

# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2007

## The Tomb of Jesus and the Possibility of Disproving Christianity

The big religious news this week is, of course, the so-called tomb of Jesus. It is actually not news at all (since it's not "new"), but has garnered attention because of the well-planned media hype for James Cameron's upcoming documentary. In this post, I do not want to talk about the supposed tomb of Jesus, because persons [more adequately trained](#) in history and archaeology are addressing it sufficiently. It seems quite clear that this tomb neither proves nor disproves anything about Jesus. But the incident does raise an interesting question: What would it take to disprove Christianity? Or, more narrowly, **what would it take to disprove that Jesus rose from the dead?**



It seems to me that Christian claims about Jesus require that they can be disproved, at least in principle. I do not think this requirement is thrust upon Christianity by the world, so that Christians must be accountable to some sort of "universally recognized foundations" (whatever they may be). Rather, this requirement is entailed by the kinds of claims Christians make. **Some (though perhaps not all) Christian beliefs are claims about states of affairs in the known universe.** This is particularly the case with regard to our (putatively central) claims about Jesus, and eminently so regarding his resurrection from the dead. Although this event cannot be *explained* by the normal operations of the known universe, it *took place within* the known universe. Therefore, claims concerning this event are vulnerable to counter-claims that could perhaps undermine it. What might constitute a sufficient objection

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to the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead?

A [certain theologian](#) took up this very question and provides a scenario in which belief in resurrection could be undermined: "A letter is discovered in an ancient Mediterranean, now Turkish, village, addressed to one Paul, formerly Saul, of Tarsus. [It reads:] I can hardly believe we got away with it. The place where we hid the body was so obvious, and it took so long before we could finally get rid of it, that I'm amazed no one discovered it. And that story we cooked up about seeing him alive after they crucified him - not just once, but for forty days! Admittedly a few Athenians though this was pretty funny, but it's astonishing how many people have believed it. So let's press on to Rome and see how far we can carry this thing. Be careful, and write when you are able...As ever, Peter." (Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* [CUP, 2000] p. 167)

What I appreciate about this example is its literary character: Christian claims about Jesus rest primarily on literary evidence (apostolic letters, etc.), and thus counter-claims would be especially fitting if they also rested on literary evidence. Of course, such evidence would need to be thoroughly tested for authenticity. But if it passed such historical tests, a letter like this could perhaps undermine belief in Jesus' resurrection. If Christians kept on claiming that Jesus was raised while at the same time accepting the veracity of this letter, people would have good reason to question our integrity.

I, for one, do not think it is possible or desirable to try to *prove* Jesus' resurrection. However, I do think Christians have a vested interest in Jesus' resurrection *not being disproved*. **I have observed that many Christians who (rightly, in my mind) eschew proving Christianity sometimes make the mistake of thinking Christianity cannot be disproved at all.** In this case, an appropriate confidence (that our beliefs *will not* be undermined) slips into an inappropriate stubbornness (that our beliefs *cannot* be undermined). **But if no evidence whatsoever could undermine our belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection, then it seems likely that we do not understand this belief to entail claims about real states of affairs in the real world.** In other words, we don't really believe in the resurrection as an actual event in space and time. I do believe that the resurrection of Jesus actually happened. Thus I have to acknowledge that, in principle, this event could be disproved, although it has not yet been disproved, and it is practically-speaking quite difficult to disprove, and there are good reasons for thinking it never will be disproved.

#### Any thoughts?

Do you agree that Christian beliefs can at least in principle be disproved? Why or why not?

What other examples could be provided as a plausible basis for

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counter-claims against basic Christian beliefs?  
Why does it matter that Christian claims be disprovable?

—

Posted by JohnLDrury at [8:11 AM](#) Labels: [News](#), [Practice of Theology](#), [resurrection](#)

### 15 comments:

#### [David Drury](#) said...

I like your parallel on the literary evidence being the place of foundation and possible erosion at the same time.

