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# Jesus is Alive, Elvis is Alive

What's the Difference?



A DARE BOOKLET

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## What's the Difference?

**On a hot Friday afternoon** outside Jerusalem in AD33, a 33-year old peasant-teacher named Jesus of Nazareth was executed by Roman soldiers. 1,944 years later, on August 16th, 1977, a 42-year old entertainer named Elvis Presley was found dead in his palatial bathroom at Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee.

On the surface, there should be no connection. Yet there is. Both are now reputed to be alive. Many claim to have seen, or to have been directly influenced by both. Controversy surrounds their lives, their deaths, and their present whereabouts. And literature continues to appear on both subjects.

Some regard the claims with equal skepticism. Others think both might be true. Yet others see a radical difference between the two stories. I want to pursue this third option by asking a series of questions about the two cases:

## 1. Was their death unexpected?

### A. Elvis

Elvis gave hints that he expected to die soon. His fans did not understand them at the time, although his close friends saw it coming.

Fans ask now: why did he say 'Adios' at his last concert? Towards the end he began to sing the Sinatra song, 'My Way', with its line, 'And now the end is near.' He told his stepbrother, 'I may not look good tonight...but I'll look good in my coffin.' In fact, his step-brother, David Stanley, said people were guessing what day Elvis would die because they realized how sick he was: 'We knew he was going to die,' he commented.

### B. Jesus

Jesus had predicted both his death and his return to life on at least three recorded occasions. His followers, however, either could not or would not believe him.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Did they really die?

### A. Elvis

Elvis' death was private and the cause confused. Murder, suicide, a weak heart and drugs have all been suggested. The mystery has been compounded by administrative ineptitude similar to that surrounding the death of President Kennedy.

The most systematic research is documented in a book entitled *The Death of Elvis* by Charles Thompson and James Cole.

They cite, for example, the fact that samples were sent from the body of Elvis to Dr Norman Weissman at a top lab—Bio-Science—in California, where they were asked to comment, without knowing the true identity of the subject—he was simply known as 'Ethel Moore'. Bio-Science responded that the subject took prescription drugs like a kid in a candy store and that the number and concentration of drugs in the system was dangerously high.

A second outside expert concluded that the codeine in the system alone could have killed him, but in combination with the other drugs, death was inevitable. The lab found that:

- the codeine was ten times the therapeutic level in his blood; twenty-three times in his kidneys, and sixteen times in his liver
- there were toxic levels of Quaaludes, a sedative/hypnotic drug
- the upper limits of therapeutic level of Valium existed
- higher than recommended levels of Valmid and Placidyl existed
- there were nearly toxic levels of pentobarbitol (a barbiturate which treats anxiety and stress by depressing the central nervous system).

Thompson and Cole discovered that 12,000 pills were prescribed in the last twenty months of Elvis' life; and 600 on August 15th, 1977 alone. It comes as no surprise to learn that late in 1979, Dr Nicopoulos, Elvis' personal physician and friend, was examined by the Tennessee Board of Medical Examiners. They found him guilty on ten counts of over-prescribing for his patients including Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley. He received three months' suspension and three years' probation.

Linda Thompson was Elvis' live-in girl-friend from 1972 till 1976. She testified that 'he took so many drugs, he would fall asleep in the middle of eating, and I would have to clean food out of his mouth and out of his throat and turn him on his side and make sure that he was breathing.'

Her departure probably hastened his death because she was very conscientious in caring for him.

## B. Jesus

Jesus' death was very public, conducted by professional executioners. Everybody knew what to do and did it efficiently. Jesus' biographer John draws attention to the fact that when a soldier's spear was thrust into Jesus' side, 'blood and water' gushed out, a sign of certain death.

There are theories that he did not die, but they are hardly plausible. The swoon hypothesis in particular has gained notoriety: Jesus did not die on the cross, but only swooned. Later, in the cool of the tomb, he recovered, returned to his followers, and convinced them that he had risen again.<sup>2</sup>

The problems with this view are many and powerful. A Roman officer had to certify a criminal's death to the governor: his own life was forfeit if he made a mistake. He was strongly motivated to be sure. Then all the records agree that Jesus was flogged before being crucified. A Roman flogging alone had been known to kill strong men. The records also say that 75 pounds of spices were wound in among Jesus' grave-clothes: a crushing weight for a desperately wounded man to sustain, let alone to throw off. And lastly, could an almost-dead man have given his followers the impression that he was the eternal victor over death? If he had survived, it would have been as a man broken in body and in spirit. There would have been little to celebrate.

