

# **The Resurrection: Extraordinary Conspiracy or Fact of History**

## **Introduction**

When trying to extract historical facts, it is important to realize that much of the historian's job is to deduce reasonableness. Specifically, historians deal with abductive reasoning, which is "having to do with abduction/abductive reasoning. Abduction is a probabilistic form of inference in which an explanation is offered to justify and explain evidence" ("Introduction to Philosophy", p.167). Simply put, historians are tasked with explaining events based on the evidence surrounding said events.

It is important to understand the naturalistic presumption to which the biblical denier must hold. In discussing the naturalistic philosophy of interpreting history, Gregory Dawes wrote: "In drawing up his account of past events, modern historians do not even consider the possibility of divine action; the only causal factors they will look for are natural causes." So, when discussing the possibility of anything supernatural, the naturalist presumes it to be impossible and will attempt to explain away the apparent supernatural event through various theories. On the onset, the focus is not necessarily naturalism versus supernaturalism. The main purpose of discussing this philosophy now is to broadly understand from where these theories emerge.

The naturalist scholar must contend with the abrupt eruption of Christianity in the first century. The fact that there are several theories which scholars have formulated implies not only that there is an issue that requires some thought but also that these theories are up for debate. According to Paul, proving the resurrection of Jesus to be false would cause Christianity to crumble (1 Corinthians 15:14). Thus, it is essential for the rational thinker to consider reasonableness in the case for the resurrection and the objections produced by critics.

## **Swoon Theory**

Proponents of the swoon theory will suggest that Jesus never died on the cross, instead He was put into an unconscious or swoon state. Within the perimeters of the swoon theory, there are many sub theories which attempt to explain how Jesus survived His crucifixion and why the Romans might have taken Him off the cross early. This article will not touch on every proposed sub theory, rather just the basis of the theory; namely, the likelihood of Jesus surviving the cross.

**Procedure of Crucifixion in Rome** Those who hold this view of the crucifixion will refer to Marks account of the crucifixion and show that even Pontius Pilate was even shocked at Jesus' rapid death. Some have said that a victim of crucifixion could survive up to ten days! Moreover, Jesus' crucifixion followed

mostly standard procedure of Roman crucifixion. Flogging, carrying the crossbar, and being nailed to the cross were all standard procedure.

On one occasion, Josephus recorded a man by the name Eleazar enduring the same fate which befell Jesus because of his rebellion against Rome (Jewish Wars ,7.196-203). In antiquities, Josephus plainly states:“they were whipped with rods, and their bodies were torn to pieces, and were crucified” (Antiquities, 12.256). In one case the scourging was described as so severe that the man’s “bones laid bare” (Jewish Wars, 6.300-309).

**Surviving Crucifixion** Indeed, Josephus records at least one man surviving crucifixion:

and when I was sent by Titus Caesar with Cerealius, and a thousand horsemen, to a certain village called Thecoa, in order to know whether it were a place fit for and when I was sent by Titus Caesar with Cerealius, and a thousand horsemen, to a certain village called Thecoa, in order to know whether it were a place fit for a camp, as I came back, I saw many captives crucified; and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery; yet two of them died under the physician’s hand, while the third recovered (Life of Josephus, 420-422).

**Problems With Swoon Theory** Despite the contentions of the swoon theorist, it is still unreasonable to believe that Jesus would have survived the cross. Ironically, swoon theorists often present Josephus’ account of the survivor as evidence to suggest that Jesus survived, but in reality it presents a challenge to their theory.

Titus, the emperor; had the power to command that the victims of capital punishment be removed prematurely. Such power was not afforded to anyone present in Jesus’ case. Instead, it was the Centurion who was required to be certain of death. Gaye Strathearn notes a quote attributed to Quintilian: “Crosses are cut down, the executioner does not prevent those who have been pierced from being buried” (qtd in Stathern 8). Noting that it was a practice to pierce victims of crucifixion, particularly for those being given to their families for burial. Frankly, a theory that leans on the idea that a Roman Centurion would not know how to ascertain death is historically absurd.

Further, in the case of Josephus’ companions, note that even with the best care available, only one of the three survived. How much more unlikely would it be for someone to survive without such care? It would seem completely unreasonable to conclude that Jesus could have possibly survived the cross.

## Stolen Body Theory

Admittedly, it is difficult to find any contemporary scholar who holds the stolen body theory as a reasonable explanation for the origin of Christianity. It is clear, however, that this is at least one of the first of naturalistic explanations. Apparently, this was Mary Magdalene's initial thought when she found the empty tomb (John 20:13). In Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Typho*, Typho asserts:

Jesus, a Galilean deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven (Dialogue, ch. 108).

