

THE MEDICAL EVIDENCE: WAS JESUS' DEATH A SHAM AND HIS RESURRECTION A HOAX?

I paused to read the plaque hanging in the waiting room of a doctor's office: "Let conversation cease. Let laughter flee. This is the place where death delights to help the living."

Obviously, this was no ordinary physician. I was paying another visit to Dr. Robert J. Stein, one of the world's foremost forensic pathologists, a flamboyant, husky-voiced medical detective who used to regale me with stories about the unexpected clues he had uncovered while examining corpses. For him, dead men *did* tell tales—in fact, tales that would often bring justice to the living.

During his lengthy tenure as medical examiner of Cook County, Illinois, Stein performed thousands of autopsies, each time meticulously searching for insights into the circumstances surrounding the victim's death. Repeatedly his sharp eye for detail, his encyclopedic knowledge of the human anatomy, and his uncanny investigative intuition helped this medical sleuth reconstruct the victim's violent demise.

Sometimes innocent people were vindicated as a result of his findings. But more often Stein's work was the final nail in a defendant's coffin. Such was the case with John

Wayne Gacy, who faced the executioner after Stein helped convict him of thirty-three grisly murders.

That's how crucial medical evidence can be. It can determine whether a child died of abuse or an accidental fall. It can establish whether a person succumbed to natural causes or was murdered by someone who spiked the person's coffee with arsenic. It can uphold or dismantle a defendant's alibi by pinpointing the victim's time of death, using an ingenious procedure that measures the amount of potassium in the eyes of the deceased.

And yes, even in the case of someone brutally executed on a Roman cross two millennia ago, medical evidence can still make a crucial contribution: it can help determine whether the resurrection of Jesus—the supreme vindication of his claim to deity—was nothing more than an elaborate hoax. With Stein having impressed on me the value of forensic clues, I knew it was time to seek out a medical expert who has thoroughly investigated the historical facts concerning the crucifixion and has managed to separate truth from legend.

RESURRECTION OR RESUSCITATION?

The idea that Jesus never really died on the cross can be found in the Koran,¹ which was written in the seventh century—in fact, Ahmadiya Muslims contend that Jesus actually fled to India. To this day there's a shrine that supposedly marks his real burial place in Srinagar, Kashmir.²

As the nineteenth century dawned, Karl Bahrtdt, Karl Venturini, and others tried to explain away the resurrection by suggesting that Jesus only fainted from exhaustion on the cross, or he had been given a drug that made him

appear to die, and that he had later been revived by the cool, damp air of the tomb.³

Conspiracy theorists bolstered this hypothesis by pointing out that Jesus had been given some liquid on a sponge while on the cross (Mark 15:36) and that Pilate seemed surprised at how quickly Jesus had succumbed (Mark 15:44). Consequently, they said, Jesus' reappearance wasn't a miraculous resurrection but merely a fortuitous resuscitation, and his tomb was empty because he continued to live.

While reputable scholars have repudiated this so-called swoon theory, it keeps recurring in popular literature. In 1929 D. H. Lawrence wove this theme into a short story in which he suggested that Jesus had fled to Egypt, where he fell in love with the priestess Isis.⁴

In 1965 Hugh Schonfield's best-seller *The Passover Plot* alleged that it was only the unanticipated stabbing of Jesus by the Roman soldier that foiled his complicated scheme to escape the cross alive, even though Schonfield conceded, "We are nowhere claiming . . . that [the book] represents what actually happened."⁵

The swoon hypothesis popped up again in Donovan Joyce's 1972 book *The Jesus Scroll*, which "contains an even more incredible string of improbabilities than Schonfield's," according to resurrection expert Gary Habermas.⁶ In 1982, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* added the twist that Pontius Pilate had been bribed to allow Jesus to be taken down from the cross before he was dead. Even so, the authors confessed, "We could not—and still cannot—prove the accuracy of our conclusion."⁷

As recently as 1992, a little-known academic from Australia, Barbara Thiering, caused a stir by reviving the swoon theory. Her book, *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, was introduced with much fanfare by a well-respected US publisher and then derisively dismissed by Emory University scholar Luke Timothy Johnson as being “the purest poppycock, the product of fevered imagination rather than careful analysis.”⁸

Today, the swoon theory continues to flourish. I hear it all the time. But what does the evidence really establish? What actually happened at the Crucifixion? What was Jesus’ cause of death? Is there any possible way he could have survived this ordeal? Those are the kinds of questions that I hoped medical evidence could help resolve.

