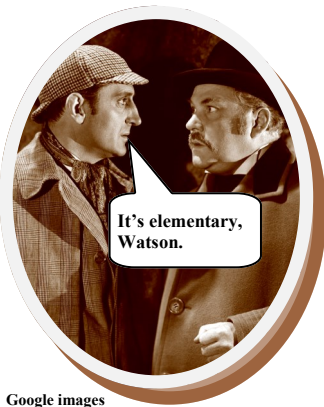


Eye-Opener Studies

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

1: The Resurrection - The 'horse' which pulls the 'cart'!

‘How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?’ (Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four*; emphasis in the original). Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories,



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was not investigating the truth or otherwise of the resurrection accounts about Jesus. Nevertheless his investigative dictum about sleuthing, and arriving at the truth of a situation, is as valid in this context as it was for Holmes and Watson. Since the resurrection left no examinable forensic evidence, conclusions must be drawn from other sources and by other means. Doing this is vital. It is the most vital investigation anybody, anywhere, at any time, can undertake because eternity depends on it.

The Resurrection presented

The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, said: ‘... *if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God...*’ (1 Co 15:14-15). For Paul, the fact of the resurrection was never going to put the existence of God Himself in doubt but today we have moved on since then. It is now a vital point in our defence of the existence of God, as we shall see in a later study. If Christ’s body was still languishing in its Jerusalem tomb when he wrote to Corinth, Paul would have simply returned to his Judaistic past and gone on waiting for, and anticipating, the arrival of the promised Messiah. This is not a option for us in our day.

Paul would have had no truck with some modern theologians who, in striving to be ever so clever and amazingly academically neutral, try to water down the simple truth of the New Testament in the interests of modern notions of reasonableness. Listen to one such in a book recommended as a textbook for examination purposes. In *The Nature of Belief* by Elizabeth Maclaren, (Sheldon Press, 1976) she writes on page 93: ‘Suppose, for instance, that one was trying to establish New Testament belief about the resurrection. Obviously we have the stories, some of them at least suggesting a bodily resurrection. Did they really believe that? Well, why else would they tell the stories? Only because they thought a television camera crew could have filmed the stone being moved, and the risen Christ emerging? Or because that was their only available *idiom* for saying that this Jesus who had died was for them alive still - alive as God was alive, *not* bodily, but somehow continuous and discontinuous with the Jesus they had known.’ So, there we have it! Elizabeth is suggesting that the resurrection of Jesus is about as real, in a literal sense, as the ‘Elvis’ some



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Garden Tomb such as Jesus would have been buried in

people maintain 'lives', because he is always going to be alive in their hearts.

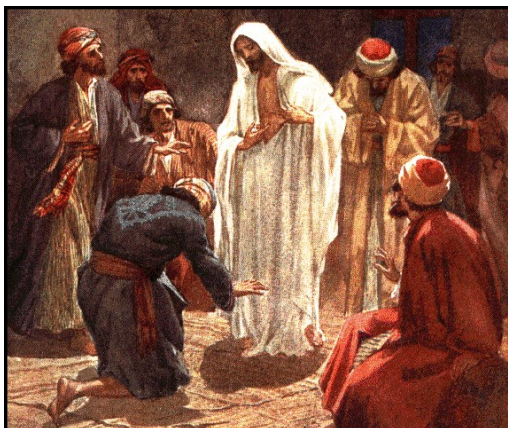
Elizabeth actually confirms this suspicion to her readers as she continues: 'If I think that the first Christians really found the literal emptiness of the tomb central to their faith, then I can hardly say with integrity that I share their faith, at least on that point. If, on the other hand, I can be convinced that the synoptic narratives of the empty tomb are religious legends, told to present an image of the living presence of Christ *in spite* of the fact that the body lay in the tomb, then I have more confidence that I may share their faith.' Well, I for one do not share her confidence and do not think that all those martyrs would have died for a resurrection like this. Thomas only said, "*My Lord and my God!*"' (Jn 20:28) after he was invited to put his fingers in the nail-prints, and his hands in the spear-wounded side, of a risen Lord, not a phantom of the imagination - or John merely wrote a pack of lies!