And the present application is that more and more Christians have seen archeological evidence as a faith-strengthener (My profs at GCTS came out with the "Archeological Bible" to meet just such a desire.) And so perhaps many attempts to erode that faith come from that newer foundation.

-David

P.S. Thanks for tackling the key theological implications of this "Old News" News. I've been mulling over with several in my church and my men's group this morning the pastoral implication of these kinds of events. I'll let you know my thoughts by Monday.

[9:35 AM, February 28, 2007](#)

#### [Ken Schenck](#) said...

It does seem to me that if someone could disprove the bodily resurrection of Jesus historically, this would require a fundamental alteration of Christian understanding. Of course there are long since many such reformulations on offer (e.g. Bultmann's existentialist approach). You would be able far more than I to say how some sense of a non-physical, spiritual resurrection might affect such core understanding.

But I consider this historical datum as one of very few on which "historic" Christianity "rises" or falls (no puns intended). I think orthodox Christianity could survive if there never historically was a Moses, David--maybe even a Paul, if in fact 96% of the Bible was historically false. It might involve significant modification in some respects, but I think the core would be there. But without a historic Jesus who was the incarnate second person of the Trinity who rose from the dead--it seems to me that that's an essentially different religion.

Would you agree?

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### Resources

11:08 AM, February 28, 2007

[JohnLDrury](#) said...

Ken asks: Would you agree that without a risen Jesus, Christianity would essentially be another religion?

John answers: Yes!

11:18 AM, February 28, 2007

[JohnLDrury](#) said...

DED,

Thanks for noting the relevance of archeological evidence. I would concur that archeological evidence not only confirms many christian claims about Jesus, but also would have a hard time denying them. The really big stuff that could conclusively undermine belief in the risen Christ has all been established in a positive direction (e.g., Jerusalem is a real place with a real history with real people names Pilate and Herod, etc). Most other possibilities require too much conjecture or argument gaps (e.g., this tomb business ) or only challenge the narrative details but not the essential core affirmation (e.g., controversy over where Jesus was crucified and buried in relation to the walls of Jerusalem at his time). Hence, I appreciate Bruce Marshall's literary scenario.

John

11:24 AM, February 28, 2007

[JohnLDrury](#) said...

Ken,

Regarding revisionist understandings of Jesus' resurrection: **they don't impress me much.** Though perhaps not necessarily so, in point of fact these alternative interpretations are often both incoherent and irrelevant.

*Incoherent* because they must equivocate on what we mean by "Jesus" (if the rise of "Jesus" is really the "rise of faith in the disciples" [Bultmann], then are we really talking about "Jesus" anymore?).

*Irrelevant* because historical science has not so utterly disproved the resurrection to require this kind of revision.

Maybe we should keep such proposals in our back pocket in case of such a disproof. But I am more inclined to (a) plan on our faith

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confirmed rather than undermined, (d) not let my worries of disproof control the formulation of my belief system, but rather work through the inner logic of my beliefs, and (c) be willing to have the integrity to let go of my faith if it is truly undermined rather than do hermeneutical summersaults just to preserve the church.

11:38 AM, February 28, 2007

[Keith Drury](#) said...

You have done an excellent job here showing that, while the historical evidence is laughable, the **issue** is not laughable.

It is not enough for Christians to say "I know He lives because He lives within my heart." He lives because his actual body was resurrected from the dead at an actual point in history. So thanks for pointing this out.

11:50 AM, February 28, 2007

[JohnLDrury](#) said...

Keith/Dad,

That song is a classic case of **reductionism**. It is not so much *false* to say that "You ask me how I know he lives / He lives within my heart," as it is *insufficient*. Of course, poetic religious language should be given more wiggle room than didactic doctrinal statements. Yet, in the case of that hymn, it is explicitly responding from the challenge of historicism by turning inward.

It was Ken Schenck who first pointed out to me the trouble with this song. There was a time in my life when I couldn't even sing it. However, I have found a [critically receptive](#) tactic for dealing with such cases of reductionism: **simply add the word "also."** I know Jesus lives on the basis of the trustworthy and sufficient testimony of the apostles' encounter with the risen Jesus himself. But it is *also* true that I know Jesus is risen because he lives within my heart.