So I flew to southern California and knocked on the door of a prominent physician who has extensively studied the historical, archaeological, and medical data concerning the death of Jesus of Nazareth—although it seems that, due to the mysteriously missing body, no autopsy has ever been performed.

INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER METHERELL, M.D., PH.D.

The plush setting was starkly incongruous with the subject we were discussing. There we were, sitting in the living room of Dr. Metherell’s comfortable California home on a balmy spring evening, warm ocean breezes whispering through the windows, while we were talking about a topic of unimaginable brutality: a beating so barbarous that it shocks the conscience, and a form of capital punishment

so depraved that it stands as wretched testimony to man's inhumanity to man.

I had sought out Metherell because I heard he possessed the medical and scientific credentials to explain the Crucifixion. But I also had another motivation: I had been told he could discuss the topic dispassionately as well as accurately. That was important to me because I wanted the facts to speak for themselves, without the hyperbole or charged language that might otherwise manipulate emotions.

As you would expect from someone with a medical degree (University of Miami in Florida) and a doctorate in engineering (University of Bristol in England), Metherell speaks with scientific precision. He is board-certified in diagnosis by the American Board of Radiology and has been a consultant to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health of Bethesda, Maryland.

A former research scientist who has taught at the University of California, Metherell is editor of five scientific books and has written for publications ranging from *Aerospace Medicine* to *Scientific American*. His ingenious analysis of muscular contraction has been published in *The Physiologist* and *Biophysics Journal*. He even looks the role of a distinguished medical authority: he's an imposing figure with silver hair and a courteous yet formal demeanor.

I'll be honest: at times I wondered what was going on inside Dr. Metherell's head. With scientific reserve, speaking slowly and methodically, he gave no hint of any inner turmoil as he calmly described the chilling details of Jesus' demise. Whatever was going on underneath,

whatever distress it caused him as a Christian to talk about the cruel fate that befell Jesus, he was able to mask with a professionalism born out of decades of laboratory research.

He just gave me the facts—and after all, that was what I was after.

THE TORTURE BEFORE THE CROSS

Initially, I wanted to elicit from Metherell a basic description of the events leading up to Jesus' death. So after a time of social chat, I put down my iced tea and shifted in my chair to face him squarely. "Could you paint a picture of what happened to Jesus?" I asked.

He cleared his throat. "It began after the Last Supper," he said. "Jesus went with his disciples to the Mount of Olives—specifically, to the Garden of Gethsemane. And there, if you remember, he prayed all night. Now, during that process he was anticipating the coming events of the next day. Since he knew the amount of suffering he was going to have to endure, he was quite naturally experiencing a great deal of psychological stress."

I raised my hand to stop him. "Whoa—here's where skeptics have a field day," I told him. "The gospels tell us he began to sweat blood at this point. Now, c'mon, isn't that just a product of some overactive imaginations? Doesn't that call into question the accuracy of the gospel writers?"

Unfazed, Metherell shook his head. "Not at all," he replied. "This is a known medical condition called *hematidrosis*. It's not very common, but it is associated with a high degree of psychological stress.

“What happens is that severe anxiety causes the release of chemicals that break down the capillaries in the sweat glands. As a result, there’s a small amount of bleeding into these glands, and the sweat comes out tinged with blood. We’re not talking about a lot of blood; it’s just a very, very small amount.”

Though a bit chastened, I pressed on. “Did this have any other effect on the body?”

“What this did was set up the skin to be extremely fragile so that when Jesus was flogged by the Roman soldier the next day, his skin would be very, very sensitive.”

Well, I thought, here we go. I braced myself for the grim images I knew were about to flood my mind. I had seen plenty of dead bodies as a journalist—casualties of car accidents, fires, and crime syndicate retribution—but there was something especially unnerving in hearing about someone being intentionally brutalized by executioners determined to extract maximum suffering.

