

Was Jesus Raised From the Dead?

By Martin Pickup

Jesus based his claim to be the Son of God upon the evidence of his miraculous deeds, but one deed was the miracle *par excellence*. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the centerpiece of Christian doctrine and the ultimate proof of all that Christianity maintains. “If Christ has not been raised,” wrote the apostle Paul, “then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain” (1 Cor. 15:14).

A man coming back from the dead is a staggering claim. But equally staggering is how easily the claim could be refuted—if indeed it were false. Jesus’ death and supposed resurrection did not occur in a remote part of the world, away from the presence of detractors and skeptics. Jesus was buried just outside of Jerusalem, the central location of the Jewish opposition against him, and his initial post-mortem appearances took place in and around this city. It was there in Jerusalem that talk of Jesus’ resurrection began to surface three days after his crucifixion, and it was there that his resurrection was first publicly proclaimed a few weeks later at the feast of Pentecost. He was buried in a grave owned by a prominent Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin Council, so locating the tomb would have been easy for anyone wanting to disprove the notion that Jesus was alive.

The resurrection of Jesus was an outlandish idea—and quite refutable. The Jewish opposition to Christianity needed only to go to the tomb and retrieve Jesus’ corpse. But when the disciples of Jesus began reporting that they had seen him alive again, the opposition never produced his body. No one could do so. The simple reality was that three days after Jesus’ burial, his tomb was empty.

Did the Disciples Take the Body?

One possible explanation for the empty tomb is that Jesus' disciples stole his body to make it appear that he had returned to life. According to the gospel of Matthew, this position was advocated by ancient Jews in an attempt to negate the claims of Christians (Matt. 28:11-15). It appears to have been the standard Jewish response to Christianity even toward the end of the second century (according to Justin's *Dialogue With Trypho* 108.) Is this a plausible explanation? Could the disciples have stolen the body of Jesus in order to perpetrate a hoax?

One obvious problem with this theory is the fact that guards were reportedly stationed at the tomb to prevent this very thing from happening (Matt. 27:65-66). How could the disciples or any other grave robbers have gotten past these soldiers? "Perhaps the soldiers fell asleep," someone suggests. But the implausibility of that idea becomes apparent with just a moment's reflection. If the guards were a Jewish contingent, then sleeping on watch would mean severe punishment and possible execution. If they were Roman soldiers, then execution was a certainty. And can anyone really believe that *all* of the guards fell asleep? Are we to think that the disciples of Jesus managed, ever so quietly, to roll back the heavy stone covering the entrance of the tomb, extract Jesus' corpse and carry it past the slumbering guards—without arousing even a single soldier? That's a pretty ridiculous scenario.

Some unbelievers try to circumvent the force of this argument by denying that there were any soldiers stationed at the grave site at all. Matthew's Gospel is the only account that specifically mentions a guard, so skeptics feel more at ease about dismissing this feature of the story as an invention of the early Church to bolster the case for Jesus' supposed resurrection. Many argue that the gospel of Matthew was written late, perhaps not until AD

85 or 90, and so the detail about the soldiers at the tomb could be a legendary embellishment of the events surrounding Jesus' death.

But even if we supposed, for the sake of argument, that there were no guards at the tomb and that the disciples could have taken the body without being seen, we are still faced with a glaring question: *Why* would they do it? What possible motive could the disciples have for perpetrating such a fraud upon the world? Claiming that a crucified criminal was the resurrected Son of God brought these first-century followers of Jesus repeated persecution from the Jewish authorities. Many Christians were martyred for their message about Jesus. Why would they endure such agony for what they knew was a hoax? And why would they continue to preach to the world a standard of morality that condemned anything less than impeccable honesty and truthfulness? The theories of skeptics provide no answers to these questions.

Post-Mortem Appearances of Jesus

First-century Christians affirmed that after Jesus was executed, he appeared alive again to his disciples on no less than 11 different occasions over a period of 40 days. These appearances are recorded in the four Gospels, the book of Acts, and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (Matt. 26; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20-21; Acts 1; 1 Cor. 15). What can a skeptic say when faced with such strong evidence for Jesus' resurrection from the dead?