I often lean over to Mandy during songs and sermons and whisper "also."

12:04 PM, February 28, 2007

[Larry](#) said...

As a GCTS grad also (along w/ David), my training included heavy doses of anti-Bultmannian literalism. "Yes, Jesus actually did rise from the dead, literally, physically, in time and space."

And yes, I would agree that any claim of historic truth must be open

to being disproved by the same forensic (or literary, nice thought) evidence.

I'm confident that it won't be. But ...

I had concluded even before the current brouhaha that it wouldn't matter to me if it did. I believe what I do about Christ because I believe it and not because I can prove or disprove it (Kierkegaard, not Bultmann).

Perhaps this explains why I never bothered to read the various popular books which claim to offer proof about the resurrection.

Here's a more practical question that you (or Keith, still out there?) might help me with:

Why is it that so many who believe that Jesus is literally alive are the least interested in obeying his commands, while [others](#) who are indifferent to the question are quite eager to apply his teachings to life?

In other words, if the resurrection matters so much, then why doesn't Jesus matter a little more?

6:17 PM, February 28, 2007

**John said...**

Hi, Im from Melbourne.Why do you take such stuff so seriously? Please check out this set of critical essays on Christianity.

1. [www.dabase.net/proofch6.htm](http://www.dabase.net/proofch6.htm)

1:30 AM, March 02, 2007

**[David Drury](#) said...**

Hey bro,

Well, I've thought through the "pastoral implications" issue and popped up my core 3 responses online. Here they are:

<http://www.drurywriting.com/david/07.PastoralReponsetoControversy.htm>

Thanks for letting me pirate and promote my link. If it makes you feel any better, I also take these things seriously! :-)

10:32 PM, March 03, 2007

**Anonymous said...**

I'm curious about your statement regarding the resurrection not

taking place in space and time. I was raised in an Evangelical Wesleyan tradition, but have been reading a lot of Jurgen Moltmann lately. He appears to take a similar stance. That is, embracing the resurrection, but denying that it occurs in space and time. Now, I realize that my confusion may very well be a result of interpreting his words through my Evangelical presuppositions, but it doesn't seem to make sense. Can you break this down into Evangelicalese? What is meant by the apparent paradox? BTW... I love the blog!

2:05 PM, March 15, 2007

[JohnLDrury](#) said...

anon,

Thanks for your comment. I believe that Jesus' resurrection took place in space and time. However, it does not occur in the regular pattern of cause and effect within space and time, since there is no secondary cause but is only the work of the Father raising his Son by the Spirit. As Moltmann says at one point, the resurrection happens *to* space and time. I like that. Certainly there are traces of this event and trails of evidence that make it more or less credible. But it is a very special event and should be treated as such.

Hope this helps.

3:00 PM, March 15, 2007

**Anonymous** said...

That does help, thank you. I recall he used similar language with it's historicity. That is, he believes it literally occurred, but it is not a historical event.

3:32 PM, March 15, 2007

**Anonymous** said...

Quote: In other words, if the resurrection matters so much, then why doesn't Jesus matter a little more?

Wow, you said a mouthful there. I just had to comment that this question is much more critical to the church at this point in history than all the talk about proving or disproving the resurrection. It's taken me many years, but I am finally starting to learn that it's not so much how full I can stuff my brain with information that matters; rather, it's the extent to which I allow Jesus to transform my life.

9:18 PM, March 17, 2007

[Tony Myles](#) said...

The catch is that we often find ourselves moving around a lot on what we say we stand on. Meaning, we can spend a lot of energy uses phrases like, "You can dig up Elvis' tomb and Ghandi's tomb, but no one has ever dug up Jesus' tomb!" Then something like this happens and we say, "Yeah, well, that's not real and even it was it doesn't mean anything."

It's a tricky thing to find something logical/archeological/scientific to stand on when we're to be people of faith... AND love God with all our mind.

1:03 AM, March 29, 2007

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