

# DID JESUS RISE FROM THE DEAD?

One of the most interesting things about Christianity is that its central claim can be investigated. If the body of Jesus was not resurrected from the dead then Christianity is false. Even more interesting is that the Bible itself points this out. In 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 Paul says that if Christ was not raised from the dead then our faith is worthless, that we are liars, and that our sins have not been paid for.

The reason the resurrection is so important to the case for Christianity is that if it is true, it confirms the teaching of Jesus as having the authority of God. The teaching of Jesus is often about his own identity, not just ethical and moral issues. At stake is the ability to know who Jesus is and how we should respond to Him.

The basic question to be answered is this: What is the best explanation for what happened three days after the execution of Jesus? We'll take a look at eight options including swoon theory, twin theory, hallucination, the wrong tomb, stolen body, legend, the Quranic account, and the Biblical account of resurrection. But before we can look at these theories we must first define what resurrection is and what facts need to be accounted for by any explanation.

The first thing to remember when assessing these explanations is that resurrection is not resuscitation. We are not talking about a body brought back to its former life, that needs food, can get sick, ages, and will eventually die again. A resurrected state is a body that is physical yet incorruptible—it cannot die, age, or become ill.

The second thing to remember is the facts that must be explained. According to the Gospels,

- Jesus was crucified,
- died on the cross,
- and was buried in a tomb;
- three days later the tomb was found empty,
- and many of His followers claimed to have seen His physical body risen from the dead over the following forty days.

Notice that these facts don't interpret their meaning, just that they happened. There are non-Christian sources such as the Talmud, Josephus, and Pliny the Younger that corroborate at least some of these claims. Now let's look at the different explanations.

## **SWOON THEORY**

The swoon theory suggests that Jesus fainted on the cross and only appeared to be dead. Once he was in the tomb he awoke, began recuperating and subsequently fully recovered. In order to appreciate this argument fully, we must first understand what was involved in the torture and crucifixion of Jesus.

Before being crucified, Pontius Pilate ordered that Jesus be scourged. A Roman scourging was

done with a whip called a flagrum or flagellum that was comprised of a handle about eight inches long with 12-inch to 24-inch-long leather straps attached to one end. The other end the straps were tied to lead balls, sharp pieces of metal, bone shards, broken glass, or sharp rock. Whatever was on the end of the whip quickly broke the skin and deeply penetrated the tissue, often exposing the bowels, ribs, or spine. This torture was so vicious that victims often did not survive. In crucifixion the victim was laid down with his arms perpendicular to the torso. Nails 5 to 9 inches long would then be driven through the wrists, crushing the median nerve, causing extraordinary pain. Nails would also be driven through the ankles with the legs in a bent position. When the victim was raised to a vertical position, his shoulders (and sometimes elbows and wrists) would become dislocated from the weight, making them useless to alleviate the pressure on his chest. With the pressure on the chest, the victim could not exhale and so he had to straighten his legs, using the nail through his ankles as leverage. Having exhaled, the victim then sunk back down to his original position. As the victim's strength was slowly worn down, breathing would become less frequent, increasing the acidity of the blood. This would cause an irregular heartbeat which was already rapid because of the loss of blood from the scourging. Death would ultimately come in the form of asphyxiation or heart failure. Depending on a victim's condition upon being put on the cross, death could sometimes take days. If the executioner wanted to speed up the process, he would break the legs of the crucified man with a club; death would come within minutes.

In the case of Jesus, the executioner was preparing to do just that, break His legs, but Jesus appeared to already be dead. To make sure, the executioner took his spear and thrust it into Jesus' side, piercing His heart and a lung. If Jesus had not already died, He would have been killed. There was no question whatsoever in the mind of the professional executioner that Jesus was dead.

With this in mind let's now return to the swoon theory. For the swoon theory to be true Jesus would have had to have not only survived the spear piercing His heart and one of His lungs, but He would have had to fake death well enough to fool a professional executioner. Jesus then had about 36 hours or so in the tomb to sufficiently recover from His wounds to rise. After getting up on his impaled feet Jesus would then have had to pop His shoulders back into place. Using hands that had lost most of their ability to function because of the nails through the wrists, Jesus would then have had to roll away an extremely heavy stone. Upon exiting the tomb He then would have had to overpower a number of Roman guards using no weapons whatsoever. Then Jesus would have had to walk unnoticed through Jerusalem in broad daylight, not clothed properly and with strips of flesh hanging from his body, exposing his bowels and bones, and proceed several miles down the road to Emmaus. After the evening meal He would have then returned to Jerusalem and sneaked into a locked room where the apostles were hiding out. Even though he clearly needed immediate, intense medical treatment, he would have had to convince them he had resurrected from the dead. Then he sneaked out of the room undetected.

