

This Miracle Separates Christianity From the Rest of the World

The story is bizarre, incredible, unbelievable. It's like a movie with a plot so absurd that it stretches all credulity, except in this case, every word of the story is true. What you are about to read is not disputed by historians. They all know that this story, the story of the mystical messiah, Shabbetai Zevi, is fact, not fiction.

Zevi was born in 1626 to upper-middle-class parents in Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey), allegedly on the ninth of Av (Tisha b'Av), a date of tremendous importance in Jewish history. According to some rabbinic traditions, it is the day on which the Messiah will be born (or was born).

Zevi received a strong education in rabbinic texts and was recognized as a scholar while still a young man, specializing in Jewish mysticism. While still in his teens, he began to share his mystical insights with a small group of followers, and as an extreme ascetic, he set himself apart. But Zevi was not simply a precocious (and devoted) Orthodox Jew. He was prone to extreme mood swings and would claim to receive new insights while in an ecstatic state, and would contravene Jewish law or perform bizarre rituals.

This was proof to some of his followers that Zevi was actually the Messiah, one who had to break the old laws in order to introduce the new Messianic order. Why else would a religious Jewish ascetic act in such ways? In 1665, Nathan of Gaza, a well-known mystic and self-appointed prophet, made a shocking announcement. Nathan claimed to have received a prophetic vision revealing that Zevi "would be the Jewish messiah." This is when the movement exploded. A messianic fervor spread

through the Jewish world.

Zevi traveled to Istanbul to reveal himself to the sultan, who would then bow down to him. But the sultan was not impressed, and rather than bow to Zevi, he arrested him upon his arrival in the city. The sultan offered him two choices: convert to Islam or die.

And what did Zevi do? He converted to Islam! Yes, sources say "Shabbetai Tzvi became Aziz Mehmed Effendi, and, with a royal pension, lived until 1676, outwardly a Muslim but secretly participating in Jewish ritual. His letters reveal that at the time of his death, he still believed in his messianic mission."

But there is something remarkable I must point out, especially in the context of the Easter season. Obviously there was massive spiritual deception surrounding Zevi, both before and after he converted to Islam. The deception was so great that it split the Jewish world in two, representing the largest false messianic movement in Jewish history. The deception was so great that even after Zevi became a Muslim, he was still hailed as Messiah by some of his followers, with many of them becoming Muslims as well. Yet no one ever claimed that Zevi rose from the dead. There were no claims of dozens, let alone hundreds, of his followers seeing him alive from the grave.

His followers were able to believe the most far-fetched things about him, both while he was alive and then after he died. Yet no one claimed his tomb was empty.

This keeps with a common pattern. No matter how much people wish that their loved ones or leaders were still alive, physical death has a certain finality about it, and it's not hard to guard a tomb. The bereaved may feel that their deceased loved ones are somehow "present" with them. They may believe that they can communicate with each other. They may even speak of the deceased appearing to them in visions and

dreams. But they do not suffer mass hallucinations that their loved ones or leaders have risen from the dead and are appearing in bodily form.

That's why there are not numerous claims about the resurrection of spiritual leaders of the past. It's a myth that doesn't stick. It's a myth that can easily be refuted. And it's a myth that was never associated with Zevi, which is quite remarkable given the fanatical nature of his followers. If they could concoct the theory that his conversion to Islam was God's plan to bring in the redemption, surely they could concoct a theory that they saw him rise from the dead. Yet he didn't rise, and they never claimed that he did.

There is a massive difference between our Jesus Christ and Zevi, and it boils down to one word: Resurrection. Only one of these potential messiahs rose again.

An Unexpected Messiah

Virtually no one was expecting a crucified Messiah. No one expected the Savior of Israel to die a criminal's death. Had Jesus not risen from the dead, despite the many miracles He had performed and His personal charisma, His Messianic movement would have ended 2,000 years ago. The Resurrection changed everything.

Looking at this through a wider lens, it's not surprising that biographies about religious leaders in past generations celebrate their accomplishments, often presenting them in saintlike, even supernatural terms. They were bigger than life and better than other humans. They were transcendent. They were ultraspiritual. They were unique.

In stark contrast, the New Testament writings talk candidly about the failures of their early leaders, the founders of the church. These writings tell us that the first followers of Jesus, the men whose lives and testimonies laid the foundation for this movement, were full of doubt and fear, often

misunderstanding Yeshua's words and intentions while He was alive, even though they were with Him day and night for a period of several years.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record how these Jewish men reacted when Jesus began to talk about His impending suffering and death: "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said this openly. And Peter took Him and began to rebuke Him. But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, 'Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'" (Mark 8:31-33).

Peter, who became one of the key leaders of the movement, could not possibly believe that Yeshua, the Messiah, would suffer a fate like this. It was so preposterous to him that he actually rebuked his master. In turn, Yeshua rebuked him, stating that Peter was seeing things through a satanic, worldly perspective rather than a divine, heavenly perspective. What a serious gaffe!

But Peter was not alone in his unbelief and spiritual dullness. After Jesus cleansed the temple, He was challenged by the local leadership: "The Jewish leaders demanded, 'What are you doing? If God gave you authority to do this, show us a miraculous sign to prove it.' 'All right,' Jesus replied. 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' 'What!' they exclaimed. 'It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can rebuild it in three days?' But when Jesus said 'this temple,' he meant his own body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he had said this, and they believed both the Scriptures and what Jesus had said" (John 2:18-22, NLT).

Do you see that? The theme of bodily resurrection was on Jesus' lips from early in His public ministry. Right off the

bat, it was misunderstood, especially when He expressed Himself in semimystical terms, speaking of “this temple”—which, to the Jewish leaders, would have suggested the temple—but really meaning His physical body. It was only after He rose that His disciples understood and believed. And note carefully what is written: “They believed both the Scriptures and what Jesus had said.”

