

GAMALIEL'S ARGUMENT FOR THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

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The resurrection of Jesus provides a plausible explanation for his followers' continued and growing zeal for claiming him as the Messiah although he had been killed. Messiah indeed "abides forever," but killing him does not necessarily eliminate him from that role if he has resurrected, especially if he arose and ascended to God with the understanding that he was to return and pick up the Messianic work in whatever fashion that proves to be.

I. Recorded Elements of Gamaliel's Speech Incorporated into the Above Synthesis

A. Gamaliel was a Pharisee, a believer in resurrection.

B. Judas and Theudas examples:

Claiming to be "somebody"

suggests a Messianic claimant, more than simply a zealot leader.

They must have been at least zealot movements if not Messianic ones.

The Romans presumably took them out.

When they were killed, their movements fell apart.

C. Put them forth a little while ("time may tell")

Time may clarify whether the Jesus movement will turn militant.

The Jesus movement may prove to be something perhaps compatible with national Judaism (cp. the Judaizers' conceptualization).

Jesus might soon return as claimed; after that the Jewish national expectancy might come into play.

D. If from men, it will be overthrown.

Romans will take care of it.

E. If from God, you will not overthrow it.

the need to entertain the possibility of resurrection and its contribution to making sense of the anomaly the religious leaders are witnessing

the need to see if the Messianic "kingdom" could be figurative (John 18:36-37)

the need to consider whether a suffering Messiah is a prophetic possibility

F. Be careful what you do to these men.

Do not get crosswise with the Romans.

Do not incur God's displeasure if the Jesus movement is legitimate.

G. Lest you find yourselves fighting against God

A comment especially suited to the Sadducees

II. Additional Contextual Considerations

A. Christianity is a person-centered system. Remove the system, remove the movement.

B. Messiah abides forever: John 12:34 < Daniel 7:13-14; Ezekiel 37:25; Psalm 110:4). Christ crucified was a major and general stumbling block to Jewish acceptance of Jesus as Messiah (1 Corinthians 1:23). Defending the “suffering motif” for Messianic expectancy received considerable attention prophetically in Jesus teaching to the disciples (Matthew 16:21-23, etc.); the Emmaus instruction (Luke 24:26; Isaiah 53).

C. The strong Sadducee objection to the Christian proclamation about resurrection:

Acts 4:1-4 (healing of the lame man at Gate Beautiful; “grieved that they were preaching resurrection in regard to Jesus”) + apostles’ signs and wonders and Sadducees’ “jealousy” (Acts 5:17-18); the apostles’ witness of the resurrection (Acts 4:33). These verses show that

D. Recent notable miracles: lame man, general series of noted miracles (Acts 5:12-16), mysterious release of apostles from prison the previous night (Acts 5:17-23). Those reports were on top of the resurrection of Lazarus and the report of the tomb guard (Matthew 27:62-66 + 28:11-15).

E. Boldness of common men against national leadership: Acts 4:13, 19; 5:29-32

F. Roman strictures on execution: John 18:31-32, etc.

G. Apostles’ willingness to risk suffering to the point of death: “a man will not suffer unto death for what he knows is false.”

H. The non-military character of “the Jesus movement” (at least for the present) in contrast to Judas and Theudas

The Jesus movement is not following the historical pattern.

The Jesus movement is not following the expected pattern: killing the man should show he is not the Messiah.

III. Back-Offs Suggested

Preliminary note: Any objection to the synthesis above should deal with all the factors in Gamaliel’s speech in a consistent alternative synthesis. Suggesting a different take on this or that point taken individually falls short of what is necessary to remove the power of the synthesis.

A. Let God take care of it.

Gamaliel’s listeners, however, may find themselves fighting against God. He envisions something in the Jesus movement that contains plausible truth. Besides, God’s “taking care of something” may, in fact, be indirect through his followers, who are to redouble their efforts rather than “let go and let God.” Lots of evil in the world God does not take care of.

B. If it is evil, it will not last. Evil tends to self-destruct.

Gamaliel is not necessarily speaking about a general historical principle. He is presenting his line of thought in the context of the Messianic circumstance. To everyone

acquainted with the current Christian proclamation, it was obvious that his followers were presenting Jesus as Messiah, not simply as a prophet or reformer comparable to John the Baptist.

Besides, Gamaliel's plea is "for a little while." The self-destruction of evil may play itself out over decades or centuries. If it is not "sufficiently false," it may not self-destruct at all. From a Christian perspective, Eastern religions, Islam, and Judaism illustrate long-lived movements that are not true as total systems.

C. By every conceivable point he could muster, Gamaliel was trying to put a damper on overly exuberant Jewish nationalism, and thus incur the wrath of Rome. The nation already had enough of an anti-Roman reputation; it did not need to get caught up in what, to the Roman eye, would look like infighting. The wrath of Rome was a powerful deterrent. Rome might decide to come and "take away our place and nation" (John 11:48). Caiaphas, the presumed leader of the present persecution, is the one that made that very comment. (It also turned out to be predictive, if it is true that the sect of the Sadducees ceased to exist after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.) The Jews might get by with "killing one man to save the nation," but a general persecution and killing spree is another story.

Under this heading could come something of a response to the "preliminary note" above. Since Gamaliel is addressing a diverse audience, different "reasons" could take aim at different "reasoners" without necessarily participating in an in-concert alternative to this synthesis. Some points might deter fellow Pharisees of the Sanhedrin that had not become "secret disciples" of Jesus. Resurrection as a solution to a dead eternal-Messiah might have value with such. Likewise, "the fighting against God." The Romans-oriented points might speak to the Sadducees, especially the Sadducees who held the reins of power in the Sanhedrin.

The damper stands with fellow Pharisees because resurrection does in fact answer the suffering Messiah issue—as reinforced, of course, by the predictive prophecy that spoke to that point, by the extreme amount and kinds of miracles in and after Jesus' ministry, and by the inherent power of the salvation-from-sin message involved in Messiah's role and purpose for coming at all.

The damper stands with the Sadducees because of the unbelievable resistance to the reports and observations of extreme miracle during and after Jesus' ministry, particularly the resurrection of Lazarus and, perhaps more important, the report of the guards from the tomb. People today might feel unpersuaded by the reports in themselves because our current perspective depends on records that we could claim were unreliable. But the "unreliable-report" approach would not work with contemporaries close to the events. They were too many and too extreme to make that other than obscurantism. The Jesus movement is not following the pattern of similar previous efforts, and it does not have a militant character to it. So the "Romans reasons" become irrelevant.

Therefore, Gamaliel's comments are not "merely" dampers. They would not have any "dampening" power if they were not true as part of the synthesis above.

Gamaliel did not necessarily have in mind all that we have attributed to his line of thought. His time perspective was not as good as ours is. The “drag” of his previous convictions as a Jewish Pharisee would have made it more difficult to appreciate the power of the points he himself was making. Nevertheless, we should have confidence now that, so to speak, the fact that we are here shows we should be here. The empty-tomb resurrection of Jesus and the existence of his body the church stand or fall together.