## 3. What evidence is there that they are alive?

Instinctively, we do not want our heroes to die. According to English legend, King Arthur is not dead, but sleeping, and he will awake and lead England in her hour of greatest need. We go into denial when heroes die, and build legends around them to protect ourselves. We can also build cases on flimsy evidence simply to buttress our prejudices. There has to be a hard-nosed approach to the question of evidence, and close scrutiny for any sign of wish-fulfilment.

### A. Elvis

Strangely enough, the evidence for Elvis' continuing life is softer than that for Jesus, even though the events are so much more recent. On the whole, Elvis' fans and the tabloids do not make the most reliable of witnesses. Whereas Jesus' fans won only ridicule and death for championing his cause, Elvis' fans have big bucks to look forward to for their stories.

But there are some exceptions, and to be fair, their stories also have to be told. The most elaborate story is that of Gail Brewer-Giorgio, in her book, *Is Elvis alive?* She calls the supposed death of Elvis 'one of the most elaborate, shocking cover-ups of this century...a musical Watergate.'

Her story is this. Three days after Elvis' death, she started writing a novel to be called *Orion*. Orion would be the name of a highly successful singer who becomes disillusioned with the weight of fame, and decides to fake his own death and escape to a new life in Hawaii.

In 1979, when she had signed a contract with a publisher for the hardback edition of the book, a singer appeared named Orion, wearing a mask and singing like Elvis. Some thought he

was Elvis. His record covers used details taken directly from her manuscript. Publication of the book had to be delayed.

The book was finally published in August 1981, but by January it was unobtainable. One distributor confessed that he had been told to pull the book, ostensibly because it was not doing well.

Then Brewer-Giorgio discovered that the William Morris Agency which handled *Orion* was closely linked to Elvis and his manager Colonel Tom Parker. This raised questions in her mind: did they pressure Simon and Schuster (the publisher) to pull the book? Did they set up Orion the singer to confuse the issue? Maybe the Colonel got someone at William Morris to threaten Simon and Schuster with litigation if they didn't pull the book.

And then the punch-line, which would explain everything: her fictional story was too close to the truth. Elvis didn't die but faked his death in order to cover his starting a new life, maybe even in Hawaii. As a result, those who knew the truth closed ranks and did what they could to destroy the book.

Brewer-Giorgio looks at the evidence for such a cover-up:

- *The National Enquirer* paid a third cousin of Elvis to smuggle a mini-camera in to the viewing of Elvis' body. The resulting picture was published in the *Enquirer*, and caused shock waves among fans around the world. The eyebrows, chin, and fingers all looked unlike Elvis.
- The coffin weighed 900 pounds: Elvis is known to have been overweight at the time of his death...but not that much. Fans deduce that the body was a wax dummy and that the weight is accounted for by an air conditioner inside the coffin to keep the wax dummy from melting.
- Elvis' father, Vernon, misspelled Elvis' middle name on the grave—Aaron instead of Aron, as his mother named him.

Was this a sign that Vernon Presley knew that it was not his son in the tomb?

- Col. Tom Parker, Elvis' manager, said later in the week after Elvis' death: 'Elvis didn't die. The body did. We're keeping up the good spirits. We're keeping Elvis alive. I talked to him this morning and he told me to carry on.' Is it possible that there was a double entendre to those words: that they had a literal truth to them that no-one suspected at the time?
- Brewer-Giorgio is struck by the evidence of numerology, a great interest of Elvis'. So, for instance, August 16th, 1977, has numerical significance:  $8 + 16 + 1977 = 2001$ . Thus *Spake Zarathustra*, the theme music from the movie *2001*, was Elvis' theme song. Brewer-Giorgio also believes that he may have chosen the 16th for his 'death' because he wanted  $3 \times 24$  in it (a lucky combination).

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Thus: } \quad & 16 + 8 = 24 \\ & 1 + 9 + 7 + 7 = 24 \\ & 2001 - 1977 = 24 \end{aligned}$$

She thinks it significant that it is in the washroom where the hero of *2001* 'executed his plans for immortality...'

- The circumstances of death are described in conflicting ways. Witnesses disagree as to how the body was found and what Elvis was wearing, when the body was found, whether it was dead already, when death was declared, and whether AR was tried.
- The book he is supposed to have been reading (about the Shroud of Turin) was not published until a year later.
- There seems to be evidence that Elvis was preparing for the end:

—Why, for instance, did he order no new costumes for a new tour due to start on August 16th, 1977?

