

THE GREATEST FEAT IN HUMAN HISTORY

BY HANK HANEGRAFF

If devotees of the kingdom of the cults, adherents of world religions, or liberal scholars are correct, the biblical account of the resurrection is fiction, fantasy or a gargantuan fraud. If on the other hand, Christianity is factually reliable, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest *FEAT* in human history.

The resurrection is not merely important to the historic Christian faith; without it, there would be no Christianity. Because of its centrality to Christianity, those who take the sacred name of Christ upon their lips must be prepared to defend the historicity of the resurrection. To make the process memorable, I've developed the acronym *FEAT*. This acronym should serve as an enduring reminder that, far from being a gargantuan fraud, the resurrection is the greatest *feat* in the annals of recorded history.

Each letter in *FEAT* will serve to remind us of an undeniable fact of the resurrection.

F = Fatal Torment

The fatal suffering of Jesus Christ as recounted in the New Testament is one of the most well-established facts of ancient history. Even in today's modern age of scientific enlightenment, there is a virtual

consensus among New Testament scholars, both conservative and liberal, that Jesus died on the cross, that he was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea and that his death drove his disciples to despair.¹ While noteworthy scholars throughout history have suggested that Jesus may have merely swooned, the evidence clearly points in a different direction.

Indeed, believing Jesus merely swooned must surely stretch credulity beyond its breaking point. It would mean that Christ

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suffered six trials, a lack of sleep, the Roman scourge, being spiked to a cross with a spear wound in his side. That Jesus survived three days without medical attention, single-handedly rolled away an enormously heavy tomb-stone, subdued an armed guard, strolled around on pierced feet and seduced his disciples into communicating the myth that he had conquered death while he lived out the remainder of his pathetic life in obscurity.

The late Cambridge scholar John A.T. Robinson suggested the swoon theory is so fatally flawed that "if

the public were not so interested in virtually anyone who writes on Christianity, it 'would be laughed out of court.'"²

E = Empty Tomb

As the historicity of the resurrection is undermined in the media, it is crucial that Christians are prepared to demonstrate that Jesus was buried and that, on Easter morning some two thousand years ago, the tomb was indeed empty.

First, liberal and conservative scholars alike agree that the body of Jesus was buried in the private tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig points out that as a member of the Jewish court that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be Christian fiction; Jesus' burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea is substantiated by Mark's gospel and is, therefore, far too early to have been the subject of legendary corruption.³

Furthermore, the earliest Jewish response to the resurrection of Christ presupposes the empty tomb;⁴ and in the centuries following the resurrection, the fact of the empty tomb was forwarded by Jesus' friends and foes alike.⁵

Finally, considering the fact that women in ancient Judaism were routinely considered to be little

more than chattel, it is remarkable that the gospel writer's highlighted women as the heroines of their empty tomb accounts.⁶ This in itself is proof positive that the gospel writers valued truth over cultural correctness.

In short, early Christianity could not have survived an identifiable tomb containing the corpse of Christ.

A = Appearances

One thing can be stated with iron-clad certainty: The apostles did not merely propagate Christ's teachings; they were absolutely positive

that he had appeared to them in the flesh. Although we are now two thousand years removed from the actual event, we too, can be absolutely confident in Christ's post-resurrection appearances.

Paul, for example, points out that Christ "appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6).

It would have been one thing to attribute these supernatural experiences to people who had already died. It was quite another to attribute them to multitudes who were still alive. As the famed New Testament scholar of Cambridge University C. H. Dodd points out, "There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that most of the five hundred are still alive,

legendary corruption.⁹

No one summed up the consensus of New Testament scholarship better than Professor Norman Perrin, the late New Testament scholar at the University of Chicago: "The more we study the tradition with regard to the appearances, the firmer the rock begins to appear upon which they are based."¹⁰