“Tell me,” I said, “what was the flogging like?”

Metherell’s eyes never left me. “Roman floggings were known to be terribly brutal. They usually consisted of thirty-nine lashes but frequently were a lot more than that, depending on the mood of the soldier applying the blows.

“The soldier would use a whip of braided leather thongs with metal balls woven into them. When the whip would strike the flesh, these balls would cause deep bruises or contusions, which would break open with further blows. And the whip had pieces of sharp bone as well, which would cut the flesh severely.

“The back would be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by the deep, deep cuts. The

whipping would have gone all the way from the shoulders down to the back, the buttocks, and the back of the legs. It was just terrible.”

Metherell paused. “Go on,” I said.

“One physician who has studied Roman beatings said, ‘As the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh.’ A third-century historian by the name of Eusebius described a flogging by saying, ‘The sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.’”

“We know that many people would die from this kind of beating even before they could be crucified. At the least, the victim would experience tremendous pain and go into hypovolemic shock.”

Metherell had thrown in a medical term I didn’t know. “What does *hypovolemic shock* mean?” I asked.

“*Hypo* means ‘low,’ *vol* refers to volume, and *emic* means ‘blood,’ so *hypovolemic shock* means the person is suffering the effects of losing a large amount of blood,” the doctor explained. “This does four things. First, the heart races to try to pump blood that isn’t there; second, the blood pressure drops, causing fainting or collapse; third, the kidneys stop producing urine to maintain what volume is left; and fourth, the person becomes very thirsty as the body craves fluids to replace the lost blood volume.”

“Do you see evidence of this in the gospel accounts?”

“Yes, most definitely,” he replied. “Jesus was in hypovolemic shock as he staggered up the road to the execution site at Calvary, carrying the horizontal beam of the cross. Finally Jesus collapsed, and the Roman soldier

ordered Simon to carry the cross for him. Later we read that Jesus said, 'I thirst,' at which point a sip of vinegar was offered to him.

"Because of the terrible effects of this beating, there's no question that Jesus was already in serious to critical condition even before the nails were driven through his hands and feet."

THE AGONY OF THE CROSS

As distasteful as the description of the flogging was, I knew that even more repugnant testimony was yet to come. That's because historians are unanimous that Jesus survived the beating that day and went on to the cross—which is where the real issue lies.

These days, when condemned criminals are strapped down and injected with poisons or secured to a wooden chair and subjected to a surge of electricity, the circumstances are highly controlled. Death comes quickly and predictably. Medical examiners carefully certify the victim's passing. From close proximity witnesses scrutinize everything from beginning to end.

But how certain was death by this crude, slow, and rather inexact form of execution called crucifixion? In fact, most people aren't sure how the cross kills its victims. And without a trained medical examiner to officially attest that Jesus had died, might he have escaped the experience brutalized and bleeding but nevertheless alive?

I began to unpack these issues. "What happened when he arrived at the site of the crucifixion?" I asked.

"He would have been laid down, and his hands would have been nailed in the outstretched position to

the horizontal beam. This crossbar was called the *paticulum*, and at this stage it was separate from the vertical beam, which was permanently set in the ground.”

I was having difficulty visualizing this; I needed more details. “Nailed with what?” I asked. “Nailed where?”

“The Romans used spikes that were five to seven inches long and tapered to a sharp point. They were driven through the wrists,” Metherell said, pointing about an inch or so below his left palm.

“Hold it,” I interrupted. “I thought the nails pierced his palms. That’s what all the paintings show. In fact, it’s become a standard symbol representing the crucifixion.”

“Through the wrists,” Metherell repeated. “This was a solid position that would lock the hand; if the nails had been driven through the palms, his weight would have caused the skin to tear and he would have fallen off the cross. So the nails went through the wrists, although this was considered part of the hand in the language of the day.

“And it’s important to understand that the nail would go through the place where the median nerve runs. This is the largest nerve going out to the hand, and it would be crushed by the nail that was being pounded in.”

Since I have only a rudimentary knowledge of the human anatomy, I wasn’t sure what this meant. “What sort of pain would that have produced?” I asked.