—Why did he fire several old friends shortly before his death?

—During his last tour he sang ‘Blue Christmas’ although it was summer: was he warning his fans?

—Five months beforehand, family members were suddenly cut out of his will. Did he realize he would need that money for his new life?

- A ticket to Buenos Aires was bought at Memphis airport the day after Elvis’ death by a man looking like Elvis and using the name John Burrows, a code name used by Elvis’ friends (including then President Richard Nixon).

However, there seem to be many flaws in Brewer-Giorgio’s argument. Most fundamentally, for a man who carefully planned his own ‘death’ and had endless money to spend, there were a lot of careless slips. Circumstances could have been much more convincing. For instance, if the body in the coffin was a wax dummy, why not a more accurate one? If that was Elvis at the airport, why wouldn’t he have paid for the ticket ahead of time to avoid recognition? Why use a name that someone might recognize? She herself says elsewhere that Memphis was full of Elvis look-alikes.

Brewer-Giorgio is unaware of the fact that Elvis had his middle name legally changed to the more conventional spelling of Aaron. Two witnesses who saw Elvis on the bathroom floor say that the book he was reading was actually *Sex and Psychic Energy*, about astrology and sex. I made a point of viewing *2001* to see if there might be any parallels with the Elvis story. The only significance of the washroom in *2001* is that it provides a silent gag: isn’t it a problem to use a gravity-free toilet in space?

Overall, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that the author is trying to force the facts to fit her theory.

## B. Jesus

The evidence for Jesus’ life beyond death is surprisingly strong:

### 1. *No one claims to have seen the actual resurrection*

If one were concocting such a story, one would want to have the most reliable witnesses present at the event.

### 2. *The testimony of Paul*

In one of the earliest Christian documents, Paul writes to doubters that if they doubt the resurrection, there are over 500 witnesses available for interview. I know an Anglican clergyman in England who climbed into his pulpit one Easter Sunday morning, and, before beginning his sermon, slowly and calmly ate a daffodil from the flower arrangement in front of him. Then he commented, ‘If one person goes out of this church this morning and says, ‘I saw the Reverend John Collins eat a daffodil in church this morning,’ the average passer-by is likely to be skeptical. But if 500 witnesses come out and all, apparently sane and sober, tell the same story, it becomes difficult to doubt it, unlikely though it may seem.’

### 3. *The testimony of the women*

According to the earliest sources, the first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection were women from among his followers. In those days, the evidence of a woman would not be accepted in a court of law. Again, if one were inventing the story, this would be a disastrous detail to invent, and would throw one’s whole case into jeopardy.

#### 4. *The testimony of the empty tomb*

Everyone agreed that Jesus' body had disappeared. The point of contention was: Who took it?

Jesus' enemies could have taken it, knowing perhaps that he had foretold his rising again. But in that case they could have produced the body once the rumours started and nipped the Christian movement in the bud.

What about Jesus' disciples? Clearly, they were not in any fit state even to think about resurrection: they were frightened and demoralized. They hardly seem like people calmly planning to confront Roman guards and steal a body. They were only concerned to save their own skins.

There is also the problem of the guards. According to the records, they reported an earthquake and the disappearance of the body to their employers, and were told to spread the rumour that they had fallen asleep at their posts. If this is Christian propaganda, it is not very useful. For the sake of the supernatural explanation, it would have been better to have the guards stay awake.

#### 5. *People will give their lives for a cause they genuinely believe in*

Of course, they may have been deceived; but it is next to impossible that they would be willing to die for a fraud they have deliberately invented. Yet the followers of Jesus, supposedly responsible for stealing his body, were willing to die for their belief that he had risen from the dead.

#### 6. *The testimony of the graveclothes*

John's account of these events mentions the fact that when the empty tomb was discovered the cloth that had been around Jesus' head lay separate from those that had bound his body. The significance of this detail is that if grave-robbers

had taken the body, either they would have taken the grave-clothes too, or they would have ripped them off and left them lying around. Only resurrection would account for the bandages as John describes them, as if the body had simply passed through them, and they had collapsed still intact.

