

Wednesday, April 11, 2007 (sent to DN)

### **An Empty Tomb is Evidence of an Empty Tomb**

It is with great interest that I read Okiya Omtatah's piece titled *Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead as Stated in Scriptures?* (DN, 10 Apr 2007). He refuted James Cameron's *The lost Tomb of Christ* as a "crackpot fantasy" and attempted to debunk some theories that skeptics have presented in the past as alternative explanations of Jesus Christ's resurrection, the resurrection being, *prima facie*, an inadequate and counterintuitive explanation for an empty tomb.

Exhibiting a commendable spirit of inquiry, Okiya exhorted his fellow Christians to take challenges presented by populists like Cameron and use them to learn more about their own faith. He urges the believers, "We must have the knowledge to handle criticisms and dismissals. Faith need not be insecure, and intolerance is an expression of that insecurity".

This is all very good, except that Okiya made a few egregious errors when he was presenting counterarguments to the skeptic's theories. Okiya started by asserting that "historical fact proves that the tomb was empty". This is incorrect. The empty tomb is a Christian construction and not a historical fact. It is no more historical than the supernatural claim of hydropatesis (walking on water) or the virgin Mary. It is important to note that the expression "the empty tomb" carries considerable theological baggage because it always means "the empty tomb in which Jesus was entombed". Of course, history is not theology and has no place for non-verifiable theological claims.

Okiya's error is in being inattentive to the fact that the allegations that Jesus was taken into a tomb by a member of the Sanhedrin (Joseph of Arimathea) and that the tomb was later found empty is not attested outside the gospels. Therefore it is not a historical fact that the empty tomb was empty as a result of the resurrection. Put simply, an empty tomb is evidence of an empty tomb. Not evidence of a resurrection.

In refuting the Swoon Theory, which postulates that Jesus survived the crucifixion, Okiya claims, incorrectly, that people didn't survive crucifixion. This is false. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, narrated in *Life* 420 that he was once traveling out to a village named Thecoa when he noticed that three of his friends hanging on crosses. He requested Titus, the Roman General that they be brought down. They were brought down and given medical Care. Two of them died but the third survived.

Okiya blunders again when he argues that if Jesus survived, he would have been too weak to move the boulder covering the tomb entrance. First of all, Biblical archaeologist Amos Kloner has demonstrated in his article *Did a Rolling Stone Close Jesus' Tomb?* that the assumption that a rolling stone covered Jesus' tomb is an anachronism because rolling stones were extremely rare during Jesus and were owned only by the wealthiest families, and neither Joseph nor Jesus were from aristocratic families. Secondly, even if Jesus were in good shape, he would not have rolled a stone weighing more than two tons alone. The stones were always rolled by a group of people, often using levers.

In refuting the hallucination theory, which argues that the disciples imagined that they saw a resurrected Jesus, Okiya claims that hallucinations are individual affairs. This is also incorrect. There is evidence that mass hysteria can occur among religious groups as have been reported in cases where groups of people claim they saw the virgin Mary.

Lastly, Okiya refutes the conspiracy theory, which claims that the disciples made up the stories of the risen Jesus by asserting that the disciple's claim would have been easily disproved had they made it all up by producing Jesus' body. This argument incorrectly assumes that Jesus' body in fact existed could have been produced at will. It also assumes that the resurrection claims were made public a few days after Jesus' alleged death. The truth of the matter is that Pauline letters, which were the earliest to claim the resurrection of Jesus, were written more than twenty years after Jesus' alleged crucifixion.

That argument also assumes, without a basis, that the resurrection claims were taken seriously by non-Christians. Unless it is successfully argued that early Christianity was seen as a truly feared force rather than a slightly annoying gadfly or even less to Jerusalem leaders in the 30s, this argument does not work.

Okiya also needs to consider other naturalistic theories like the possibility that the body was buried in a shallow grave and then eaten by dogs or even interred in a tomb but taken by body-snatchers. Assuming that it was indeed the case that Jesus' body was placed in a tomb, the fact is that there are several naturalistic possibilities for the apparent disappearance of the body and these are more probable than claims of resurrection, which are not attested in any historical texts or by human experience. Occam's razor cuts off the resurrection from the word go and to any historian worth his salt, it is not even worthy of consideration as an explanation for an empty tomb. Because history, like science, is not theology and the supernatural is not an explanation for any event regarded as historical.

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