

## A Christian Response to Anti-Resurrection Theories

The nature of the resurrection of Jesus according to the biblical record is emphatically a bodily resurrection. Of course, such a claim immediately steps on some philosophical toes. Those that hold to a naturalistic worldview sternly proclaim bodily resurrection is impossible! Amen indeed. It is completely impossible within the confines of a worldview that allows for no supernatural activity. And so, the meticulously crafted presupposition that everything naturally impossible is impossible has spawned many rebuttals to Jesus' bodily resurrection. The following is a brief survey of some arguments against the resurrection and a Christian response to each.

**Stolen Body Theory-** This is the oldest of all rebuttals to the resurrection, for it is the argument proliferated among the generation living during the resurrection event itself (Matthew 28:12-15). It argues that the disciples stole the body of their master during the dark of night. Then, after the successful exhumation, they publicly declared Jesus risen from the dead—the empty tomb as evidence of such.

**Response-** The tomb was guarded by soldiers and sealed with the Roman seal. Potential thieves and the soldiers themselves would have felt the wrath of Rome had a theft occurred. Moreover, the New Testament describes the apostles shortly after the crucifixion and burial as fearful and hiding out in fear of detection (John 20:19). Not exactly the sort of audacious fellows capable of overpowering soldiers, breaking Roman seals, and concocting lies about a "risen" Messiah. Also, the fate of these apostles must be considered: all of them, save John, were executed for their proclamation of the risen Christ. One would be hard pressed to argue that these men would perpetuate a fabrication to the point of imprisonment and death.

**Wrong Tomb Theory-** This argument maintains that the disciples did indeed visit a tomb and Jesus was indeed not to be found in it but, the reality is, they got the wrong tomb! This case of mistaken tomb identity led the disciples to believe that Jesus was resurrected. This grand error, in turn, led to the exuberant spreading of the gospel.

**Response-** If a resurrected Jesus was erroneously being preached, surely the religious rulers of Jerusalem could have easily terminated the new sect by showing people the correct tomb—body of Jesus and all its fixings still inside. The fact that such clarification was never resorted to makes this theory highly spurious. Furthermore, is one to believe that the very women who helped entomb Jesus could not relocate the tomb just three days later? Clearly, the Wrong Tomb theory is more problematic than the issue it attempts to solve.

**Swoon Theory-** Jesus did not die on the cross but merely lost consciousness. Once buried, he regained consciousness, exited the tomb, and so seemingly "rose from the dead."

**Response-** The Romans perfected crucifixion as a method of tortuous execution. It did not *usually* end in death. It always ended in death. Also, the wounds Jesus incurred would preclude any survival—let alone a convincing resurrection appearance. This is true especially in the case of the spear that was thrust into Jesus' side and heart. This was done by the Roman soldier to ensure death. If a professional Roman executioner was satisfied that Jesus was dead, perhaps modern naysayers should be as well.

**Eaten by Dogs Theory-** This hypothesis, made popular by John Dominic Crossan's *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography*, suggests that the best explanation for the absence of Jesus' corpse is that it was devoured by wild dogs. In short, Jesus was never entombed. His body was simply left on the cross for carrion crows and wild beasts or, was thrown in a shallow ditch by the Roman executioners to be disposed of in like manner. The gospel accounts of the burial and resurrection of Jesus are, according to Crossan, merely heartfelt attempts by

Jesus' followers to provide a respectable and glorious end to an event that was in actuality degrading and tragic.

**Response-** Crossan is correct in his explication of Roman crucifixion being a form of torture and execution designed to bring shame and disgrace upon the accused. A proper burial after crucifixion would be an occurrence of utmost rarity. To secure such a burial would involve the intercession of a person of prominence. Crossan himself admits that only a person of influence or great wealth could arrange for such intervention and cites Josephus' autobiographical *Life 75* wherein three men, in mid-crucifixion, were taken off of their crosses and medically treated. Two of the three died from their wounds and were given proper burial; the third survived. It is at this point of the argument wherein Crossan's bias shows most glaringly. All four gospels record that Jesus' burial was arranged by Joseph of Arimathea—a man of both influence and wealth! Yet Crossan dismisses Joseph of Arimathea as a mythical interpolation designed to give credence to the burial account. Stating that certain variables must be in place in order for something to happen, but then demoting those same variables to "myth" once they are in place, shows a prejudice against the possibility of that same something happening. In other words, Crossan isn't playing fair. To Crossan, Joseph of Arimathea cannot be allowed to be a real person who really secured the burial of Jesus, because such an admission would provide the backdrop for the resurrection to have really happened. And this would obviously weaken his case. Apart from all of this reasoning, however, there is a more basic weakness to the Eaten by Dogs theory. If the early disciples are merely trying to bestow dignity upon their beloved Rabbi by concocting a narrative of a regal burial and miraculous resurrection, why not leave it at that? Why follow up the fairy tale eulogy with preaching of such fervency as to incur the wrath of Jerusalem and Rome alike? Why preach an escape from the finality of death when Jesus himself lies mangled and dog-devoured? And most pointedly, why would any of the apostles die for such so-called "good news?" To these salient questions the Eaten by Dogs theory has no reasonable answers.

**Hallucination Theory-** This theory attempts to respond to the above stated questions concerning the radical devotion of the apostles. The answer: the apostles truly did believe Jesus resurrected from the dead and even had an encounter with the "risen" Lord. The only problem is, it was a grand hallucination! All (or at least some) of the apostles were religious fanatics. The loss of their Messiah proved too much for their psyches and, as a result, they suffered from hallucinations of Jesus "back from the dead." These experiences led to the diligent preaching of the gospel, subsequently leading to the rise of early Christianity.

**Response-** The Hallucination theory has most recently come into the anti-resurrection spotlight by the liberal scholar, Gerd Ludemann. In *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?*, Ludemann debates William Lane Craig, a conservative theologian and philosopher, concerning the nature of Jesus' resurrection. The book is a good exposition of each thinker's stance, and highly recommended reading for those interested in such matters. The thrust of the Hallucination theory is psychological or, more specifically, psychoanalytical in nature. The emotional and mental makeup of the apostles is determined to be one of deep longing, despair, and imbalance; thus inducing hallucinations of that which they so desperately wanted to be true—a victorious and ever-living Messiah. The problem with this theory is that a reliable psychoanalysis of Peter or Paul is not possible from the sparse biblical data pertaining to their emotional and mental states (1<sup>st</sup> century Jews, the New Testament authors included, were typically non-introspective). Moreover, hallucination theories often claim that all five hundred plus conversions recorded in First Corinthians were the result of mass hallucinogenic experience. It would seem highly unlikely that such a phenomenon would carry with it enough correlation between individual devotees as to produce a unified faith community.

These five theories which attempt to display the unreasonableness of Christ's resurrection—constructed by gifted scholars and logicians—are some of the most unintelligent and illogical mental endeavors to proceed from the human mind. And why is this? Because these theories would necessarily lead us to believe that the proliferation of a single lie, namely, the bodily resurrection of Christ, has changed humankind for the better more than all truths combined! Can this be? Are we not instinctively driven to believe that truth is good and falsehood is evil? Yes, this is what we have believed since childhood: that truth and good prevails over falsehood and evil. Perhaps this is the kind of childlike faith that Jesus validated in saying, "...the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19: 14b).