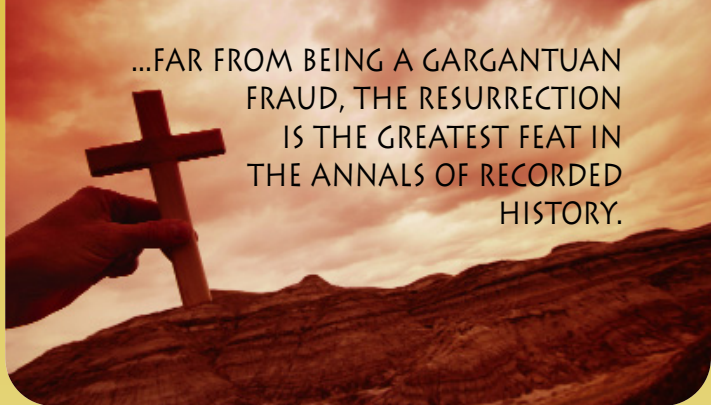
T = Transformation

What happened as a result of the resurrection is unprecedented in human history. In the span of a few hundred years, a small band of seemingly insignificant believers succeeded in turning an entire empire upside down. While it is conceivable that they would have faced torture, vilification and even cruel deaths for what they fervently believed to be true, it is inconceivable that they would have been willing to die for what they knew to be a lie.

Peter, who was once afraid of being exposed as a follower of Christ, after the resurrection suffered a martyr's death. James, the half-brother of Jesus, who once hated everything his brother stood for, after the resurrection calls himself "a bond-servant of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1 NASB) and, like Peter, was martyred. Paul was likewise transformed; once a ceaseless persecutor of the growing church, he became the chief proselytizer of the Gentiles. As Simon Greenleaf, Royall Professor of Law at Harvard put it, "If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error...If then their testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for this fabrication."¹¹

Not only did the resurrection of Christ transform the disciples from cowards to lions of the faith, but His resurrection continues to transform lives today. Of one thing I am certain—if 21st-century Christians

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would grasp the significance of resurrection like their first-century counterparts, their lives would be radically revolutionized. Rather than being microcosms of the culture, they would become change agents. Like a small band of seemingly insignificant believers who succeeded in turning an empire upside down, we would leave a lasting mark on society.

In the end, it all depends on whether we *say* we believe in the resurrection or whether we *really believe!* □

1 See Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, Miss.: College Press Publishing Co., 1996), 143-170 (esp. 158); Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 26-27.

2 Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 71.

3 William Lane Craig, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" in Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, gen. eds., *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 147-148; Copan, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* 26-27.

4 William Lane Craig, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" 152. See Matthew 28:13.

5 See Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 205-206.

6 William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, revised edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 276.

7 C.H. Dodd, "The Appearances of the Risen Christ: A Study in the Form Criticism of the Gospels," in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1968), 128, as quoted in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 282.

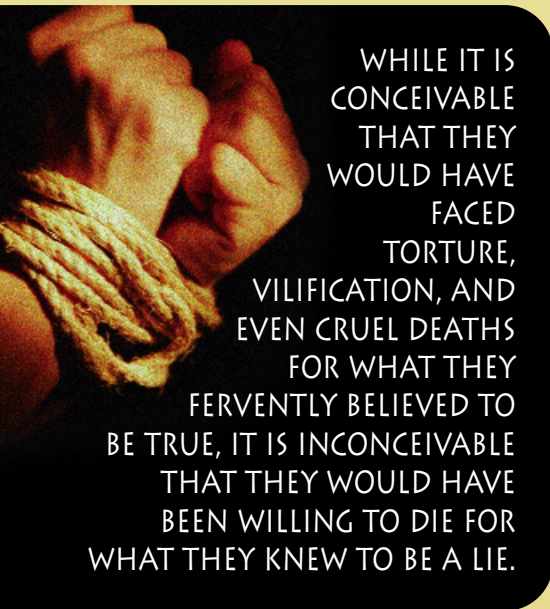
8 Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 154; cf. Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, gen. eds., *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 42-43.

9 See Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 285.

10 Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 80, as quoted by William Lane Craig in Copan, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* 28.

11 Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists: The Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1995; originally published 1874), 31-32.

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unless Paul is saying, in effect, "The witnesses are there to be questioned."⁷

Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Paul is reiterating a Christian creed that can be traced all the way back to the formative stages of the Christian church. Incredibly, scholars of all stripes agree that this creed can be dated to within three to eight years of the crucifixion itself.⁸ The short duration between Christ's crucifixion and the composition of this early Christian creed precludes the possibility of