

THE THIRD REASON

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Introductory Comment

Belief in the resurrection does not wholly depend on the evidence for a particular, unique event. That event ties into other matters that anticipated it in prophecy and issued from it in history. To a significant extent the acceptableness of Jesus Messiah depended on the Jews' proper understanding of Old Testament anticipations for the Christ. This web of inter-reinforcing evidences increases exponentially the evidential power of the data. A different understanding of Messiah and his kingdom, however, predisposed most nationalistically minded Jews to reject him on doctrinal grounds. Nevertheless, as Gamaliel's presentation shows in Acts 5, the argument from the very existence of the church tended to short-circuit that doctrinal objection sufficiently to force a re-evaluation of previous prophetic interpretation and current policy toward Jesus' followers.

Arguing from the empty tomb and the appearances of the resurrected Jesus depends significantly on the reliability of New Testament documents. The argument from the existence of the church, however, is more loosely tied to the records, because historical details would not have to be accurate in every case for the argument to have force. Even a cursory reading of the New Testament shows that the early Christians staked the claim of the church on whether Jesus came forth alive from his tomb in Jerusalem after he had been crucified (1 Corinthians 15:14; cp. 1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Fundamental Proposition: A person-centered system disintegrates at the death of the central person. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth plausibly explains the continuation of his movement after his death (Acts 5:34-42).

When Jewish authorities arrested the apostles and were of a mind to execute them for preaching Jesus as Messiah, Gamaliel restrained the Sanhedrin by observing that this movement was not following the pattern of other, false, Messianic movements. In the cases of Judas and Theudas, the natural consequence was observed: the death of the leader was followed by the disintegration of his movement. In the case of Jesus of Nazareth, his death not only failed to stop the movement; the movement gained impetus afterwards. His resurrection could legitimately explain this unexpected pattern, and so the council heeded Gamaliel's advice to "let them alone" and to "put them forth a little while."

A person must enter the contemporary Jewish mind-set to perceive the power of Gamaliel's argument. Instead of supposing that this doctor of the law simply used the occasion to score a point against the Sadducees in the council (which may be a secondary motivation, all right), we propose that his line of thought had enough cogency in the context that it relaxed persecution of Christians sufficiently for a multiplication of disciples in Jerusalem and a conversion of great numbers of priests (Acts 6:7). Only after an indeterminate period of time, did

Gamaliel's disciple, Saul of Tarsus, initiate a wave of persecution beginning with the martyrdom of Stephen that lasted until Saul himself was converted in Damascus.

I. The first element in the picture is that Messiah is eternal. During the ministry of Jesus this idea surfaced as one "stumbling block" for the multitude when Jesus publicly intimated that he would die by crucifixion (John 12:34; Matthew 26:35). Out of the law the people had learned that Messiah was to abide forever. Typical passages include Daniel 7:14; Isaiah 9:7; Ezekiel 37:25; and Psalm 110:4. Since by the nature of the case there can be only one universal eternal kingdom (as per Daniel 7:13-14; Psalm 89), any prophetic passage dealing with either a universal or eternal kingdom could be identified with the Messiah and his kingdom. Especially under the pressure of Roman domination, the Jewish mind had fixed on this permanent deliverance and salvation. For a Messianic claimant to imply that he would die was doubly unthinkable: the prophets had said he would abide forever and the people needed him to deliver them permanently from political oppression. The Hebrew Messiah would not be followed by Jews who knew he was dead.

Not only did the masses subscribe to this understanding, but the inner circle of Jesus' disciples assumed it. At Jesus' disclosure that he would have to go to Jerusalem, suffer, and die, Peter promptly took him aside and rebuked him, not seeming to hear the further comments that death would not prevail against establishing the kingdom because he would arise the third day (Matthew 16:13-28). Before the resurrection the disciples followed the expected pattern of fear (John 20:19) and dispersal that later turned to atypical boldness and power.

For the Jewish leaders, there was one practical consequence of the Messiah's eternity: the very fact that they could kill him meant Jesus was not the Christ. The incredible behavior of passersby, the soldiers, the rulers of the people, and even those who died with him takes on at least a modicum of sensibleness with this observation (Matthew 27:29-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-37). Before his crucifixion the two Emmaus residents "had hoped that it was he who would redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). Now that he was dead the chief priests could confidently call him "that deceiver" (Matthew 27:63). He did not abide forever; therefore he was not the Christ.