Although this does account for the empty tomb (however implausibly), the theory does not account for anything else. In fact, it raises more questions given that the colossal fraud that would have to be committed by Jesus to accommodate the swoon theory is completely contradictory to everything we know of Jesus' character and teaching. So the foolishness of swoon theory is self-evident.

## **TWIN THEORY**

The twin theory suggests that Jesus had an identical twin brother nobody knew about who took

Jesus' place on the cross.

The main problem with the twin theory is that there is simply no reason to believe it. The facts we do have about Jesus' family mention brothers and sisters but no twin. Luke, who many scholars believe may have received his information about Jesus' birth from Mary herself, makes no mention of a twin in this birth narrative. Also, for the twin theory to work it would require Jesus' mother to not recognize the difference between her own sons. She was at the foot of the cross and had a close up view of the man hanging there, yet we see no indication that she believed that it was not Jesus but His twin.

Another problem is that the theory does not explain the empty tomb. If it was Jesus' twin that was executed and buried, then what happened to the body? The fact that both Christians and their enemies claim the tomb was empty is a very important fact.

Finally, Jesus would have to have behaved completely contrary to His teachings to make the fraud a success. In order for this theory to work, Jesus would somehow had to have convinced or coerced the twin to spend his life in hiding and to die for Jesus' own self-aggrandizing plan that required deceit and manipulation. In fact, if this theory is true, then Jesus is not only not worthy of worship, but He deserves to be punished severely.

### **HALLUCINATION THEORY**

The hallucination theory says that in the midst of their profound grief, the disciples and other followers of Jesus experienced hallucinations in which they saw him raised from the dead. These hallucinations were private in some cases and corporate in others. In these corporate hallucinations Jesus imparted the same information to everyone having the experience. The problem with this theory is that hallucinations are entirely internal events created by the mind. The mind is not witnessing a strange event in the real world that it then struggles to interpret. The possibility of several different people having the exact same hallucination in the exact same way at the exact same time is extremely unlikely to say the least—let alone 12 or even 500 people at once. And like the swoon theory, the hallucination theory also has the problem of the empty tomb. Thus, there is no reason to take the hallucination theory seriously.

### **WRONG TOMB**

The wrong tomb theory states that the followers of Jesus discovered the tomb to be empty because they went to the wrong tomb. This theory has a number of problems. First, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" were at the tomb when Jesus was buried, so they knew which tomb to go to. Second, as if they needed a landmark, Pilate placed a number of Roman soldiers outside the tomb to prevent the body's theft. Third, as mentioned above, even enemies of Christianity said the tomb was empty. Again we find a theory for which there is no evidence and therefore, no reason to believe.

### **STOLEN BODY**

The stolen body theory says that Jesus' followers stole His body from the tomb. This particular theory has a great advantage over all other non-resurrection theories: it is the only alternate theory that dates from the first century. This theory is actually recorded by the Bible itself as well as by Jewish tradition such as the Toledoth Jesu.

The weakness of the stolen body theory is that it does not account for the behavior of the disciples. The disciples deserted Jesus the night of his arrest. They even refused to believe Mary

Magdalene's claim the tomb was empty and that Jesus had risen. But less than two months later they were publicly preaching in Jerusalem about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It seems odd that if these cowards stole the body, they would then, within a matter of weeks, turn around and proclaim the resurrection of Jesus so forcefully and with such uniform passion and commitment. But the apostles were so committed to story of the resurrection of Jesus that most likely all of them except John paid for the claim with their lives by dying martyrs' deaths.

The point is that these men scattered around the known world for the sole reason of proclaiming the physical, historical resurrection of Jesus. For the stolen body theory to be true, we would have to believe that these 11 cowardly men overpowered a number of Roman soldiers guarding the tomb, disposed of Jesus' body, and fabricated a story that they all fanatically stuck to even as they were being crucified, stoned, scourged, beheaded, thrown from buildings, and flayed. Not only that, but they did it for no personal gain whatsoever. Thus, the lives of the 11 apostles show absolutely no motive for stealing the body or perpetuating the lie of Jesus' resurrection. There was no prospect of riches in holding to the story. And they were far more infamous than famous. It's true that many martyr's have died for something that was a lie. But no one dies for a story they made up and know to be a lie. Yet none of the disciples tried to escape execution by admitting to making up the story.

