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with Dr. Frank Turek      **PODCAST**

## **Did the Apostles REALLY Die as Martyrs? With Dr. Sean McDowell**

(March 14, 2025)

### **FRANK:**

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the arguments that Christians have been using for millennia now to show that the New Testament writers and apostles were actually telling the truth is that these people who are in a position to know whether Jesus had risen from the dead or not, gave their lives for saying that Jesus rose from the dead. But did they really? You know, there's something out there that's been out for centuries called 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs'.

And essentially, it says that most, maybe 11 out of the 12, gave their lives. Eleven out of the 12 apostles gave their lives for Christianity. They could have recanted. They could have said it never happened, but they actually paid with their lives. Is that really true? And if we're going to say that martyrdom somehow shows that Christianity is true, don't we have to say that martyrdom, might show that Islam is true? Because there are certainly martyrs in Islam. Well, my friend, Dr.

Sean McDowell actually decided that he was going to investigate this for himself in his own doctrinal dissertation. This goes back about 10 years ago, but he since updated that and has some new insights into what he found. So, here he is, ladies and gentlemen, the great Dr. Sean McDowell, all the way from Biola University and the left coast. Sean, how are you?

### **SEAN:**

Good to be with you, man. I'm doing great, Frank.

### **FRANK:**

Now, tell me, remind our audience, because we did a show on this, Sean. It had to be 2015, 16, 17? Something like that.

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**SEAN:**

That's right.

**FRANK:**

Why you decided to actually do this? Why did you decide to look into the fate of the apostles? That's the name of the book, by the way.

**SEAN:**

So, in 2010, I started my doctoral program. And when you do that, you start thinking about looking for a topic. So, it was in the back of my mind, and we were at Berkeley with about 25 or 30 high school students, and we would bring in Unitarian—

**FRANK:**

Bizerkely! [Laughter]

**SEAN:**

Exactly. We'd bring in Unitarian reverends, and LGBTQ advocates, and atheists, and teach our students how to engage them well. And one of my students says something to the effect of, we had a mythicist who was there who argues that Jesus didn't even exist. And one of my students goes, you know, if Jesus didn't exist, why did all the apostles die as martyrs? And this atheist friend of mine, he goes, none of them did. He goes, give me evidence for any of them. Prove it.

And I sat there, Frank, and was like, I'm not sure I actually have a really good answer for this. And so, J. Warner Wallace was there because his daughter was on the trip. And I said, hey, do you think this is a good topic? He goes, not only is it a good topic, but I've collected two boxes of books on this, and I was going to do a deep dive myself. You can have those boxes. Go for it.

Now, in a PhD, two boxes of books is quite literally a drop in a bucket. But it was the encouragement, and motivation, and start moving forward. And I was like, this is the most interesting topic ever. So, that's where it started in 2010. Published the first book in 2015, and then just released a 10-year update.

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I've been talking to scholars. I've been reading articles. I've been tracking the research, and I've made a few shifts that I think better align with the historical evidence.

**FRANK:**

Now, as I look at the table of contents here, the new version, you are covering specific individuals. You're looking at the evidence for specific folks. Who are they? Who are the people that you're looking into in order to see whether or not they actually gave their lives?

**SEAN:**

So, this is an important question because I picked the 12 disciples, but I also included Paul the apostle, of course, and James the brother of Jesus. Now, I could have done Mark, I could have done Luke, I could have gone on to Mary. Like at some point, you have to minimize and limit it. So, I focused on those 14 and did a deep dive on the evidence of whether they died as martyrs or not.

**FRANK:**

So, if you look at the table of contents, ladies and gentlemen, you'll have a chapter on each one of these 14.

**SEAN:**

Yep.

**FRANK:**

And there's some other chapters as well. So, what's different between this new edition, Sean? Again, the book is called 'The Fate of the Apostles', and the previous one you wrote?

**SEAN:**

So, broadly speaking, I added some more objections in the end because some people have challenged and pushed back on my premise, which is great. Filtered throughout it, there's a lot of just interesting finds we could talk about. Like in each of the apostles or a number of the apostles, I just came across research that intersected with my case. So, that's different.

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I also have reassessed a few of the apostles, some up and some down, just based on a decade of thinking about this, a decade of feedback from scholars. There's two that I shifted significantly that we can get to that might somewhat surprise the audience, that certainly, if you had told me when I started this research, I was going to conclude this, I would have thought, wow. I did not see that one coming. So, that's essentially what's different as a whole.

**FRANK:**

Let's talk about some people in specific, because you do a really good job of pulling out the ones we have a lot of evidence for. And then you show that maybe some of the other apostles we don't have enough evidence for, or we don't have any evidence. So, let's start with the folks that you conclude are very well established as having been martyred. Let's start with Peter. What evidence do we have for Peter being martyred?