Yes, the Jewish Scriptures actually predicted the Messiah’s rejection, violent death and Resurrection, and after Yeshua rose from the dead, the light went on and everything became clear. It was written there all the time!

His Unsuspecting Followers

The first disciples knew that Yeshua was the promised Messiah—it was undeniable to them that He was the man—but His suffering and death completely threw them. They were expecting a very different outcome.

After reading about Peter rebuking Jesus in Mark 8, in the very next chapter of Mark’s Gospel, we read that Jesus took His three closest followers up onto a mountain to pray. And as they prayed, He was transfigured, His face shining with the glory of God. Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Him, the cloud of God’s presence came and the Father spoke from the cloud. It was an absolutely glorious and extraordinary experience, a clear manifestation of the Messiah’s supernatural stature.

Yet Mark 9:9-10 records, “As they came down the mountain, He warned them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept that statement to themselves, questioning each other what the rising from the dead meant.”

Note that this is recorded in Mark 9, which means the disciples had already heard Jesus talk about His death and Resurrection (as recorded in Mark 8), but they still had no

idea what He meant.

Then in this very same chapter, we read, "They departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it. For He was teaching His disciples, saying, 'The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. After He is killed, He will rise the third day.' But they did not understand the teaching and were afraid to ask Him" (Mark 9:30-32, MEV).

They still could not figure out what Jesus was talking about, even though He was now repeating the same information over and again: "I'm going to be killed, but after three days, I will rise from the dead." They just didn't get it. But it gets worse. The night that Jesus was betrayed, all His disciples got up and ran, despite His telling them moments before exactly what would happen (Matt. 26:20-56). At this very late juncture, immediately before His crucifixion, they still didn't get it.

And what happened after He died, even after there were reports of His resurrection? They were in great despair, their hopes dashed to pieces.

John records that on the very night that these Resurrection reports were circulating, even after some of these men had seen that Yeshua's tomb was indeed empty, "the doors being locked where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (John 20:19b).

For these men, the death of Jesus meant it was all over. So much for His being the Messiah! But then He rose from the dead, and everything changed.

According to reliable tradition, Peter, the one who rebuked Yeshua for saying He was going to be crucified, was himself crucified for his testimony. And tradition tells us that once-doubting Thomas took the message of Jesus to India, dying as a

martyr there. These doubting, fearful and hopeless disciples became the nucleus of a world-changing, faith-filled and victorious army. And as they presented the message of their crucified and risen Messiah, He made Himself real to the hearers in many different ways, as He continues to do to this very moment.

Writing less than 25 years after the Messiah's resurrection, Paul wrote: "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: how Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and was seen by Cephas, and then by the twelve. Then He was seen by over five hundred brothers at once, of whom the greater part remain to this present time, though some have passed away. Then He was seen by James and then by all the apostles. Last of all, He was seen by me also" (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

This is absolutely remarkable. The risen Messiah did not simply appear to a select few. He appeared to all His first followers repeatedly, as Acts records: "He presented Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs, appearing to them for forty days, and speaking concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). And then, somewhere during this 40-day period, He presented Himself to more than 500 at one time. Not only so, but Scripture records that He ascended to heaven in the presence of some of these very same men (Acts 1:6-11).

No wonder they then preached with such boldness. No wonder those who fled for their lives when Jesus was betrayed now joyfully gave their lives to stand for Him. No wonder they were fearless in the face of intimidation, threats, beatings, persecution, imprisonments and even death. Yeshua rose from the dead, and they saw it with their own eyes. Their fear turned to faith, and their cowardice turned to courage. He was alive, and they could never doubt it again.

What's more, Jesus told them that when He ascended to heaven,

He would send the Holy Spirit down upon them and that, empowered by the Spirit, they would do the same works that He did (see Luke 24:49, John 14:12, Acts 1:8). And they did! They too saw the same miracles take place. They too saw blind eyes open. They too saw lame people walk. They too saw the dead raised—all through the merit of (and in the name of) Yeshua, the King of the Jews, the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world.

Miracles Upon Miracles

What's even more, these same miracles are taking place to this very day through prayer that is offered in Jesus' name. He really is alive! And it's not just the "special people" who can work these miracles. It's not just the charismatic superstar leaders who have seen such remarkable answers to prayer. On the contrary, it's often through the most common, ordinary people that these miracles take place. That's because the power is in the name of Yeshua the risen Messiah, not the power of His followers.

Professor Craig Keener, one of the most respected New Testament scholars, has estimated at least 200 million people have witnessed a miracle in Jesus' name—and he means people alive today. Some of these are miracles occurring in nature, some physical healings and some miraculous prophecies. The list is incredibly impressive.

Some of the most amazing miracles involve the Muslim world, where, on a regular basis, Muslims are having visions of Jesus and as a result, converting to Christianity. In other cases, these Muslims have a dream about someone they have never met, but they are told in the dream that this person will bring them a message that will change their life. Then shortly after having the dream, for the first time in their life, they meet the person they saw in the dream, and it just so happens that the person is a Christian missionary. Things like this are happening all the time in the Muslim world to the point that

millions of Muslims are now coming to faith in Jesus. To say it again, He is risen!

At the end of his Gospel account, John wrote, "There are also many other things which Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

John wrote these words more than 1,900 years ago. How much more would this be the case today? The one true Messiah has risen from the dead. That is undeniable. But His death was not an interruption in His mission. Instead, it was an integral, absolutely central part of His mission. When you understand this, you understand it all. {eo}

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