The centrality of the Resurrection

We are so used to the stories in the Gospels that we often fail to grasp just how important an event it was in the minds of the writers and the early church. In truth, we know very little about the life and biography of Jesus. To them His story does not start in a stable in Bethlehem. That was so unimportant that two didn't even bother to mention it. Christ's credentials in their minds did not depend on the fact of a Virgin Birth (or 'Virgin Conception' as it should be called for the birth was perfectly normal). Not that this detail was meaninglessly insignificant. It needed to be told, and Jesus's credentials as a Son of David also emphasized since the prophecies foretold all of this - and Jesus was presented as Messiah to the Jews in particular because He did fulfil such prophecies. But the resurrection had to be established and confirmed before any of this other detail could be related, or no Jew would have listened.

We know that chapters and verses were not in the original manuscripts but they are most useful tools. The Gospels contain 89 chapters, 31 of which

deal with events just in the last week of Jesus's life. That is 35% of the stories about the life of Jesus focus only on one week. That is a measure of how important that week was both for Him and for all mankind. John's Gospel is the 'daddy' of them all. He devoted 57% of his narrative to that week. No doubt he was aware of the other writings and he wanted to climax his story with the affirmation that Jesus was/



Jesus shows Thomas His hands

is both our Lord and our God. It was only after the resurrection that any Jews could ever contemplate that a man they had actually seen, heard and touched was none other than the very Word of God, who was in the beginning and was in fact the Creator of the universe. (1 John 1:1-4, John 1:1-5). It took an earthquake to shake open the tomb and the 'earthquake' that was subsequently released on to the world was no phantom, 'Elvis lives'-type guru, who comes across in a take-it-or-leave-it form but as a vital, living reality who can change lives, command loyalty and respect and offer salvation to those who believe that He is Lord. John could not have written about the Word in chapter one had not the resurrection evoked that response from the mouth of Thomas, and from all of those in agreement with him.

Leaving the Gospel stories behind we move into Acts and there we find accounts of the preaching which was presented to the people of the day. And what was the central, focal point? The Resurrection, of course.

There are four accounts, or summaries, of sermons in Acts: 2:22-36, 3:11-26, 13:16-43, and 17:16-34. The first three were preached to a Jewish audience, the last to Greeks. Those to the Jews had a fourfold structure:

- i) Reference to the *bona fides* of Jesus, His character, life, works and descent.
- ii) The fact that He fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah.
- iii) The principle accountability of the Jews for His death.
- iv) The proof of His claims to be Lord, Christ and our Saviour via the resurrection.

A simple survey of the four gospels will reveal these four elements being emphasized. After all, many of the Jews hearing these sermons would have known Jesus, or have heard of Him on the gossip grapevines of their day. Such details could be verified at first hand if required, even the fact that the tomb He was buried in was empty. Matthew in particular emphasizes fulfilled prophecies, and all point assiduously at where responsibility lay for His death; that it was a Jewish plot not a dastardly Roman anti-Jewish conspiracy to kill this holy man. The empty tomb was a fact, not a mystical belief, and the only unanswered question was how it came to be empty, not how to maintain that it was when it patently wasn't!

In Athens, preaching to Greeks, a different approach had to be employed. The first three elements in the argument to Jews would cut no ice with Gentiles in Greece. They did not know Jesus or His *bona fides*; they did not know, and even less cared about, the Old Testament prophecies concerning a coming Jewish Messiah; they would not feel any responsibility or accountability for His death - it had nothing to do with them; but they were confronted by His resurrection for, if true, that reached way beyond it being a parochial Jewish affair. This had universal meaning - and still has today. Paul also used a fourfold approach in his message:

- i) An appeal to the God who made the world and His purpose in Creation.
- ii) An appeal to non-Jewish philosophers.
- iii) The nature of God who is spirit, and His demands.
- iv) The proof of these arguments found in the resurrection.