**SEAN:**

Great. Now, by the way, I have a four in the category I think are the highest probability or close to it. Two that I think are maybe at least more probable than not. There's a few that I would put in natural deaths and then a few that are indeterminate. That's how I break it up. Peter's a great place to start. I think we are on the highest historical probability. I have almost no doubt that Peter died as a martyr. Why?

We have at least 10 sources that tell a unanimous, consistent account that Peter died as a martyr. I couldn't find any sources that told a contrary account to this. Eight are in the second century, and we have at least two in the first century: John 21 and 1 Clement chapter five. There are a few scholars that I found that some said Peter didn't make it to Rome and died naturally in his bed. Like, I mean, there are very few minor skeptical scholars, but I think the vast majority of scholars would say there's no reason to doubt that Peter died as, you know, as a martyr.

Now, we could get into some of those sources or whether he was crucified upside down. That's the question everybody wants to ask. But I would put Peter in the highest category because the number of sources, the quality of sources, and how early many of those sources are.

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**FRANK:**

Now, skeptics will immediately jump on you, Sean, and say, wait, wait. You can't use the Bible. You can't say John 21 is a valid source. Why are they wrong?

**SEAN:**

Well, John is one historical source. I think it'd be too biased for us to say it's the inspired word of God, therefore it's true. Well, you can't start there. It's also biased to dismiss it and say, well, that's in the Bible, so we can't use it. Let's look at John like we would any other historical source and ask the questions of reliability.

And I think in my footnote, in my book, a strong case can be made for the eyewitness account behind John and for its historicity. So, if John is written in the 90s, I mean, this is within three decades of the death of Peter, there's still some people around who would have known him. And the Christian faith was already growing.

So, they're not going to write something in there that at least some people wouldn't hold them to account. So, I think John is one good early source. And by the way, even Bart Ehrman positively says there's a known tradition behind this of the martyrdom of Peter. So, he concedes this insofar as it goes as one source towards his martyrdom.

**FRANK:**

By the way, there's a growing number of scholars that are saying John is written prior to 70 A.D. I know Dan Wallace is one of them. And even if that's the case, that's even closer to Peter's martyrdom than, say, 90 A.D. But we don't need to come down on one side or the other on that. But it's kind of like saying, it seems to me that, yeah, you can talk about the Revolutionary War, but you can't take anything George Washington said. [Laughter]

**SEAN:**

Sure, sure.

**FRANK:**

Wait a minute! Why not? So, who is Clement of Rome and what did he say about Peter?

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**SEAN:**

So, Clement of Rome is writing, some date him earlier, but typically in the 90's. And he's actually writing from Rome. So, there's a group of presbyters, and they're writing a letter to Corinth from Rome. And if that's the traditional site of his death, then he's in a good position to know and research this.

This is a whole letter he wrote. And he is talking about the beginning, kind of the theology is how jealousy divides and goes back to like the beginning of Cain and Abel. And you just see jealousy in the history of the church. And then he moves up towards modern examples, and talks about how jealousy leads to death, and then gives the examples of Peter and Paul. And even Bart Ehrman says this is a reference to the martyrdom of Peter as well.

**FRANK:**

More with Dr. Sean McDowell. His new updated book, 'Fate of the Apostles' is the standard work on the topic. Now, forget 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs'. This is it, ladies and gentlemen. You need to get it. We're back in two minutes. Don't go anywhere.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are planning another amazing trip in October. We're going to Jordan and Israel with an extension, an optional extension to Egypt. We're only taking one bus. If you want to be a part of it, go to [Crossexamined.org](http://Crossexamined.org). Click on events. You will see it there. We just got back from a fabulous trip to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. I can't wait to go back but we're going to Jordan first, then a week in Israel. Then for those that want to, we're going to go over to Egypt.

Check it all out on our website, [Crossexamined.org](http://Crossexamined.org). Let me go back to my friend, Dr. Sean McDowell. We're talking about his brand-new updated book, 'Fate of the Apostles'. And Sean, just before the break, we were talking about the evidence that Peter was martyred. Everybody wants to know, was the apostle Peter crucified upside down? What do you say? Because that's the tradition.

**SEAN:**

My 12 year old son came back this week and he goes, dad, we were talking about this at school. And I'll just say, an authority at his school told everybody that he was crucified upside down.

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And my son's like, no, he wasn't. My dad knows. And I'm like, okay, buddy. It was kind of an awesome conversation that the two of us had. He was gracious. Okay, so here's an area where I've shifted my research. As far as I could tell, the majority of scholars believe that Peter was crucified.

