

Is the resurrection of Jesus a myth or a miracle?

By Colin Webster¹

David Hume² ruled out the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus on the basis that 'no dead person comes back to life'. He completely ignored the evidence in the New Testament; in fact it was not even examined. It was ruled out on the assumption that bodily resurrection is impossible. Yet this is hardly an objective approach.

Christians are fully aware that dead people don't come back to life. However, we are convinced that Jesus did come back to life! This event was a miracle, and we believe it to be true on the basis of strong evidence.

Was Jesus actually dead?

Before claiming that Jesus was resurrected, we first have to establish that He was in fact dead.

Just before His crucifixion Jesus had been flogged by the Romans (John 19:1). From such floggings alone, people were known to have died. The kind of whips used often had pieces of broken bone or metal tied to the ends of the tassels in order to rip into flesh and cause maximum damage.

Then, having had to carry a wooden crossbeam, Jesus was led out of the city of Jerusalem to be crucified.

The Romans devised crucifixion as a means of both torturing and executing their victims. Nails would be driven into the wrists attaching the prisoner to the crossbeam in an outstretched position whilst the feet were nailed together onto a small platform causing maximum pain, and an agonisingly slow death. Because of the awkwardness of movement and the unnatural position for the body the crucified person would have to push up on his pinned feet in order to gasp for air. Every breath took effort and caused immense agony. People usually died of suffocation as the muscles became too weary to lift the body up for air. In order to speed up a prisoner's death the Romans used to break their legs making it impossible for them to rise up to breath. There was no need for Jesus' legs to be broken because He was found to be dead already (John 19:32-34).

By law, Roman soldiers had to make sure Jesus was dead because they themselves risked execution if they failed to carry out their duties to the full. It was for this reason that the Roman soldier thrust his spear into Jesus' side - to make certain of Jesus' death. The Apostle John spoke of this incident in his gospel by saying, 'The soldiers, therefore, came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water' (John 19:32-34). It has been noted by those in the medical profession that the issue of blood and water was a sure sign of death - once the heart has stopped

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² Atherton, Margaret, (Ed.), (1999). *The Empiricists: Critical Essays on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume*, Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Oxford. 'David Hume (7 May 1711 –25 August 1776) was a Scottish philosopher, economist, historian and a key figure in the history of Western philosophy and the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume is often grouped with John Locke, George Berkeley, and a handful of others as a British Empiricist.'

pumping, the water and plasma in the blood separates (rather like oil separating from vinegar when left to stand). There was no question about it; Jesus was dead!

How was Jesus buried?

Jesus was wrapped in grave clothes (rather like a cocoon) and buried in a tomb, which had a huge stone placed in front of it. The grave clothes had oils poured on it and would have suffocated any normal healthy man let alone one who had just endured crucifixion. It is estimated that the temperature at night in the tomb, during that time of year, would have resulted in hypothermia and death to a traumatised body. Furthermore, that same tomb was guarded by between four and sixteen Roman soldiers, who faced execution if they failed in their duties. They literally had to guard that tomb with their lives! (Matthew 27:65).

Why was the tomb empty on the third day?

On the third day the women found that the huge stone sealing the tomb had been rolled away (Mark 16:1-8). The Roman guards had been frightened off earlier when they saw that the stone had been moved by an angel and the tomb was now empty! (Matthew 28: 2-4). Without a body to guard they fled in fear of their lives (Matthew 28:11-15). So why was the tomb empty? This has been a matter of much debate but only in the past 150 years have people tried to come up with alternative suggestions other than those presented in the New Testament. Here are some of those theories:

1. The swoon theory

This theory states that when Jesus was buried He was actually still alive and recovered in the coolness of the tomb. He then rolled the stone away and slipped past the guards unnoticed! There are many problems with this theory:

- * The theory was first suggested 1,800 years after the event! So why didn't anyone ever think of it earlier?

- * It totally contradicts the eye witness accounts that Jesus was in fact dead (John 19:34-36).

- * The temperature in the tomb would have killed a traumatised body (see above).

- * How did Jesus get out of the grave clothes he was wrapped in and 'slip past' the guards?

- * How could someone with the kind of injuries Jesus had sustained have the strength to move a stone which would normally require at least one healthy grown man to move it? (Matthew 27:60; Mark 16:2,3).

- * Finally, if this theory was true, the disciples would have lived a lie... and died for it.

2. The theft theory

This theory suggests that Jesus' body was stolen from the tomb by one of two groups of people. One suggestion is that the disciples stole the body in order to claim that Jesus was resurrected. This fabricated excuse is even recorded in one of the gospels (Matthew 28:11-15). The second suggestion is that the Jewish authorities stole the body. But each of these suggestions is fraught with difficulties.

i) Difficulties with disciples stealing Jesus' body

- * How could anyone slip past the watchful guards who faced execution for failing in their duties?

- * Is it credible that all the guards fell asleep at the same time, especially with such a controversial person's grave as Jesus' to guard?

- * If all the guards did fall asleep, how is it possible that no-one was aroused with the noise made by the removal of the stone?