The resurrection was the bedrock and starting point of Christian faith and still is. All arguments spread out from it and build on its foundation. 'On Christ the solid rock we [may well] stand', yet the ground under His feet is not His teaching, miracles, Virgin mother, pure and sinless life or fulfilled prophecies, but His empty tomb. The other things confirm and substantiate the findings demanded by the conclusions drawn from the empty tomb that 'The Lord is risen', as we believe the early Christians used to greet each other, with the response that 'The Lord is risen indeed.'

Who Moved The Stone?

Over a lifetime people who think seriously about the Christian faith will meet many challenges. I was privileged to go to Keele University (Staffordshire) in the early 1960s and was challenged by brilliant academics at times. The most potent was the professor of Philosophy, one Antony Flew. He was the world's leading philosophical atheist, or one of the world's leading philosophical atheists, in the Twentieth Century - as opposed to scientific atheists like Professor Richard Dawkins. At Keele, which is where Flew was at that time, they ran a unique Foundation Year Course in the first year, which has long since ceased. In this course all departments and their professors (i.e. British-style professors, the top person and head of the faculty, not any old lecturer as in the American system) had to lecture to us on their subjects. So I knew Flew and was taught briefly by him, though he almost certainly did not know me (I did not opt to take his subject for my degree). He used to debate Christian believing professors, of whom we had several fine exponents at the time, and it was a treat to be there to hear them jousting about the faith and the existence of God.



Professor Antony Flew

When clever men like Antony Flew challenge you, especially if you are young and still learning basics let alone handling sophisticated arguments, they can easily undermine your faith and rock you off course - which is what they try to do. You cannot always find the answers. You can therefore be made to feel silly at times and lose confidence in the ability to find answers which can satisfy your inner cravings. Failing to find answers greatly undermines faith and can lead to some losing it altogether, especially if your Christian teachers and leaders cannot, or will not, bother to help provide them. This can be a particular challenge in today's climate of scientific onslaught on our faith through both beautifully filmed and presented television nature documentaries, with persuasively scripted and delivered soundtracks, and the written media promoting theories of Evolution and millions of years of

development. Undermining the credibility and trustworthiness of the Genesis narrative, in chapters 1-11 in particular, removes the biblical foundations of our faith and the structural foundations it is built on. If we cannot believe in the Bible at that end why should we believe it at the other? The meaning and power of the Cross is diminished and therefore much easier to discard as the attacks bound along unanswered.

When thus challenged, Christians require a rock-solid reliable base to return to where they can regroup, gain new strength and move forward once more. They will find answers if they know how and where to look for them but they must have the confidence to pursue the search and not simply give up. Thus it was that I was blessed to read a book, published in 1931 but just as potent today as ever it was. It is called *Who Moved The Stone?* by Frank Morison. It can still be purchased and I doubt can be bettered because of its remarkable origins.

When anti-Christian people dismiss the resurrection as a fact, or mock Creationists who believe that the Theory of Evolution is simply a lie, usually they demonstrate immediately that they believe what they want to believe because they have been told what to believe, but they have not studied the subject in detail. We can all do this in many areas of our understanding because we cannot be for ever verifying what we are told. However, in both of these subjects, the consequences of finding out the truth are profound. Morison was an atheist who wanted to write a book destroying the myth of the resurrection narratives about Jesus once and for all. To do so he had to study them, apply investigative methods in their analysis, like a religious Sherlock Holmes, and winkle out the truth. What emerged shook him because he did not get the answer which his prejudiced opinions had wanted him to get. The conclusion which was forced upon him was that 'On the third day Jesus rose.' Consequently he changed from being an atheist to a theist - though what sort of theist I'm not sure - but the book he wrote with the aim of debunking the resurrection became one of the most powerful advocates for the

truth of the Gospel story. And, as we said, it still is. I can't commend it highly enough. Read it!