And so, I agreed that he was crucified. But my first book came out in 2015. Later that year, Larry Hurtado edited a volume, and it had a chapter in there on the death of Peter. And Frank, it pointed out something so obvious, I don't know how I missed it, but evidently other scholars have too.

One thing we know about crucifixion is not every time. There's some exceptions, but the vast majority of times, the person was stripped bare to shame and humiliate them. Now in John 21, the first reference to the martyrdom of Peter, what are we told? It says, you will be clothed and taken where you do not want to go. This article in Larry Hurtado's volume said during the reign of Nero, there were people that had these clothes put on that were somewhat flammable, and it was somewhat like a crucifixion, more on a stake.

But the person was burnt to death. And I think that's actually the most reasonable fate for Peter. Now, what about crucifixion upside down? If I don't think he was crucified, then I don't think he was crucified upside down. But nonetheless, the first appearance of this is in what's called the 'Acts of Peter', the end of the second century. And there's the 'Acts of Paul' and there's the 'Acts of John'. These are kind of these fanciful, apocryphal accounts divorced from history.

But they still maintain a certain historical core, you might say, at times. Well, in Peter, he's crucified upside down there. So, we're probably 120 years after the time of Peter. It's not until, I think, the third century that a church historian picks up on this and starts citing it, and then church historians run with it from there.

Now, I'm going to ask you an obvious question, Frank, and I think I know how you're going to answer this one. The traditional way we're told the reason Peter was crucified upside down is because he requested. He said, I'm not worthy as Jesus. Don't crucify me in the same way.

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Here's the question, Frank. Do you think the Romans took suggestions on how you wanted to be crucified?

**FRANK:**

No, I don't think so, Sean. So, it's probably not good tradition then. [Laughter]

**SEAN:**

Exactly! They didn't accommodate your need for humility. But there's a better take on this that in my research, I came across, there's some scholars who say, actually in the 'Acts of Peter', the point was that the world had been kind of turned upside down by sin.

And so, when Peter's upside down, he can see the world as it is. But akin to Jesus, his death will help right it and turn it right side up. So, it might be making more of a theological point than a historical point. So, I think-- I mean, there are cases of people being crucified upside down, so it's possible, but I don't think it's probable for Peter.

**FRANK:**

Okay, well, either way, the manner in which he died or was martyred, I should say, isn't really the issue. The fact that he was and could have recanted but didn't. What do we know about James, the brother of Jesus? Because this is a fascinating one, especially since we have his ossuary, which is now, scholars have come to, I think, close to a consensus. It's a legitimate ossuary with a legitimate inscription that says James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus, on it. But there's more to this story. What do we know about this, Sean?

**SEAN:**

What's fascinating about James, of course, he's not one of the 12, but we know he has an appearance of the risen Jesus because of 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. He becomes the head of the church in Jerusalem. And what's interesting about this is he's the only apostle for which I could find not only Christian sources, like Dionysius of Corinth in the second century, Gnostic sources.

Now, we're moving in probably to the third century with what's called 'The Apocalypse of James', first one and second one. But you also have Josephus, a Jewish source in 'Antiquities

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20', affirming the martyrdom and death of James. Now, one of the apostles, and we can go back to this if you want to. But I took Paul down from the highest possible probability to very probably true.

James, I had at the highest possible probability. And there were a number of scholars who pushed back on the martyrdom of James after I worked through some of their critiques and talked with people like Craig Evans. I'm more convinced than ever that the weakness of the criticisms of the martyrdom of James are just not compelling at all, given the consistency of tradition, how multiply attested it is, and the manner in which it appears in Josephus.

So, I think we're on very solid ground. And I mean there's some objections we could weigh into. Like some people would say, you know, he's kind of killed for political reasons. That's how it stated in 'Antiquities 20'. And I say, well, that's true, but so is Jesus. You couldn't separate his identity and his message from the political effects at play. It wasn't one or the other.

James is publicly proclaiming he's seen the risen Jesus leading a church for which, you know, it's founded on a martyr who is an enemy of the state, full aware of what it could cost him and gets killed doing so. I think he qualifies as a martyr pretty strongly.

**FRANK:**

And Josephus tells us this. But doesn't Hegesippus also mention this? I think he's a writer that comes later. Maybe only Eusebius quotes this. Are there other sources other than Josephus for James's martyrdom?

**SEAN:**

So, James, you don't have as many sources as you do for like Peter. And you have, like Dionysus of Corinth is in the second century. You have Hegesippus as well. You start getting into the third century with James. So, my confidence in him is less numerically as it is qualitatively with Josephus, and then Christian sources, and then Gnostic sources tells me this is the highest probability.