- * If the guards were asleep how could they know who had stolen the body?
- * Would anyone stealing the body really have gone to the lengths of unwrapping the grave clothes and then place them back in the tomb?
- * Why were the disciples not arrested if the authorities knew that they stole the body? (See the guards' report in Matthew 28:11-15).
- * The disciples were fearful and dejected and in no mood to attempt to steal Jesus' body (John 20:19; Luke 24:13ff).

ii) Difficulty with authorities stealing Jesus' body

- * If the authorities stole the body then why didn't they produce it when the disciples began preaching in Jerusalem that Jesus was alive? (Acts 2:14-41).

3. The wrong tomb theory

This theory suggests that the women mistakenly went to the wrong tomb. This view falls down on several counts:

- * Jesus' body was specifically laid in the tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea (a disciple of Jesus), it would seem logical that he would have told the women which was his tomb.
- * Tombs cut into rock faces so near to the city were not all that common; indeed it was usually the rich people like Joseph who could afford such an exclusive location, so there would not have been many tombs to choose from. Besides, the tomb where Jesus lay would have been the only one surrounded by guards (which is a bit of a giveaway).
- * Scripture tells us that the women had carefully noted the position of the tomb (Matthew 27:61).
- * It was obvious that Peter and John knew which tomb to check out without having to be shown by the women when they were told of the resurrection (Luke 24:9-12; John 20:1-9).
- * If all the disciples had gone to the wrong tomb then why didn't the Sanhedrin (Jewish ruling council who had Jesus crucified) point to the right tomb and produce the body?

4. The hallucination theory

This theory is the most bizarre. The proponents of this theory believe that the witnesses to the resurrection all suffered from hallucinations because they wanted Jesus to appear in front of them. Once again this theory has a number of major problems:

- * The disciples were not expecting Jesus to rise from the dead in the first place so they would not have been 'looking out' for a resurrected body (Luke 24:13-35).
- * Jesus appeared to his disciples several times over a period of forty days during the evening as well as in the day, so there was no possibility of them all being tricks of the light (Luke 24:36-53; John 21:1-25; Acts 1:1-5).
- * Jesus was not a shadowy figure but a real person who ate with the disciples and who they themselves could physically touch and feel (Luke 24:42,43; John 20:19ff; John 21:1-25). Ghosts don't have flesh and blood; living people do!
- * Jesus appeared not only to individuals but also to groups of people. On one occasion over 500 people saw him at one time (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). It is possible for an individual to have a hallucination, but highly unlikely for whole groups of people to have the same hallucination.

* Despite the best attempts of the sceptics to dream up an alternative reason for the empty tomb, I think that the evidence overwhelmingly supports and leads to only one realistic conclusion - Jesus rose from the dead just as he said he would! (Matthew 17:9; 22-23; Mark 16:14; Luke 24:13-33).

After the resurrection

The transformation of the disciples

There was something that made the disciples of Jesus change from being cowards hiding in an upper room afraid for their lives to being bold enough to stand up in front of thousands of people and proclaim that Jesus was alive (compare John 20:19-20 with Acts 2:14-41). The only reasonable explanation for this transformation was their deep conviction that Jesus had risen from the grave. Furthermore this conviction was not short lived as they were willing to be punished, imprisoned, beaten, rejected and even martyred for their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead (Acts 16:22; 2 Corinthians 11:23-27).
The resurrection appearances

There are a number of passages which upon examination will clearly show the reader that a real, bodily resurrected Jesus, was seen by a number of people:

- * Jesus appeared to Mary Magdelene (John 20:14)
- * Jesus appeared to the women (Matthew 28:9-10)
- * Jesus appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34)
- * Jesus appeared to the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13-33)
- * Jesus appeared to the Apostles (Luke 24:36-43)
- * Jesus appeared to the Apostles and Thomas (John 20:26-29)
- * Jesus appeared to the disciples by the lake (John 21:1-23)
- * Jesus appeared to over 500 people at one time (1 Corinthians 15:6)

Final Comment

If someone were to make up the resurrection story in a Jewish culture then why would they include events that would weaken their argument rather than strengthen it. For instance:

* It was the women who first made the reports of the resurrection. Yet a woman's testimony in the Jewish culture did not carry the same weight as a man's.

* Even the disciples thought that Jesus' body had been stolen, so they themselves were not really expecting Jesus to come back to life. Something quite dramatic must have happened to change all that.

* Why would a storyteller invent a doubting Thomas? Surely that would weaken any attempt to convince people that Jesus was alive by stating that even one of his disciples was not convinced (John 20: 24-25).

* Would a storyteller invent a story that would endanger their own life and bring them persecution, hardship and poverty? I think not, unless of course the story is true!

My own life and the lives of millions of other Christians alive today have been transformed by the risen Lord Jesus. Our past has been dealt with; we have a purpose for living in the present and a glorious future to look forward to. Jesus can do that for you too because He is alive!

I leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul, who explains clearly that if Jesus is not raised from the dead then Christianity is the biggest hoax, and Christians the biggest fools. Thankfully, Christ is alive and what is more He will return.

‘And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.’ (1 Corinthians 15:12-24)