Alternative Explanations

Could the witnesses have mistaken some other person for Jesus? Sometimes people momentarily mistake a stranger for someone they have known. It is not unusual for people

who have lost a loved one to do a double-take at some person in a crowd who looks very similar to the deceased. But this explanation doesn't do justice to the testimony about Jesus. The New Testament witnesses do not claim to have caught a mere glimpse of their risen master, but to have talked with him, touched him, and eaten with him. Prolonged, intimate contacts like this cannot be explained away as simple cases of mistaken identification.

Some skeptics suggest that Jesus' followers experienced hallucinations. A loyal disciple, distraught over Jesus' abrupt and unexpected execution, might be susceptible to such a phenomenon. But the problem here is that Jesus was not said to have appeared only to individuals in private, but also to groups of people who all said they saw him alive again. He reportedly appeared at different times to varying numbers of people—even to as many as 500 disciples on one occasion. Mass hallucination is not a scientifically established phenomenon, certainly not anything of this scale. And isn't it strange that these "hallucinations" ceased after 40 days?

There is one exception, of course—an appearance of Jesus that reportedly occurred after the initial 40 days. Saul of Tarsus, a disbeliever in Jesus and persecutor of Christians, claimed that he saw Jesus on the Damascus road. The incident changed Saul's life and prompted him to begin proclaiming the messiahship of the very person whom he formerly denied (Gal. 1:13-17; Acts 9:1-22).

Interestingly, many skeptics appeal to this experience of Paul to try to discredit the reliability of all of the testimony about Jesus' appearances. They argue that Saul had a visionary experience that occurred only in his mind and not in real life. (Acts 26:19 does refer to what Paul saw as a "vision.") If so, say the skeptics, then all of the post resurrection sightings of Jesus might be explained in the same way. Even today we hear of people who

say they had a vision of the Virgin Mary, and history is replete with cases of religiously zealous people who aver similar visions. Why can't the appearances of Jesus be placed in the same category? The disciples' emotional state-of-mind at the time may have made them particularly susceptible to such a phenomenon. They desperately wanted Jesus to be alive again. Paul's vision, we are told, may have stemmed from a sub-conscious guilt he felt over his role in the persecution of so many of his Jewish countrymen.

But aren't the appearances of Jesus too numerous for all of them to be dismissed in this way? And again we must ask, why would the disciples of Jesus suddenly stop having these visions after 40 days? Furthermore, though the Book of Acts uses the word "vision" to describe Paul's Damascus experience, the text clearly does not mean by this term that the incident was solely in Paul's mind. Acts indicates that Paul's traveling companions, though not understanding the words being spoken to Paul, did hear their sound and saw the same blinding light that Paul saw (Acts 9:7; 22:9; 26:13-14).

Where Was the Body?

Yet the strongest objection to any theory that denies the factuality of the post-mortem appearances of Jesus is this: the opponents of Christianity never produced Jesus' body. If it is true that Jesus was raised only in the imagination of some of his followers, then three days after his burial the corpse of Jesus would still have been in the tomb. Once the news of his resurrection began to spread throughout Jerusalem, it would have been a simple matter for the Jewish leaders to retrieve the body from the grave and disprove the fraud. Yet the body of Jesus was not produced. Indeed, there were no remains at all. This one fact is a daunting obstacle to anyone who tries to attack the historicity of the post-mortem appearances of Jesus.

Two thousand years ago the disciples of Jesus publicly proclaimed that their Teacher had conquered death by being resurrected. They affirmed this notion in the one place on earth where it could, if false, be readily disproved. Yet the opponents of Christianity never produced the body. Three days after his burial, Jesus was no longer in his tomb. His followers put their lives on the line by claiming that he was alive again and that they had seen him. These facts stand today as powerful evidence for the truth of Jesus' resurrection.