And I just, you know, some of the criticisms against James would be things like there's another Jesus that's mentioned in the source of, you know, son of Damnius in the source by Antiquities.

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So, he's talking about a very different, you know, brother of Jesus, so to speak, who's called the Christ. And I just don't find that compelling at all.

**FRANK:**

So, do we know from... It's quite clear it seems, in Acts, that James is a prominent leader in the church. Are there other sources outside of Acts that state that James is a leader in the church?

**SEAN:**

So, you'll see this in Eusebius and John of Corinth. So, these, of course, are later in Acts. And Acts is first century, and we can get into the dating and historicity of that. But the early church fathers affirm that narrative. Now, sometimes there's details added that might be flowery. Like you hear about James having knees like camels because he was so just, you know, reverent, and respectful, and prayed. And I think that's probably added on top of it is my guess. But it's still this consistent narrative of who he was, the position that he played within the church.

**FRANK:**

By the way, friends, Josephus, the man that Dr. Sean's talking about right here, is a contemporary of James because Josephus lived from 37 A.D. to about 100 A.D., and this allegedly took place in 62 A.D. in Jerusalem. Is that right, Sean?

**SEAN:**

Yeah, 62, that's right.

**FRANK:**

So, he's a contemporary of these events. So, you put the martyrdom of Jesus's brother James, the same guy that wrote the epistle we know as James, as the very highest probability of being a martyr.

**SEAN:**

I have two at the highest level of probability, James, the brother of Jesus and Peter. And then I have two, one notch below, very probably true.

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**FRANK:**

Let's talk about Paul then. Paul, you say maybe one notch below. Why do you put him one notch below?

**SEAN:**

You know why I—

**FRANK:**

Correct me if I'm wrong, I thought the first edition, you had those reversed. I thought you had Paul at the top and James just a notch below. Did you reverse those for some reason?

**SEAN:**

I still had James at the highest possible probability.

**FRANK:**

You did. Okay.

**SEAN:**

I think I did. We're talking about James, the brother of Jesus. The son of Zebedee is different. I've re-looked at him. So, Paul, there's one source in the first century, 1 Clement, not two. Now, some have argued from Acts and 2 Timothy chapter four, if it's pseudepigraphal, referring to I fought the fight and finished the race. You know, is that an awareness that he was martyred, and somebody's got to put it on his lips? Of course, I don't think it's pseudepigraphal, but these are just the kind of arguments that people make.

Bottom line, I think there's one first century source instead of two. And I think there's closer to eight sources as a whole instead of 10. So, I really just assessed this, Frank. And I thought, okay. What's the highest probability of we know something in history? And I was like, you know what the crucifixion is up there. There's no reason to doubt that. Can I put Paul's martyrdom on that level? And if I'm just being honest with myself, I don't think I can. Now, that doesn't mean I'm skeptical about it or doubt it.

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Like, if you get an eight out of ten, if I had to put a number on it, I mean the weight of evidence is still there. But just to be more careful and as accurate as I can, I think that's a better assessment of what we have.

**FRANK:**

Now, this Clement you mentioned, speaking of Paul's martyrdom in the first century, is he the same Clement of Rome from Peter's, mentioning Peter's?

**SEAN:**

Yeah, that's right. So, he mentions Peter, and Paul, and you know, some of the other apostles who are not named. So, we don't know who any of these other ones are. But Peter and Paul are named, specifically. And you don't have sources like Clement saying, and by the way, they died as martyrs, like they're giving a history of this account.

Nobody's writing that, but they reference it in a way that clearly implies martyrdom. And again, Bart Ehrman says this is a tradition that was known at this time alluding to his martyrdom. And then we pick up on that and can infer from it that there's at least a tradition in the 90's Clement of Rome about Peter and Paul dying as martyrs.

**FRANK:**

We've got a lot more with Dr. Sean McDowell, 'The Fate of the Apostles', the brand-new updated book, the standard work on the topic now. Are we overstating the case? How many of these apostles or early believers who knew Jesus had risen from the dead or at least were in a position to know, how many of them actually did die? Did any recant? Much more after the break. Don't go anywhere. Welcome back to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist.

And one of the reasons 'I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist' is it seems several of the apostles who were in a position to know whether Jesus had risen from the dead or not, died excruciating deaths when they could have saved themselves by saying it never happened. That's our topic today with Dr. Sean McDowell and his brand-new, updated book called 'Fate of the Apostles.' Before I go any further, let me mention this weekend, Lord willing, the 15th and 16th of March, I will be at Godspeak Calvary Chapel in Thousand Oaks, California for the

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evening service Saturday night, the three services on Sunday morning. Then Lord willing, we'll be at Wayne State University next Wednesday. That's in Detroit, Michigan, the 19th of March.