This narrative can be clearly seen from the first century Jews (Mat 28:11-15)

**Who Stole the Body?** According to Typho, the clear culprits were **Jesus' Disciples**. Supposedly, according to Typho, they stole the body so they could tell others that Jesus has risen. The main issue that this article will raise against Typho's theory is that the disciples were executed in all kinds of terrible ways based on their belief in Jesus as their Savior. According to tradition, every one of the apostles were killed for their teachings on Jesus. Why would they be willing to endure the persecutions if they KNEW what they were teaching was a lie?

Some might suggest that perhaps the **Jews or Romans** would want steal the body. The issue with this theory is that neither the Jews nor the Romans had any motivation to steal the body and if they had, they could have squashed the resurrection narrative very quickly by admitting to stealing it! They both were blaming Christ's disciples, which seems to imply neither the Romans or the Jews had any clue what happened to the body.

Still some might put the blame on **grave robbers**. After all, grave robbery seemed to have been an issue at the time of Jesus. The *Nazareth Inscription* was a fascinating find which showed the Romans' attitude toward grave robber - including the death penalty to those who are caught. With that in mind, imagine the amount of motivation one would need to rob a grave. Some might find motivation in robbing a grave of one of the Caesars; presuming the valuables that might be found, but robbing the grave of a Galilean carpenter seems outlandish!

**The Stolen Body and The Naturalist's Dilemma** One might note that Paul never appealed to the empty tomb as evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Instead, Paul appealed to the eye witness testimony of those who had seen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:3-7). Presumably Paul understood the empty tomb was not great proof, as the inclination would be to say the body was stolen; as Mary Magdalene thought. This theory fails to deal with the issue at hand. It is evident that the disciples at least believed they had seen Jesus!

## Group Hallucination Theory

The hallucination theory posits that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were not physical encounters but rather collective hallucinations experienced by his disciples. This appears to be the primary theory employed by contemporary scholars to justify a naturalistic explanation. At first glance, this theory seems outlandish, so how do hallucination theorists rationalize this position?

**Contrasting the Disciples with Psychological Phenomena** Dr. Bart Ehrman cites a study that demonstrates many people have apparently “seen” Mary (How Can “Group Hallucinations” Possibly Happen?). Further, many have sought to explain this view utilizing “grief hallucinations” and other related phenomena. The rational thinker must then inquire whether the disciples were unique or just more examples of the aforementioned phenomena.

Dr. Joseph Bergeron contends that a medical diagnosis is key in this discussion (The Crucifixion of Jesus, pp. 107-108). He continues to explain that generally speaking, those who experience genuine hallucinations are suffering from some sort of psychosis for which the first century had no actual treatment. It is not reasonable to conceive the idea that people suffering from such psychosis would be organized enough to demonstrate the organization which is clearly seen by the disciples of the first century. Bergeron continues to state:

The rapid spread of Christianity in the first century required organized planning and deliberate action by capable individuals. Christianity spread so fast that Christians were a recognized religious minority by the early 60's AD. Nero blamed them for the great fire in Rome. In 64 AD Nero launched the first mass persecution campaign by Romans against Christians. 296 Could a band of lunatics with severe untreated psychiatric illnesses have deployed such a rapid and successful widespread expansion of Christianity? (The Crucifixion of Jesus, pp. 107-108)

**Hallucination Theory and Plausibility** In another blog, Dr. Bart Ehrman passes the torch to psychologists to explain his theory (Are “Group Hallucinations” Possible? The Case of Mary). The fact that he never cites psychologists or M.D's that share his position is telling. The theory appears to be less based on evidence and more on faith in the naturalistic presumptions which he and other biblical deniers often champion.

## Conclusion

In wrapping up this discussion on the resurrection of Jesus, we've delved into various theories proposed by scholars aiming to make sense of historical events. Looking at the Swoon Theory, it's apparent that the idea of Jesus surviving crucifixion faces substantial challenges, given the historical evidence and the practicalities of Roman crucifixion procedures. The Stolen Body Theory, an

early naturalistic explanation, struggles to explain why Jesus' disciples, who faced persecution and death for their beliefs, would opt to steal the body and propagate a false resurrection narrative.

Moving on to the Group Hallucination Theory, which suggests that post-resurrection appearances were collective hallucinations, contemporary scholars often lean on psychological phenomena for support. However, the swift and organized spread of Christianity in the first century raises valid doubts about the feasibility of such hallucinations among the disciples.

In dissecting these theories, it's clear that the naturalistic assumptions of certain scholars significantly influence their interpretations of historical events. The enduring strength of Christianity in the face of persecution, coupled with the historical context, challenges the credibility of these alternative theories. In the end, a rational thinker must carefully weigh the reasonableness of each theory, considering the available evidence and the broader historical backdrop surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. It is clear that when one rids himself of biases and evident presumptions; the biblical explanation is the only reasonable explanation of the events surrounding the first century. The resurrection of Jesus is indeed, a fact of history!

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