Arguments against

There are four major arguments as to why Jesus's tomb was empty on that Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago:

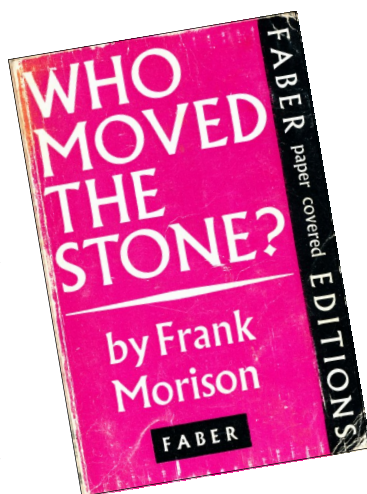
1. The wrong tomb theory.
2. The Authorities removed it theory.
3. The Swoon theory.
4. The disciples stole the body theory.

The first two are arrant nonsense. Number 1 suggests that it was dusk when Jesus was laid in the tomb and the women did not take enough care to note its exact location. When they arrived on resurrection day it was also in the half light of dawn and they met a gardener in the gloom of a new, unused tomb. He spoke to them more-or-less as in Mark's gospel at 16:6, conveniently omitting the words 'He has

risen.' The text then reads: '*... he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. [...] he is not here. See the place where they laid him."*' So saying he waved his arm and pointed to another tomb in the garden just over the way where they laid Him, and invited them to go and see. They were terrified, fled and then spread the rumour of the resurrection.

Even allowing for the possibility that the women were upset and had made an error in the location, the tomb was Joseph's and he knew where it was and so did the Authorities, who mounted a temple guard of soldiers with Pilate's expressed permission to ensure nothing happened to the body before the end of the third day. (These guards were not Roman soldiers, as is often supposed, but Jewish temple guards who were allowed only to police the temple precincts and could not operate outside their zone without the governor's permission.) The correct tomb had been carefully marked for them.

The second 'argument' is equally silly. Why the Authorities should have the tomb guarded and then remove the body themselves, thereby fuelling stories of a resurrection, which was the very thing they were trying to prevent, would be madness. But even more mad would be their inability to produce



My somewhat battered copy!

this body once the Christians were proclaiming 'He is risen!'. They could have killed that message off in one easy stage.

The Swoon theory is more dangerous because it is the Muslim answer to the conundrum. They say that Jesus was taken down from the Cross rather quickly and preserved alive in the tomb. Those who buried Him in haste honestly thought He was dead despite the speed of His death - six hours was very quick indeed for a crucifixion and even Pilate was surprised He was dead so soon. He revived in the cool of the tomb, so this theory goes. Somehow He managed to push open the entrance stone from the inside and escape, met some of His followers before disappearing to somewhere like Kashmir, where He lived out His life in obscurity and died in old age.

The sheer impossibility of anybody moving the stone from the entrance of the tomb from the inside, let alone a man who had been nearly flogged to death and had bled out for six hours in excruciating pain, is beyond belief, but if that is all you've got you stick with it. The notion that the killing machines, which were the Roman soldiers, who were experts in crucifixion, not knowing when a victim was dead, is equally silly, but when we add the evidence that water came out of the spear wound as well as blood (John 19:34) we have corroborating evidence that Jesus was dead on the Cross. It is only of recent date that medical science has confirmed that when the heart ruptures at death water is present as well as blood. John could not have known this medical fact but accurately bore testimony to what he witnessed, and this testimony clinches any doubts on that score.