And then the following week, will be at Mississippi State. That's the 27th of March, the evening of the 27th. I think that begins at 6:30 Central. All these will be streamed on our YouTube channel. Want to mention as well that I'll be at the Unshaken Conference with my friends Alisa Childers and Natasha Crain in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on the 5th of April.

Then I'll be speaking at Calvary Church on the 6th. All the details are on our website. And also, we'll be at Sam Houston State, that's in Huntsville, Texas, on April 8. Much more on our website. Check all that out. And I know Dr. Sean McDowell is speaking out there a lot. Sean, where are you going to be next so our listeners can know where you're going to be?

**SEAN:**

Oh, my goodness. That's a good question. I'm home this weekend because my son's in the national basketball tournament at Biola.

**FRANK:**

Good.

**SEAN:**

So, that's what's on my radar. Soon I'm actually going back to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, doing some lectures out there. Dr. Mohler invited me back. That's where I did my doctorate. So, that's on my radar of something that's coming up soon.

**FRANK:**

Okay. All right. Check Sean McDowell.com or org? Where do they go?

**SEAN:**

Dot org. I think .com is like a shoe salesman or something, I think. I haven't checked in a while.

[Laughter]

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**FRANK:**

SeanMcdowell.org, ladies and gentlemen. Check him out there. And by the way, he has a great podcast and YouTube channel. In fact, I was listening to your talk today with Ross Douthat. I think that's how you should pronounce his name. The New York Times columnist.

**SEAN:**

Douthat, yeah. Catholic.

**FRANK:**

Yeah. Yeah. That was a good conversation about halfway through. Sean always has great guests on, does a really super job. So, if you don't know about his podcast or his YouTube channel, check him out. Really great stuff. Sean always does a great job with interviews, particularly people who are not Christians. So, check Sean out wherever you can, YouTube channel, or the website, or the podcast. Sean, let's talk about the other apostles that maybe—

**SEAN:**

Sure.

**FRANK:**

Well, why don't we go to James, son of Zebedee. So, that would be John the apostle's brother. Correct? What do you know about him?

**SEAN:**

So, James, this is an example of one that I also reassessed. He is the second apostle that we have in the Bible, Peter, of course, John 21. This is in Acts 12:2. It refers to, you know, the sword being taken to James. Well, as Keener points out in his wonderful commentary series, he goes, this reads exactly like an unflowered execution account that's reliable. I agree with him. I think, given the historicity of Acts, I put that at the highest level.

Now, two reasons made me reconsider. Number one, Gary Habermas is like, you've only got one source as reliable as it is. Can you put it the highest? And I'm like, well, if Gary says it, that settles it, I believe it, for one. Kidding aside. And then I'd ask my students every year in our

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resurrection class, in our master's program, I'd say, which of the apostles would you rate differently?

That was the most common one. And so, I just thought about it the last decade. I was like, you know what? I'm going to move it down from highest probability to very probably true, even though after this, there's some other sources that come up and confirm it. And I think there's some details in Acts that are really interesting.

Like some writings in Josephus matches up with the time of when James was killed and how Herod was trying to please the people around him. But with that said, very probably true, no good reason to doubt it. James, the brother of John died as a martyr.

**FRANK:**

Okay. So, at the sort of, the real high level of probability, you've got Peter, you've got James, the brother of Jesus, you've got James, the brother of John, son of Zebedee, and you've got Paul.

**SEAN:**

That's right.

**FRANK:**

They're the top ones. What's the next level down?

**SEAN:**

So, that means 4 out of 14 you can really bank, and you should go to Vegas with those numbers. Now, the next down, I have two, where I would put Thomas, and I would put Andrew.

**FRANK:**

Okay.

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**SEAN:**

Thomas was perhaps the most fun to study because you have all these Eastern scholars weighing in, and they do history a little bit differently. I actually reassessed Thomas from more probable than not to just more plausible than not. Like, my confidence went down a little bit.

So, with Thomas, now you're dealing with. The earliest written source is probably 200 to 220 A.D. in the 'Acts of Thomas'. Now, that book is full like the other Acts, it has some added stuff we know is not historical, but some of it is historical. And one of the figures who's mentioned from northern India is a king named Gondorus. And we found coins that match the time and place of this king. And there's other kind of markers of historicity within the 'Acts of Thomas'.

The other piece of evidence that points towards his martyrdom is the people group, the St. Thomas Christians in southern India. Now, they don't have written sources from the first or second century. They have songs, and poems, and traditions. And my assessment is that those two are independent sources pointing towards the martyrdom of Thomas. Some scholars differ with me.

