

Jesus' Resurrection: A Greco-Roman Invention?

Legends and myths are designed to make a story more impressive, attractive, and believable.

Today, some think the resurrection of Jesus might have been added when Christian faith encountered Greek culture, to impress the Greeks.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Greeks and Romans didn't care for the poor and had low sexual ethics. This lifestyle was undergirded by the Greek idea that human bodies don't really matter. For them, the body was a prison that housed the immortal soul for a while. The idea of anyone's bodily resurrection, especially a Jew's, and especially a crucified Jew's, was a slap in the Greco-Roman face. Jesus' resurrection didn't make the Christian claim more credible. It made it more contemptible. It needed more proof and explanation.

We will look at the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas as evidence of how Greek culture, philosophy, and mysticism wanted to get rid of the claim of Jesus' resurrection because it was unattractive and undermined their entire worldview.

This strongly suggests that belief in Jesus' resurrection was present at the beginning of the Christian movement.

Part One: The Cultural Backgrounds

*Below are three representative belief systems and the stories they tell.
Which seems most likely to be merely a social construct? Why?*

	GREEK	JEWISH (and CHRISTIAN)
US: What are we?	SOUL We are good, immortal souls trapped in a bad, mortal body	BODY AND SOUL We are both; both were created good
DEATH is...?	LIBERATION of the soul	THE ENEMY God will overthrow it in a fresh new creation
HOPE: What is there to hope for?	DISEMBODIMENT the separation of soul from body	RESURRECTION God's renewal of the world and resurrection of Israel
GIVE WEALTH up for the poor, the weak...?	NO since other people's bodies are not important	YES since people's bodies and souls are important.
SEX & MARRIAGE are...?	From NEUTRAL (Epicureans said have sex with anyone), to BAD (Stoics said don't have sex)	Marriage and sex are inseparably UNITED AND GOOD because God designed it that way.
HISTORY is...	CIRCULAR and repetitious; there is nothing new	LINEAR because God is good and will defeat evil

Notice that it would be much easier to live in the Greek belief system. If you told me, 'You don't have to care for the poor, and you can have sex with whoever you wanted, and by the way, here's the back story to support you in that lifestyle,' I would be naturally attracted to that. I would not be naturally attracted to the Jewish, and later Christian, belief system. I would require much more proof of those belief systems if I were to consider them.

Part Two: The Gospel of John

Notice how Jewish the Gospel of John is.

Old Creation	New Creation
In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)	In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

	7 Miracles	7 Discourses	7 'I AM' statements
1	Emptiness to joy. Water into wine at Cana. (2:1-10)	Second birth with Nicodemus (Jn.3:1-21)	I am the bread of life (6:35)
2	Sickness to health. Healing of the royal official's sick son. (4:46-54)	Living water with Samaritan woman (Jn.4:1-42)	I am the light of the world (8:12)
3	Debilitation to wholeness. Healing the invalid man. (5:1-15)	The 'Son and Father relationship' debate with the Pharisees (Jn.5:16-45)	I am the door (10:7)
4	Hunger to satisfaction. Multiplication of bread. (6:1-14)	Bread of Life (Jn.6:22-71)	I am the good shepherd (10:11)
5	Fear to peace. Walking on water. (6:16-21)	Abraham debate with the Pharisees (Jn.8:12-59)	I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)
6	Blindness to sight. Healing of the blind man. (9:1-41)	Good shepherd (Jn.10:1-38)	I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6)
7	Death to life. Resuscitation of Lazarus. (11:17-44)	Upper Room discourse (Jn.13:1-17:26)	I am the true vine (15:1)

Old Creation	New Creation
Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)	Jesus breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' (John 20:22)

FACTUAL ISSUE: Jesus' life, death, and bodily resurrection.

LITERARY ALLUSION: John is clearly echoing Genesis 1 – 2.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: Jesus is creating a new humanity, and a new creation. Jesus is God.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are like John. They also make a historical case for Jesus' life, death, and bodily resurrection. Like John, they also echo, allude to, and quote from the creation story, because they are also telling a historical story of God's new humanity and new creation.