#### 7. *The seven-week gap*

It is a strange fact that there is a gap of seven weeks between the supposed resurrection of Jesus and the disciples going out and preaching that he was alive. This does not make good dramatic sense. Far better, if you are writing a story, to have the disciples immediately excited at their Lord's resurrection. The seven weeks' delay (in the records, a time when Jesus reassured and instructed his followers) has a strangeness that smacks of the truth.

#### 8. *Physical resurrection*

New Testament scholar Dr NT Wright points out that Jews at the time of Jesus believed in the possibility of resurrection, but in a physical resurrection; the concept of a merely 'spiritual' or 'inspirational' Jesus after death would not have occurred to them. They also believed in a universal resurrection at the end of time; something very striking must have happened for them to begin believing in the resurrection of just one man.<sup>3</sup>

#### 9. *A last question*

What transformed the disciples? Something turned them from a bunch of frightened sheep into a force that turned the Roman world upside down and radically altered the course of history. The memory of a good man would hardly do that. A Jesus who barely survived crucifixion would not inspire people to face death. And of course, through the centuries, millions

have claimed the same as those early Christians: that their lives had been transformed by a powerful, loving, death-defeating Jesus. Is there a more rational explanation than the traditional one of resurrection?

In 1948 a journalist named Frank Morison wrote a book called *Who Moved the Stone?* The first chapter is entitled 'The book that refused to be written,' because this is not the book that Morison originally had in mind. His interest was in showing that the resurrection of Jesus never happened. However, as he painstakingly went through the evidence piece by piece, he came to the unexpected conclusion that it must have taken place. The resulting book sets out the evidence as he understood it.

Which leads to the question:

## 4. What did they (supposedly) do then?

### A. Elvis

The stories are many. He variously goes to Hawaii, gets a job, gets married, helps the poor, lives in privacy and avoids the crowds he knew before.

Cartoonists have suggested other possibilities. According to one cartoon in *The New Yorker*, he becomes a monk—Brother Elvis. According to a *Far Side* cartoon, he joins Salman Rushdie in hiding. My personal favorite is the suggestion that Elvis has become an Elvis impersonator. *The Dallas Morning News* has calculated that there are currently 8,029 Elvis impersonators in the world, and that at the present rate of increase, by the year 2037 one in five of the world's population will be Elvis impersonators. What better way for the king to remain incognito?

### B. Jesus

Jesus is reported to have commissioned his followers to go and spread his message and to continue doing his work in the world. And millions of people would claim that Jesus continues to affect their lives now just as he did when he was on earth in a visible way—bringing healing, forgiveness, new life, meaning and purpose.

There are two other differences between Elvis and Jesus worth noting:

#### **One:**

Those who claim that Elvis is alive assume that he never really died; those who argue that he did die say he is still dead. Nobody is saying he died and then came back to life again. The two views can be summarized as:

*Supporters say:*

He didn't die then...and is now alive.

*Skeptics say:*

He did die...and is still dead.

Claims that Jesus is alive, however, are based on the belief that he really did die. Opponents of this story are those who say he didn't die then but, naturally enough, is dead now! In sum:

*Supporters say:*

He did die...and is now alive.

*Skeptics say:*

He didn't die then...but is dead now.

#### **Two:**

Even if Elvis were alive, so what? The greatest change would be that the tabloids would have to look for new stories. It would be a nine-day wonder, nothing more. In fact, the number of Elvis stories seems to be decreasing month by

month. Not long ago, the *Weekly World News* took the story to its logical conclusion, announcing 'ELVIS DEAD AT 58'.

On the other hand, if Jesus is alive, the world takes on a completely new look:

- Jesus' teaching that he was sent by God would appear to be completely authenticated. The resurrection is God's seal of approval on all Jesus said and did.
- His claim that he would return at the end of time to judge the world seems a little less far-fetched—now that he has fulfilled the other impossible claim he made.
- For many, Jesus' resurrection provides the most solid evidence of life after death: if Jesus rose by the power of God then the enemy death has been conquered, and Jesus is our only reliable guide through death.
- Jesus' promise to be with us always makes sense; it is not just wishful thinking. He is available anywhere, any time, to be experienced, known, loved and followed. Part of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is the countless multitudes who claim to have been touched by him, and as a result call themselves his followers today.

## Notes

1. Luke 9:18f, 9:44, 18:31-34.
2. This hypothesis has recently been revived by Barbara Thiering in her book, *Jesus the Man: a New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*. For a thorough refutation of this view, see *Who was Jesus?* by NT Wright (cited below).
3. Wright, NT, *Who was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), pp 61-62.

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