Now, if somebody's out here wanting to do a PhD dissertation and has the skills, I would love somebody to compare the traditions of the St. Thomas Christians with the 'Acts of Thomas' and see if there's literary and historical dependence or not. I don't think somebody has fully probed that out, and I think that would really help us understand whether it's historical or not.

So, my confidence that it's independent went down just a little bit, but I still think if I had to bet my house, I would bet on Thomas. Two lines of evidence. It's consistent. Couldn't find almost any other traditions about Thomas going anywhere. He probably died as a martyr.

Andrew, we have two sources now. You're in the second century and then the third century. Both seem to indicate he died by crucifixion, but one describes him kind of being crucified. One describes him hanging on a tree, which is the same fate, but seems like they would be literally independent. But they're later sources and they're just not as reliable. So, those two, I think, probably died as martyrs, less sources later, just not as strong of a historical case.

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**FRANK:**

Now, the rest of them, do we have absolutely no evidence for? Or is it so late, you're saying, well, there's evidence. But we don't know how much we can rely on it.

**SEAN:**

All right, here's the bomb. The traditional story is, Frank, that John died naturally, and the others died as martyrs.

**FRANK:**

Right.

**SEAN:**

I think three of the apostles likely died naturally.

**FRANK:**

Who and why?

**SEAN:**

There's a backstory behind this. And I would argue that John died naturally.

**FRANK:**

That's always been the case, they thought anyway. Okay.

**SEAN:**

Nothing new on that. The thing with John is there's some scholars who have argued for his martyrdom, and I'd like love to accept that. It would make my case stronger, but I'm just not convinced, historically speaking, so I can't. He died naturally. I think Matthew and Philip also died naturally. And I think the evidence is there for that. Now, I don't know how much time we have left in the segment. I'd love to unpack. Why?

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**FRANK:**

Go ahead, unpack Matthew. That seems really interesting. We've got five minutes. Go ahead.

**SEAN:**

Oh, perfect. Okay, so what's fascinating about this is Matthew, there were traditions for, and traditions against him dying naturally and him dying as a martyr. The English translation of Heraclian, who's in Clement, this is in the second century, not Clement of Rome, is a tradition that I interpreted because of the English translation of this as indicating that the four listed there died as martyrs.

And I thought that was the best interpretation. After my first book came out, I had a French scholar reach out to me and he goes, Sean, how are you interpreting this so differently than I do? If you go to the original Greek, there's a negation in there in Greek that's left out in the ante Nicene Fathers, which is the standard traditional reliable source.

Now, as you know, a negation quite literally changes everything. So, I went back and forth with him. I reached out to a few scholars to make sure, and he is totally right. I don't know why the English translation missed this, but I went back and Heraclian is kind of the source for this.

And Clement is talking about how there's people who confess and then don't die for it, and people who confess and do. And he lists Levi, and Matthew, and Philip, and Thomas as those who confess with the lips, but those who do not confess with their life. I look back at that given the negation, and thought, you know what? I think this scholar was right. Now, the trick here is it also mentions Thomas, who I don't think died naturally.

So, I think Clement got this one wrong because of the other reasons I gave a minute ago. And it doesn't mention John. If you're mentioning people who died naturally, why wouldn't you mention John? Well, so it's not like a nail, you know, in the coffin, so to speak. But there are other early sources of Matthew dying naturally. We now have one in what I call the living memory in the second century.

The martyrdom accounts don't appear until later. So, I actually really think Matthew died naturally. And there's a number of scholars like Brian Litvin, who's done a great popular book

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called After Acts, agrees with this and says Matthew probably died naturally. Now, before anybody thinks, he recanted. No, this has nothing to do with recanting the faith. It's just the same category as John of somebody who believed throughout his life, testified with his life and his lips, but probably didn't die as a martyr.

Now, Philip, I have a little less confidence he didn't die as a martyr because there's only one source that states this for Philip, where there's a few when it comes to Matthew. But the martyrdom of Philip doesn't show up until really the 4th century. And the one that says he died naturally is in the second century. So, I think it's at least more plausible than not that he died naturally.

**FRANK:**

Now, do we have any evidence that anyone recanted?

**SEAN:**

No evidence at all. And I think we should expect to find that evidence if it were there. This is my difference with a lot of people who have critiqued my hypothesis, like Dale Allison, wonderful New Testament scholar, one of the best in the world. And by the way, he still endorsed my book even though he disagrees with me on this, which was like the—

I was just so honored and thrilled that he would, is he argues, Candy DeMoss and others have kind of argued that if we don't have this, it undermines their testimony. We can come back to this, but I don't think it does.