## **LEGEND**

The legend theory states that Jesus' burial, the discovery of the empty tomb, and the resurrection appearances are stories devised by the disciples to embody the teachings of Jesus. But if they did invent this story, why would they include so many claims that could be investigated? And why would they make these claims in the one city where they could be investigated and where so many witness could refute them? If the plan was to spread a legend, why not base the operation out of Galilee where the facts couldn't be checked so easily?

But perhaps an even bigger problem for this theory is the discovery of the empty tomb by women. In first-century Palestine women were considered untrustworthy and were not even allowed to testify in a court of law. If the legend was to be convincing, why would the apostles make the discovery of the empty tomb made by witnesses who would not be believed? Why not say it was discovered by one of the leaders like Peter or John?

A variation of the legend theory says enthusiastic followers of Jesus other than the apostles began to tell exaggerated tales of His deeds that developed over the years into the story we now know. The first problem with this version is the ever-present problem of the empty tomb being attested to very early on by enemies of Christianity. The second is the behavior of the apostles that was mentioned earlier. The third is that that the apostles would have corrected errors in the false teaching about Jesus. In fact, this is exactly why some of the New Testament books were written—to combat false teaching about Jesus.

## **THE QURANIC ACCOUNT**

The New Testament is not the only sacred book that gives an account of the resurrection. The Quran, Islam's holy scripture, tells of the arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection, but it differs significantly from the biblical account. Islam teaches that Jesus never died but was assumed into heaven. There are a couple of variations explaining how this happened. One version has the soul of Jesus departing from the body before the torture and execution. Jesus was assumed into heaven, but His soul-less body was left on earth to be tortured. Another, more popular tradition, explains that Judas, unbeknownst to the disciples, made his way to Jesus' prison cell and took

Jesus' place, allowing Jesus to escape. God then made Judas to look and sound like Jesus. Thus, the executioners of Jesus only thought they had crucified Jesus.

The first problem is that the Quran was written almost 600 years after the event it claims to correctly document. Compare that with the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 15:3-9 makes claims of Jesus' death by crucifixion, burial, resurrection on the third day, and resurrection sightings that date back within 1 to 3 years of the crucifixion itself. Given the choice between believing an account 1 to 3 years removed from the event that is confirmed repeatedly by eyewitnesses and an account 700 years removed from the event that has no corroboration, the burden is very heavily placed on the later.

The problem is even worse for the second variation is based on the Gospel of Barnabas which was written as late as the Middle Ages. This version also includes the disciples stealing the body, which we saw earlier is very problematic.

### **THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT**

The biblical account of what happened the Sunday after Jesus' execution is the supported by the arguments against the theories already mentioned. Points such as the empty tomb being affirmed by first century enemies of Christianity, the discovery of the empty tomb by witnesses that wouldn't be allowed in court, and the radical change in behavior of the disciples speak to the truthfulness of the biblical account.

In addition, we have to account for the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to the Apostle Paul. Saul was a Pharisee trained by one of the most eminent rabbis of his day. He also persecuted Christians and was on the road to Damascus to do just that when he became one instead. Something happened that turned his world in the opposite direction. Instead of persecuting Christians, he became the greatest missionary who ever lived. It cost him dearly to make his case that Jesus is the Son of God. He was frequently beaten, jailed, flogged, was shipwrecked several times, and ultimately was beheaded. He forfeited his position of privilege as a pharisee, and probably wealth. This radical change in course is best explained by his own account: a real encounter with the risen Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the best explanation of the events on the Sunday after the execution of Jesus. All other explanations fall short in accounting for the evidence we have, they make claims that are not supported by the evidence, and they lack explanatory power. Thus, the central claim of Christianity makes a strong case for its truthfulness.

This line of argumentation can stand on its own as a case for Christianity or can be part of a whole case that uses many arguments to make its case. Either way, its importance can hardly be understated. As Paul said, without the historical resurrection we have no reason to believe.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

#### ***Apologetics Study Bible Articles:***

- Does the Moral Argument Show There Is A God? by Paul Copan, 1687.
- Can Something Be True for You and Not for Me? by Paul Copan, 1608.
- Is the Old Testament Ethical, 116.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Are there any other explanations for the Resurrection that weren't covered? If so, what are their strengths and weaknesses?
2. Why should the Resurrection be understood as a physical event instead of merely a spiritual one?
3. If you wanted to create a religious movement, what kinds of claims would you make? How much would it look like the Resurrection?
4. What kind of evidence would you need to make you believe that your teacher had risen from the dead three days after being brutally executed? What kind of evidence would be so strong that you would die for it?
5. How would the Resurrection prove that everything Jesus said was true?