Part Three: The Gospel of Thomas

Notice how Greek the Gospel of Thomas is.

I These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded. 1. And he said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death." 2. Jesus said, "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all. [And after they have reigned they will rest.]" 3. Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the (Father's) kingdom is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty." 4. Jesus said, "The person old in days won't hesitate to ask a little child seven days old about the place of life, and that person will live. For many of the first will be last, and will become a single one." 5. Jesus said, "Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed. [And there is nothing buried that will not be raised.]" 6. His disciples asked him and said to him, "Do you want us to fast? How should we pray? Should we give to charity? What diet should we observe?" Jesus said, "Don't lie, and don't do what you hate, because all things are disclosed before heaven. After all, there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and there is nothing covered up that will remain undisclosed." 7. Jesus said, "Lucky is the lion that the human will eat, so that the lion becomes human. And foul is the human that the lion will eat, and the lion still will become human." 8. And he said, "The person is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of little fish. Among them the wise fisherman discovered a fine large fish. He threw all the little fish back into the sea, and easily chose the large fish. Anyone here with two good ears had better listen!" 9. Jesus said, "Look, the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered (them). Some fell on the road, and the birds came and gathered them. Others fell on rock, and they didn't take root in the soil and didn't produce heads of grain. Others fell on thorns, and they choked the seeds and worms ate them. And others fell on good soil, and it produced a good crop: it yielded sixty per measure and one hundred twenty per measure." 10. Jesus said, "I have cast fire upon the world, and look, I'm guarding it until it blazes." 11. Jesus said, "This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are not alive, and the living will not die. During the days when you ate what is dead, you made it come alive. When you are in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?" 12. The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?" Jesus said to them, "No matter where you are you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being." 13. Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to something and tell me what I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a just messenger." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like." Jesus said, "I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended." And he took him, and withdrew, and spoke three sayings to him. When Thomas came back to his friends they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?" Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and devour you."

29. Jesus said, "If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel, but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvels. Yet I marvel at how this great wealth has come to dwell in this poverty"... 37. His disciples said, "When will you appear to us, and when will we see you?" Jesus said, "When you strip without being ashamed, and you take your clothes and put them under your feet like little children and trample them, then [you] will see the son of the living one and you will not be afraid."

114. Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life." Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven."

Criteria for Christians Rejecting the Gospel of Thomas

1. Authorship
 - a. Authorship dubious; there is no historical attestation that Thomas wrote this 'Gospel'
2. Historical Use
 - a. Historical usage by early Christian community missing. It was only found in one place: the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt, dated as early as 130 AD, ranging to 340 AD.
 - b. The Indian Christian community claims that Thomas was their founder in 52 AD. But we have no evidence that the Gospel of Thomas was ever there. By contrast, we have found fragments of the Gospel of Matthew. Would Thomas have brought Matthew's Gospel, but not his own? The more natural conclusion would be that Thomas did not write a Gospel.
3. Content
 - a. Content not in agreement with other Four Gospels, nor the Old Testament
 - i. Jewish Messiahship
 - ii. physical bodies
 - iii. female gender
 - iv. new creation
 - b. There is no cross & resurrection narrative!
 - c. It is not even a narrative, just isolated teachings (Israel affirms history; Gnostics do not).
 - i. It's like stripping *Return of the King* of story and reducing Aragorn's part to monologue, and a distorted monologue at that. How unsatisfying!
 - ii. Like T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* being a reflection of Eliot giving up on the story of the West, the Gnostics do not have a story in which they can hope. Thus, they have a historically disembodied wisdom tradition.

The Greek Gnostics tried to dismantle the story of Jesus' resurrection to create a whole new set of myths and legends about Jesus. Their myths and legends were an attempt to change Christian (i.e. fundamentally Jewish) belief to Greek philosophy and religious mysticism. This is important because it shows us what direction the myth-making and legend-development goes, and for what purpose: it goes in the direction of making a hero or belief system more attractive and believable. It does not go the other way, making the hero or belief system more challenging and more offensive.