**FRANK:**

Yeah. Let's talk about this right after the break and then we're going to deal with what about other martyrs from other faith traditions like Muslims? If we're going to say martyrdom proves Christianity, don't we have to say that martyrdom proves Islam? Much more with Dr. Sean McDowell. Don't go anywhere. Dr. Sean McDowell writes in his new updated book, 'Fate of the Apostles', this. 'The crucial point is not that we might establish the martyrdom of all the apostles, rather their willingness to suffer and die for their firsthand witness of the risen Jesus.'

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This is of foremost importance. Yet the evidence shows that some really died as martyrs. And while a few likely died natural deaths, there is no evidence to indicate that any wavered or recanted in their faith." Sean, should we expect to find evidence that if they did recant that we would know about it?

**SEAN:**

I do think so. And I actually checked with a number of church historians on this at Talbot, where I teach as neutrally as I could to see if they thought that I was crazy. Because I think if they had recanted or there was even a story about them recanting, either the apologists for it would have felt the need to respond to this or the critics like Celsus in the second century or Porphyry in the third, who went after the resurrection accounts, pointing out things like apparent contradictions and the witnesses, and all this kind of stuff.

They certainly would have jumped on that to discredit it. So, Jeremiah Johnston, who's done a deep dive, you know, tied to the Gospel of Peter was like, this is-- Even though the Gospel of Peter, written the end of the second century, probably has these mythical elements that are added into it, like a cross that's floating and heads that go to the sky. They are addressing some of the claims like they add the guard in there. Second century skepticism of the resurrection, they're addressing it.

There's no hint from believers or skeptics that any of them recanted. And you could even go into like the 4th century in the Donatism debate about what happens for people who at the moment that their life is on the line and they say, I choose life over following Jesus. Can they come back into the church? Can they be resuscitated?

Can you imagine if this happened to Matthias or Andrew? This would be like drop the mic moment and would prove that so to speak, or at least be a part of the conversation, and it's not. So, it is an argument from silence, but it's an argument of silence with some teeth, I think.

**FRANK:**

Now, what about the oft written objection and you cover this in the book about, you know, there are Muslim martyrs or Buddhist martyrs. What do you say about that? How do the apostles being martyred differ from say Muslims being martyred?

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**SEAN:**

So, Christians are not saying that we alone have martyrs. There were Buddhist monks who lit themselves on fire to protest the Vietnam War. There were the Jewish martyrs, the Maccabean, you know, the brothers in this account died. So, you know, horrific deaths.

We're not the only one with martyrs. The question is, why do people? What are they martyrs for? So, Buddhists to protest war. Great. But Maccabean martyrs were showing their commitment to the law, how deeply they believed it and would not compromise the law.

Christians were not martyrs to protest some cause or stand up for the law. They believed Jesus had risen from the grave and appeared to them. That was the Christian message. So, when we look at the apostles willing to suffer and die, and the earliest account we have of what it meant to be a Christian, 1 Corinthians 15, is to believe that Jesus died, and was buried, and rose from the grave. He died for our sins, by the way.

Their willingness to suffer cannot be separated from the belief that he indeed appeared to them. Now, there might be one other wrinkle on this where people say, what about the 9/11 terrorists? You have 12. You know, there were 12 disciples, and you could add James and Paul. But there were what, was it, 15 Muslims who died for their belief? First off, I'd say they're terrorists, not martyrs. When you willingly take somebody else's life, it's a very different thing.

But these guys lived centuries removed. What are we, 1200 years, 1300 years, 1400 years, doing the math, from the time of Muhammad? So, they died for something passed on to them from someone else, from someone else, from somebody else. The apostles were willing to suffer and die for what they saw with their own eyes. They claimed to have seen, or at least in some cases, it's claimed about the apostles that they saw the risen Jesus.

So, they're in a different epistemic position to know, in a sense, if this was true or not. I mean, if somebody kills me and I die for the faith, all that proves is, wow, that Sean, you know, that apologist, Sean, he actually believed it. That means nothing to the truth of Christianity apart from my witness and testimony.

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But the apostles were the ones who lived and traveled with Jesus and shared their testimony publicly. And some of them, like John, wrote down their gospel accounts. Their willingness to suffer and die, I think, is qualitatively different and points toward their sincerity that they're not liars. They're not making up a story to get themselves in persecution and suffering.

**FRANK:**

Yes, some people will die for a lie they think is the truth, but no one will die for a lie they know is a lie. And I think, as you pointed out, Sean, they knew it wasn't a lie. They were the eyewitnesses. They were there. Now, what about-- There's kind of a new objection which you deal with in new edition. Again, friends, the book, 'Fate of the Apostles'. I think it's more affordable this time, Sean.