II. The second element in the picture is that the Messianic kingdom is a person-centered system. By virtue of eternity, Christ's kingdom accentuates the person-centered character of the normal kingdom model; here the same person—not just his dynasty—is king forever. As a result there exists no real parallel to the Messiah and his kingdom. In the nature of the case, a person-centered system disintegrates when the personal center is removed. It is this point that Gamaliel makes when he contrasts the present case with previous ones that followed the pattern natural to Messianism.

A. What is affirmed here must be distinguished from an ideology-centered system. Communism did not die with the death of Karl Marx. The movement of a particularly charismatic leader will sometimes disintegrate with his death even though the movement is an ideology-centered one. A case in point is Adolf Hitler and his doctrine of the supremacy of the "Aryan" race. The cause lost an articulate and forceful leader and for that and other reasons fell apart, but it did not in the nature of things have to do so. An ideology does not depend on a person for its existence, because the concept may be transferred to someone else and continue to

have practical existence. If the ideology is somehow proved false scientifically, historically, or philosophically, the movement centered around it likewise dissolves. An ideology-centered movement dies when its ideological center “dies” in the same way that a person-centered one dies if its person dies. The Christ was not the dead founder of a religious movement; he is the living Lord of an eternal kingdom.

B. What is affirmed here must also be distinguished from sin’s tendency to self-destruct. Sin does tend to self-destruct since sin is usually sin because it is out of keeping with the nature of the thing or situation involved; consequently, when the organism or the group conducts itself contrary to its nature or purpose, a process of natural selection removes it from the competition. Sin’s self-destruction may involve generations or centuries whereas the matter under consideration in Gamaliel’s speech is “a little while.”

C. Later during the preaching of the resurrection, these men had their lives endangered, they were beaten, many were killed. Had their claims for Jesus’ resurrection been false, they would surely not have died for a (1) known (2) falsehood that was (3) contrary to their basic convictions as Jews.

D. From an ethical standpoint one finds it difficult to believe that so high a moral standard as the believers advocated (and demonstrated in many other particulars) would allow for perpetrating such a fraud.

When the rabbi affirmed, “if this counsel is of men it will be overthrown,” he did not mean it as a universal principle in history, but as a principle applicable to the particular matter at hand—the concept of Messiah and his kingdom. That Jesus of Nazareth had resurrected, Gamaliel could in principle accept since he was a Pharisee. In point of fact also, Jesus’ resurrection not only (1) explained the peculiarity of the case with this movement, but it also (2) provided a way of joining together the suffering and glory motifs in Old Testament prophecy. It (3) tied in with Jesus’ prediction of his resurrection and (4) harmonized with his miraculous ministry, especially the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-53), which had been a particularly embarrassing sign performed right “under the rulers’ noses.” The resurrection (5) accounted for the disappearance of Jesus’ body and (6) made sense of the disciples’ indomitable spirit. It likewise (7) was consonant with continued miracles like that of healing the well-known lame man at Gate Beautiful (Acts 3-4). The cumulative force of these considerations made Gamaliel’s suggestion of caution a wise one.

Summary Analysis of Gamaliel’s Speech

1. Political. “They came to naught” means that (1) the Romans will take care of this as they did in the case of Theudas and Judas; we need not get involved. (2) “Minded to slay them” relates to the fact that Rome had withdrawn Jewish right to exercise capital punishment (except when the temple precincts were being desecrated). Gamaliel’s suggestion kept them from ill-advised action that could bring worse trouble on the religious leaders than Jesus’ Messianic movement was bringing.

2. Theological. The Pharisee Gamaliel is willing to use this observation as an occasion to score a point against the Sadducees.

3. Practical. You have to admit that the resurrection the disciples were proclaiming would indeed explain the different direction this Messianic movement was taking after its leader's death (vs. "came to naught").

Concluding Comment

The existence of the church and the fact of Jesus' resurrection stand or fall together. The church would not have come into existence without Messiah's resurrection; the church exists; so the resurrection must have occurred as claimed. The resurrection is the kind of event that does not happen without supernatural agency and therefore divine approval of Jesus as what he claimed to be since "dead men don't rise." He was powerfully declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection (Romans 1:1-4). Consequently, the church legitimately exists, which is another way of saying that we are legitimately called to accept Jesus as Messiah, the Son of the living God.