Yet this is precisely what Jesus' bodily resurrection meant in the world of Greek culture, philosophy, and religion. Jesus' resurrection meant that the God of Israel was the one true God, so the Greek person's religious worship needed to completely change. It meant that other people's bodies mattered, so the Greek had to care for the poor. It meant that sexual ethics really mattered, so the Greek couldn't have sex with whoever he wanted. It meant that all humanity is claimed by this God in love, and that each human being matters no matter what their background was. Note that the Athenians believed they were descended from a different human ancestry than everyone else; this is how they justified mass slavery of foreigners, and the Spartans enslaved the Helots. So Jesus' resurrection would have meant radical lifestyle changes for the Greek.

To the Greek and Roman audience, the resurrection of Jesus didn't make Christian faith more believable, but less. It didn't make Christian faith more admirable, but contemptible. It didn't make Christian faith easier to believe, but harder to live. It was the part of Christian faith that required a lot more proof and explanation! Why would the Christians add this over time, as they engaged more and more with Greek culture? It would make life harder and harder for them. This strongly suggests that belief in Jesus' resurrection was present at the beginning of the Christian movement.

Part Four: The Gospel of Judas

Notice how Greek the Gospel of Judas is.

An excerpt from 'JESUS LAUGHED'

In the "Gospel of Judas," the renegade is redeemed.

by ADAM GOPNIK

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...It certainly makes for odd bedside reading. "The Gospel of Judas" isn't actually a gospel by Judas, or, really, a gospel at all in the sense that we might expect: an account of the life of Jesus, from birth to death and rebirth. It is, instead, a mystical riff on a life already assumed to be familiar. It begins just before Jesus' last Passover in Jerusalem, as the disciples are offering a prayer to God over the dinner table. Watching them, Jesus laughs. "Why are you laughing at us?" the nettled disciples ask, and Jesus says that he is laughing not at them but at their strange idea of pleasing their God. (One of the unnerving things about the new Gospel is that Jesus, who never laughs in the canonic Gospels, is constantly laughing in this one, and it's obviously one of those sardonic, significant, how-little-you-know laughs, like the laugh of the ruler of a dubious planet on "Star Trek.")

The disciples are furious at Jesus' condescension, except for Judas, who thinks he knows what the laughter signifies. "I know who you are and where you have come from," Judas says, standing before him. "You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo." Apparently startled by his insight, Jesus tells Judas, "Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the Kingdom."

The true mystery, as Jesus unveils it, is that, out beyond the stars, there exists a divine, blessed realm, free of the materiality of this earthly one. This is the realm of Barbelo, a name that gnostics gave the celestial Mother, who lives there with, among others, her progeny, a good God awkwardly called the Self-Generated One. Jesus, it turns out, is not the son of the Old Testament God, whose retinue includes a rebellious creator known as Yaldabaoth, but an avatar of Adam's third son, Seth. His mission is to show those lucky members of mankind who still have a "Sethian" spark the way back to the blessed realm. Jesus, we learn, was laughing at the disciples' prayer because it was directed at their God, the Old Testament God, who is really no friend of mankind but, rather, the cause of its suffering.

What gives "The Gospel of Judas" a peculiar pathos is the sacrificial role that Judas must play in the divine story. Jesus is going back to Barbelo, and to get there he must "sacrifice the man that clothes me"; that is, his mortal body. The only way to do this is to accept his own death, and he urges Judas to become the agent of it. (Presumably, self-slaughter would not get him back.) But Judas has reason to worry that if he obeys his Lord he will be stuck with a bad reputation forever. "In a vision," he says, "I saw myself as the twelve disciples were stoning me." Jesus assures him that though "you will be cursed by the other generations . . . you will come to rule over them." At the end, he supplies Judas with a beatific vision of a luminous cloud, and, in this Gospel's one truly poetic note, tells him, "Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star that leads the way is your star." Judas accepts the bargain—temporal libel in exchange for eternal luminosity—and agrees to turn Jesus over to the high priests. The Gospel's very last lines have an extraordinarily modern feeling of Hemingwayesque understatement, achieved perhaps inadvertently, by textual omission: "They approached Judas and said to him, 'What are you doing here? You are Jesus' disciple.' Judas answered them as they wished. And he received some money and handed him over to them."