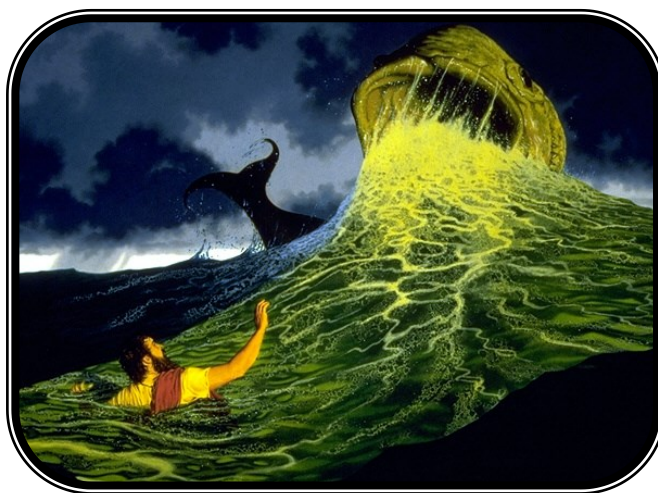
However we have to be aware that Muslims will argue that the Swoon theory is correct because of the prophecy contained in the story of Jonah. They will point out that Jesus Himself linked Jonah to His death as the only sign that will be given. The link goes like this: *'Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish*

to see a sign from you." But he answered them, *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* (Mt 12:38-40). They will draw the parallel and declare that just as Jonah was preserved alive in the belly of the whale, or great fish, so Jesus, as the antitype, was also kept alive. It is another study but it is clear to me that the fault here is not in linking Jonah to Jesus, for Jesus did it Himself, but for the assumption that Jonah was alive inside the fish. He wasn't. He drowned and was revived by God just before the fish was sick and disgorged him on to the land. It was immediately before that happened that he spoke his famous

prayer in chapter 2. He begins by recounting quite clearly that he had drowned (1-6a), and then the Lord brought him back because of that repentance and he promised to do as God wanted him to (6b-9). Then the fish was sick (10). Jonah was not preserved alive inside the fish. His is a resurrection story not a body preservation story, or swoon story. Chris-

tians need to grasp this fact and get a proper handle on the story of Jonah - read it carefully in Chapter 2!

Finally there is the theory that the disciples stole the body. This, of course, was the original suggestion put about by the authorities to explain the disappearance of the physical remains of the Saviour (Mt. 28:11-15). It is still the best they have yet it still makes no sense at all. That this scattered rag-tag band of fishermen and others, who were running scared, petrified that they might be dragged in by the powers that be because of their association with 'that seditious criminal', Jesus, who had just been executed, could get themselves together, hatch a plot to get around the guards and steal the body so they could put it about that He had risen - even though they knew He hadn't, and then boldly proclaim that He had in fact risen, is beyond all psy-



Jonah drowned!

chological and practical belief. You could hardly mount a scheme like that AND, bear in mind, that it had to be accomplished within less than three days or Jesus's prophecy failed. It was a Sabbath situation and movement was very restricted in cities on those days anyway. That these amazingly 'brave' disciples, who had thought He was the one to redeem Israel (Luke 24:21), and who were crushed and sadly disillusioned that He had been executed without, apparently doing so, suddenly got their courage back and laid a cunning plan together, being prepared to risk life and limb to perpetuate a lie, is absolutely beyond belief. Later they were to suffer all sorts of hardships and martyrdoms with none ever remotely spilling the beans that it was all a hoax. They gained nothing at all in personal terms, just hard work and suffering for the Name of Christ. People will not dedicate their lives to what they know and believe to be a lie. It defies all psychological analysis, makes no sense now and never did then.

Therefore, having eliminated the impossible we are left with the truth of the improbable that 'On the Third Day He rose'!

Implications

The tomb was empty on that Sunday morning. That fact can be verified by normal historical investigative processes. Actually there is apparently more evidence for the existence of Jesus and His empty tomb extant than there is for Julius Cæsar. Nobody questions the life and biography of Cæsar because nothing affecting our morals, beliefs, life-styles or guiding authority hangs on the answer given. We could easily agree that Cæsar lived and did what it is said he did, shrug our shoulders and then say, 'So what?' And it would not affect our lives in any way at all. Nothing, apart from possibly passing some exams in Roman history, hangs on what we believe about Julius Cæsar. Yet the fact and testimony of the empty tomb is a time-bomb waiting to explode



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for the answer we give as to how it became empty not only affects our beliefs and actions in this life, it will decide our eternal destiny.