“Let me put it this way,” he replied. “Do you know the kind of pain you feel when you bang your elbow and hit your funny bone? That’s actually another nerve, called the *ulna nerve*. It’s extremely painful when you accidentally hit it.

“Well, picture taking a pair of pliers and squeezing and crushing that nerve,” he said, emphasizing the word *squeezing* as he twisted an imaginary pair of pliers. “That effect would be similar to what Jesus experienced.”

I winced at the image and squirmed in my chair.

“The pain was absolutely unbearable,” he continued. “In fact, it was literally beyond words to describe; they had to invent a new word: *excruciating*. Literally, *excruciating* means ‘out of the cross.’ Think of that: they needed to create a new word because there was nothing in the language that could describe the intense anguish caused during the crucifixion.

“At this point Jesus was hoisted as the crossbar was attached to the vertical stake, and then nails were driven through Jesus’ feet. Again, the nerves in his feet would have been crushed, and there would have been a similar type of pain.”

Crushed and severed nerves were certainly bad enough, but I needed to know about the effect that hanging from the cross would have had on Jesus. “What stresses would this have put on his body?”

Metherell answered, “First of all, his arms would have immediately been stretched, probably about six inches in length, and both shoulders would have become dislocated—you can determine this with simple mathematical equations.

“This fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy in Psalm 22, which foretold the crucifixion hundreds of years before it took place and says, ‘My bones are out of joint.’”

THE CAUSE OF DEATH

Metherell had made his point—graphically—about the pain endured as the crucifixion process began. But I needed to get to what finally claims the life of a crucifixion victim, because that's the pivotal issue in determining whether death can be faked or eluded. So I put the cause-of-death question directly to Metherell.

“Once a person is hanging in the vertical position,” he replied, “crucifixion is essentially an agonizingly slow death by asphyxiation.

“The reason is that the stresses on the muscles and diaphragm put the chest into the inhaled position; basically, in order to exhale, the individual must push up on his feet so the tension on the muscles would be eased for a moment. In doing so, the nail would tear through the foot, eventually locking up against the tarsal bones.

“After managing to exhale, the person would then be able to relax down and take another breath in. Again he'd have to push himself up to exhale, scraping his bloodied back against the coarse wood of the cross. This would go on and on until complete exhaustion would take over, and the person wouldn't be able to push up and breathe anymore.

“As the person slows down his breathing, he goes into what is called *respiratory acidosis*—the carbon dioxide in the blood is dissolved as carbonic acid, causing the acidity of the blood to increase. This eventually leads to an irregular heartbeat. In fact, with his heart beating erratically, Jesus would have known that he was at the moment of death, which is when he was able to say, ‘Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ And then he died of cardiac arrest.”

It was the clearest explanation I had ever heard of death by crucifixion—but Metherell wasn't done.

“Even before he died—and this is important too—the hypovolemic shock would have caused a sustained rapid heart rate that would have contributed to heart failure, resulting in the collection of fluid in the membrane around the heart, called a *pericardial effusion*, as well as around the lungs, which is called a *pleural effusion*.”

“Why is that significant?”

“Because of what happened when the Roman soldier came around and, being fairly certain that Jesus was dead, confirmed it by thrusting a spear into his right side. It was probably his right side; that's not certain, but from the description it was probably the right side, between the ribs.

“The spear apparently went through the right lung and into the heart, so when the spear was pulled out, some fluid—the pericardial effusion and the pleural effusion—came out. This would have the appearance of a clear fluid, like water, followed by a large volume of blood, as the eyewitness John described in his gospel.”

John probably had no idea why he saw both blood and a clear fluid come out—certainly that's not what an untrained person like him would have anticipated. Yet John's description is consistent with what modern medicine would expect to have happened. At first this would seem to give credibility to John being an eyewitness; however, there seemed to be one big flaw in all this.

I pulled out my Bible and flipped to John 19:34. “Wait a minute, Doc,” I protested. “When you carefully read what John said, he saw ‘blood and water’ come out; he intentionally put the words in that order. But according

to you, the clear fluid would have come out first. So there's a significant discrepancy here."