Last time you wrote it, it was like a doctoral dissertation. It was like \$100. I think it's cheaper now on Amazon. People need to get this book. This is the new standard work on the topic. But there's sort of a new objection that's come up recently, and it has to do with Mormonism. What about the witnesses of the Golden Plates and the witnesses of Mormons? How does this discussion we're having here relate to that?

**SEAN:**

So, I do apologize in advance in terms of the expense of the book. It is an academic book, and I think the paperback is now cheaper. Originally, it's like \$120.

**FRANK:**

But it's not written in academic way, though it's easily understandable.

**SEAN:**

It's actually, it's very readable, but it's footnoted. It's 300 pages. But I wanted it in a non-Christian, solid academic press. And Rutledge is a wonderful academic press, so the research would be out there. Maybe someday I'll do a popular version. That's still on my list of things to do at some point. So, this is a new objection that came up. I had some people reach out to me and say, what about, you know, Joseph Smith?

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He died as a martyr. And if you look in the 'Doctrines and Covenants' and some of the early writings by Mormons, they refer to him as like being led to the slaughter and kind of refer to him as a martyr akin to Jesus. Well, a couple things to keep in mind when he is, when Joseph Smith and some of the other guys with him were arrested in Nauvoo, it's questionable whether they were really innocent or guilty. There's good reason to think that they were guilty for destroying the press in the town that was publishing some negative things about them and the church.

Second, Joseph Smith brought a gun with him to fight. Now, he's in prison. Nobody should have themselves attacked and killed in prison. Of course not. But if you're there because you're guilty of wrecking a press and then you bring a gun to fight your way out, I'm just not quite sure that that's going to make you qualify as a martyr. But beyond that, if you look at the beginning of 'The Book of Mormon', there's the lists of the different witnesses.

Now, I reached out to some Mormon scholars and people can read it for themselves. But how these other witnesses allegedly saw the golden tablets is more spiritual than it is physical. There's not evidence for a great group of people who claim to have seen these things physically and handled them the way we do with Jesus. So, I think there's just a few things that unfold here.

You could also take what J. Warner Wallace has done when he looks at his cases about, you know, he says every case he has is power, sex, or money. Look at the apostles. It wasn't about power. You know, pick up your cross and follow me. Feed the poor, wash my feet. It wasn't about sex. All we have about Jesus is treating women with dignity and kindness. And it's certainly not about money. This is not a money making scheme. But then you compare that to Joseph Smith.

Power, he wanted to be president of the United States. Money, he was running his own bank and when it comes to sex, had at least two dozen plus wives. He was using his power for this. So, I think we have no good reason to think he was a martyr and good reason to question his sincerity.

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**FRANK:**

Can I ask you something? And maybe it's just me, but I haven't heard anyone say this, but it seems to me that even if there were golden plates and they did see them, golden plates are not a miracle. If I had the right equipment, I can make golden plates in my garage. Why is this supposed to be some sort of affirming miracle that says Mormonism is true even if they did see golden plates? Am I missing something here, Sean? I don't get it.

**SEAN:**

That's a fair question. I don't know how Mormon scholars would answer that one, but it strikes me as seeing golden plates is very different than seeing somebody alive after they were dead. Because that's what gives the apostles confidence.

Oh, if Jesus was crucified and I see him again, now I have a new boldness to proclaim this message despite persecution. You can take my life. I'm going to live again. I don't think golden plates that are not necessarily supernatural is going to get somebody there emotionally and intellectually.

**FRANK:**

Not only that, friends, notice that the miracles of Jesus solve our greatest problem: Sin, sickness, nature, and death. Jesus has power over sin, over sickness, over nature, and death. Why? Because those are our four problems. He can solve the problem. If Jesus made golden plates, that wouldn't solve any problem for us.

But the miracles that Jesus does shows us he's the Savior because he can fix the main problems we have here. Joseph Smith didn't do any of that. Sean, a great book. People need to get it. Tell people we've just got 30 seconds to go, where they can learn more about you and what you're doing.

**SEAN:**

SeanMcDowell.org, links to my Instagram page, links to my speaking. We'd love to have folks listening. Come study with me and get a Master's in apologetics at Talbot School of Theology. Like you said, I have a podcast and I'm all over YouTube.

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**FRANK:**

It's great. Sean does a great job. Check out his podcast, check out his YouTube channel, check out SeanMcDowell.org. And by all means, get 'Fate of the Apostles', ladies and gentlemen. I'll see you out in California this week and next week, Lord willing. We will also be at Wayne State University. Lord willing, we'll see you then. God bless.

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