Part Five: The Formation of the New Testament

Was the canon a conspiracy?

Q: Wasn't the canon a conspiracy of the church hierarchy? A power move?

A: What hierarchy? The church was much closer to a flat community in its beginnings, not a hierarchical organization. Here's evidence:

- Referring to an independent exorcist that was not part of the band of twelve disciples, Jesus said, 'He who is not against you is for you.' (Lk.9:49 – 50). Apparently this confused the disciples who thought that this exorcist should 'report' to them. The fact that Jesus took a 'loose' view of organization is important to notice. He did not want the disciples to think that formal organization is what guarantees unity or success. In fact, common commitment to Jesus' mission is what gives a basic sense of unity to the disciples, not some formalized relation of power. Even more important is the fact that Luke carries the saying into the life of the early church. Why would a Gospel writer circulate that statement if the early church had all kinds of authority questions about which leader they were going to follow?
- The apostles had a collective, not an individual, authority. The apostles didn't 'carve up the world' and set up hierarchical 'realms' that were impermeable to one another. Hence, Peter (in I Peter) addressed the Galatians after Paul did; John (in Rev.2) addressed the Ephesians after Paul did; the author of Hebrews writes from Italy all the way to the Jewish Christians in Judea; the late first century work I Clement was apparently written from the elders at Rome to the church at Corinth; and the other patristic writings demonstrate this dynamic all the time. There were no 'realms' of individual jurisdiction. They didn't get into debates of, 'Don't step into my part of the organization.' Nor did the early Christians say, 'You're not my apostle.' Thus, their authority was a collective authority that they shared together. This means they did not see the church as an organization, but as a flat community where one section was permeable to others.
- The apostles' way of managing themselves was decentralized: They do not give any evidence that they 'reported' to Simon Peter (they were not centrally organized). Simon Peter appears to be a spokesperson for, but not an authority over, the other apostles. No central leader sent Barnabus and Paul out from Antioch; Barnabus and Paul parted ways on their own discretion. Paul respects the other apostles as colleagues and checks on himself, but he doesn't refer to their formal authority over him.
- The need for a council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 gives evidence of a decentralized community. If a hierarchical organization was already in place, it would have been used, and the decision making process would have been hierarchical, not consensual.
- House church governance seems fairly decentralized, e.g. Romans 16, I Corinthians 16, Philippians, etc. Local elders (I Timothy, Titus plus scattered references in Heb.13, I Th.5, I Pet.5) are subject to the apostles but otherwise work independently, respecting other churches.
- The process of writing the New Testament and its canonization were both decentralized. The apostles do not appear to have consulted each other before writing.
- The need for subsequent church councils in Nicea, Chalcedon, etc. is also evidence. If a hierarchical organization was already in place, it would have been used, and the decision making process would have been hierarchical, not consensual.
- Later competition between Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Antioch suggests that there was no clear understanding of church hierarchy. Edessa's independence (i.e. the Syrian Church) is also revealing. At the end of the sixth century, Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, denounced John the Faster (Patriarch of Constantinople) for his assumed title of 'Universal Patriarch.' In A.D. 606, Boniface III claimed he was 'Universal Bishop' over all the churches, though this was never actually true.

Q: So wasn't the canon a tops-down move?

A: Not really; it was a bottoms-up development. More like a grass-roots community consensus. Or like a 'Hall of Fame.'

Q: But the Greek, Latin, and Syrian branches of the church had different New Testaments, didn't they?

A: There were slight differences, but only with regards to 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Not much hangs on those books alone. But the core of the New Testament was set. The Syrian church developed into East and West, and the Western Syrian church adopted the 27 books of the Greek and Latin New Testaments. The Eastern Syrian church continues with 22 books.