Christianity is the only religion which is founded on an historical fact, and that fact can be examined logically by all the investigative tools we have at our disposal today. It is not founded on wise philosophy and exalted moral principles expounded by a mystical preacher, as some are - though it contains them and they are arguably the best ever taught. The teacher was either a sinless,

godly man and His authority is that of God speaking to us, or He was a liar and confidence trickster, so full of pride that He may even have believed in His own publicity. His religion cannot stand alongside any other for it is base and devilish if His remains still lie buried in the ground, for it captures the innocent with promises it cannot fulfil and hopes that will never be realized. If it is true He is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5), which rules out any other way back to God. He is, as He said, "...the way, and the truth, and the life [and that] no one comes to the Father except through [Him].'" (John 14:6). That makes Christianity the only true religion and Jesus the only Saviour. It is an exclusive religion which automatically rules out any sort of 'All roads lead to God'-type theory which many people want to promote in our so-called multi-faith culture today. That does not mean that we should treat them with contempt and be harsh, unloving and unkind towards them, but we must brook no compromise over salvation and who provided it for us.

Authority

Once we accept and fully grasp the fact that the tomb was empty because Jesus rose, unaided, from the dead, we have to recognize that we have entered another realm of existence entirely. No human being can do this, and only one ever has. His words, teaching and wisdom are from God, and if from God they carry Divine authority.

Now as we face life's challenges especially to our faith we have to realize that Jesus is the one who is the very Word of God, who created the universe and who is God (John 1:1-5). Now we can begin to see why John could not even think like this, let alone use it to authenticate the claims of the faith before the resurrection verified its truth. The empty tomb is the 'horse' which pulls the 'cart', not the other way around. Jesus is not the Son of God because He was born of a virgin - though we would expect nothing less concerning His birth. Jesus was the best teacher ever with lessons which can transform lives and lift people up to heights of triumphant living - but we would expect nothing less from Him.

When we are opposed by scientists who leave valid and often wonderful experimental science behind and enter the world of historical science, based on assumptions, presuppositions and interpretations, we remember that we interpret the past through Jesus's eyes. He was not just a 'child of His day' who swallowed the crazy notions of the times in which He lived. He spoke from knowledge. Thus when He talked of Noah, the ark and the Flood (e.g. Mt 24:37-39) and modern geologists deny it ever happened and that Noah ever existed, we let Jesus pull the cart and believe that Noah, the ark and the Flood were true. Whether we can explain everything about that event is a different field of study but we do not need

to fear examining these facts, and their implications, because scientists deny them. You can be assured that the Flood model of geological history currently fits the facts far far better than the scientific, evolutionary, atheistic model does. When Jesus goes back to Genesis and the story of Adam for His teaching on marriage (Mt 19:3-6), we can rest assured that Adam was real, the Genesis story is true and the millions of years we are regularly bombarded with in the media are the chimera. It may take many years for this to penetrate the minds of these people like David Attenborough or professor Brian Cox - and probably never will in their specific cases - but we need not fear them, even though we may be laughed at and thought to be naïve.

Conclusion

There are challenges which all Christians will face. Some could well unsettle us if we let them. When Satan tries to pull the ground from under our feet, remember that 'On Christ the solid rock [we] stand', it's the other ground which is sinking sand. If answers elude us for the moment please rest assured in Christ and ask yourself 'Who moved the Stone?' It's the question which has stood by me all of my life for the answer to it declares the Jesus is Lord.

The resurrection and the empty tomb is indeed the spiritual 'horse' which pulls the spiritual 'cart'!

Tasks

- 1) Read the following passages about the resurrection and try to draw up a logical, coherent sequence of events from them: Mt. 27:32-28:15; Mark 15:21-16:14; Luke 23:26-24:49; John 19:16-21:14.
- 2) Which issues puzzle, challenge or upset you in your Christian walk? Say why you think they do?