Metherell smiled slightly. "I'm not a Greek scholar," he replied, "but according to people who are, the order of words in ancient Greek was determined not necessarily by sequence but by prominence. This means that since there was a lot more blood than water, it would have made sense for John to mention the blood first."

I conceded the point but made a mental note to confirm it myself later. "At this juncture," I said, "what would Jesus' condition have been?"

Metherell's gaze locked with mine. He replied with authority, "There was absolutely no doubt that Jesus was dead."

ANSWERING THE SKEPTICS

Dr. Metherell's assertion seemed well supported by the evidence. But there were still some details I wanted to address—as well as at least one soft spot in his account that could very well undermine the credibility of the biblical account.

"The gospels say the soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals being crucified with Jesus," I said. "Why would they have done that?"

"If they wanted to speed up death—and with the Sabbath and Passover coming, the Jewish leaders certainly wanted to get this over before sundown—the Romans would use the steel shaft of a short Roman spear to shatter the victim's lower leg bones. This would prevent him from pushing up with his legs so he could breathe, and death by asphyxiation would result in a matter of minutes.

“Of course, we’re told in the New Testament that Jesus’ legs were not broken, because the soldiers had already determined that he was dead, and they just used the spear to confirm it. This fulfilled another Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah, which is that his bones would remain unbroken.”

Again I jumped in. “Some people have tried to cast doubt on the gospel accounts by attacking the crucifixion story,” I said. “For instance, an article in the *Harvard Theological Review* concluded many years ago that there was ‘astonishing little evidence that the feet of a crucified person were ever pierced by nails.’ Instead, the article said, the victim’s hands and feet were tied to the cross by ropes.⁹ Won’t you concede that this raises credibility problems with the New Testament account?”

Dr. Metherell moved forward until he was sitting on the edge of his chair. “No,” he said, “because archaeology has now established that the use of nails was historical—although I’ll certainly concede that ropes were indeed sometimes used.”

“What’s the evidence?”

“In 1968 archaeologists in Jerusalem found the remains of about three dozen Jews who had died during the uprising against Rome around AD 70. One victim, whose name was apparently Yohanan, had been crucified. And sure enough, they found a seven-inch nail still driven into his feet, with small pieces of olive wood from the cross still attached. This was excellent archaeological confirmation of a key detail in the gospels’ description of the Crucifixion.”

Touché, I thought. “But one other point of dispute concerns the expertise of the Romans to determine whether Jesus was dead,” I pointed out. “These people were very primitive in terms of their understanding of medicine and anatomy and so forth—how do we know they weren’t just mistaken when they declared that Jesus was no longer living?”

“I’ll grant you that these soldiers didn’t go to medical school. But remember that they were experts in killing people—that was their job, and they did it very well. They knew without a doubt when a person was dead, and really it’s not so terribly difficult to figure out.

“Besides, if a prisoner somehow escaped, the responsible soldiers would be put to death themselves, so they had a huge incentive to make absolutely sure that each and every victim was dead when he was removed from the cross.”

THE FINAL ARGUMENT

Appealing to history and medicine, to archaeology and even Roman military rules, Metherell had closed every loophole: Jesus could not have come down from the cross alive. But still, I pushed him further. “Is there any possible way—*any possible way*—that Jesus could have survived this?”

Metherell shook his head and pointed his finger at me for emphasis. “Absolutely not,” he said. “Remember that he was already in hypovolemic shock from the massive blood loss even before the crucifixion started. He couldn’t possibly have faked his death, because you can’t fake the inability to breathe for long. Besides, the spear thrust into his heart would have settled the issue once and for all. And

the Romans weren't about to risk their own death by allowing him to walk away alive."

"So," I said, "when someone suggests to you that Jesus merely swooned on the cross—"

"I tell them it's impossible. It's a fanciful theory without any possible basis in fact."

Yet I wasn't quite ready to let go of the issue. At the risk of frustrating the doctor, I said, "Let's speculate that the impossible happened and that Jesus somehow managed to survive the crucifixion. Let's say he was able to escape from his linen wrappings, roll the huge rock away from the mouth of his tomb, and get past the Roman soldiers who were standing guard. Medically speaking, what condition would he have been in after he tracked down his disciples?"

