25 years. Contrary to what is sometimes said, events in the Gospels are clearly within living memory.
2. Near my office in Manchester there is in the John Rylands Library a fragment of John's Gospel dated around AD130. It is by half a century the earliest fragment of the New Testament.
3. The time between this fragment and the original is about 40 years. (By way of contrast, the time between the original of Caesar's *Gallic War* and the earliest copy is 900 years.) Also, we have the Bodmer Papyrus containing most of John's Gospel with a time span of about 70 years and the Chester Beatty Papyri containing most of the New Testament giving a time span of about 110 years.
4. There is the staggering number of over 13,000 ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in whole or in part and the text is the same in over 98 per cent of these. Again, by way of contrast, there are only nine different copies of Caesar's *Gallic War*.

No wonder Sir Frederick Kenyon (one of the greatest New Testament authorities of the past) said, 'It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain. Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world.'

Lawyers are used to assessing the reliability of evidence. One basic rule is that where ancient documents are involved they should be allowed to speak for themselves. In his book *A Lawyer among the Theologians* Sir Norman Anderson QC has pointed out: 'The

*The Historical Facts*

account should be accepted as prima facie reliable unless there is evidence to show that the opposite is the case' (p.25).