Metherell was reluctant to play that game. "Again," he stressed, becoming a bit more animated, "there's just no way he could have survived the cross.

"But if he had, how could he walk around after nails had been driven through his feet? How could he have appeared on the road to Emmaus just a short time later, strolling for long distances? How could he have used his arms after they were stretched and pulled from their joints? Remember, he also had massive wounds on his back and a spear wound to his chest."

Then he paused. Something clicked in his mind, and now he was ready to make a closing point that would drive a final stake through the heart of the swoon theory once and for all. It was an argument that nobody has been able to refute ever since it was first advanced by German theologian David Strauss in 1835.

“Listen,” Metherell said, “a person in that kind of pathetic condition would never have inspired his disciples to go out and proclaim that he’s the Lord of life who had triumphed over the grave.

“Do you see what I’m saying? After suffering that horrible abuse, with all the catastrophic blood loss and trauma, he would have looked so pitiful that the disciples would never have hailed him as a victorious conqueror of death; they would have felt sorry for him and tried to nurse him back to health.

“So it’s preposterous to think that if he had appeared to them in that awful state, his followers would have been prompted to start a worldwide movement based on the hope that someday they too would have a resurrection body like his. There’s just no way.”

A QUESTION FOR THE HEART

Convincingly, masterfully, Metherell had established his case beyond a reasonable doubt. He had done it by focusing exclusively on the “how” question: How was Jesus executed in a way that absolutely ensured his death? But as we ended, I sensed that something was missing. I had tapped into his knowledge, but I hadn’t touched his heart. So as we stood to shake hands, I felt compelled to ask the “why” question that begged to be posed.

“Alex, before I go, let me ask your opinion about something—not your medical opinion, not your scientific evaluation, just something from your heart.”

I felt him let down his guard a bit. “Yes,” he said, “I’ll try.”

“Jesus intentionally walked into the arms of his betrayer, he didn’t resist arrest, he didn’t defend himself at

his trial—it was clear that he was willingly subjecting himself to what you’ve described as a humiliating and agonizing form of torture. And I’d like to know why. What could possibly have motivated a person to agree to endure this sort of punishment?”

Alexander Metherell—the man this time, not the doctor—searched for the right words.

“Frankly, I don’t think a typical person could have done it,” he finally replied. “But Jesus knew what was coming, and he was willing to go through it, because this was the only way he could redeem us—by serving as our substitute and paying the death penalty that we deserve because of our rebellion against God. That was his whole mission in coming to earth.”

Having said that, I could still sense that Metherell’s relentlessly rational, logical, and organized mind was continuing to crunch down my question to its most basic, nonreducible answer.

“So when you ask what motivated him,” he concluded, “well . . . I suppose the answer can be summed up in one word—and that would be *love*.”

As I drove away that night, it was this answer that played over and over in my mind.

All in all, my interview with Metherell had been thoroughly helpful. He had persuasively established that Jesus could not have survived the ordeal of the cross, a form of cruelty so vile that the Romans exempted their own citizens from it, except for cases of high treason.

Metherell’s conclusions were consistent with the findings of other physicians who have carefully studied the issue. Among them is Dr. William D. Edwards, whose

1986 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded, “Clearly, the weight of the historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted. . . . Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.”¹⁰

Those who seek to explain away the resurrection of Jesus by claiming that he somehow escaped the clutches of death at Golgotha need to offer a more plausible theory that fits the facts.

And then they too must end up pondering the haunting question that all of us need to consider: What could possibly have motivated Jesus to willingly allow himself to be degraded and brutalized the way that he did?

DELIBERATIONS

Questions for Reflection or Group Study

1. After considering Dr. Metherell’s account, do you see any validity to the swoon theory? Why or why not?
2. For two millennia the cross has been a symbol for Christians. Now that you’ve read Metherell’s testimony, how might your own view of that symbol be different in the future?
3. Would you be willing to suffer for the sake of another person? For whom and why? What would it take to motivate you to endure torture in the place of someone else?

4. How would you react to the soldiers if they were abusing, humiliating, and torturing you, as they did Jesus? What could possibly account for Jesus' reaction, which was to utter in the midst of his agony, "Father, forgive them"?