

Jesus: More Than a Prophet? (Part 3)

Jesus was truly a prophet of God—we agree on that. But we are examining the question: Was he more than a prophet? We have already seen several things that distinguish him from the others: the fact that his coming had been announced many centuries ahead of time and specially prepared by the sending of another prophet; he was unique in that he led a sinless life; he made claims that no other prophet made—for example, he claimed to have existed thousands of years before his birth; he claimed to have the right to forgive sins; he wore the title of Messiah, a title that even the Qur'an attributes to him. And he did great miracles. But one of his miracles surpasses those of all other prophets.

HIS RESURRECTION

In the Gospel according to John 2:18-22 we read: "So the Jews answered and said to Him, 'What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' Then the Jews said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said."

These disciples "believed the Scripture" because they understood that the resurrection of Jesus was one of the things that had been announced in advance concerning him. The apostle Peter preached to the people of Jerusalem a few weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He said:

"God raised [him] up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. For David says concerning Him: '... For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.'

...Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of

his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses." (Acts 2:24,25,27,29-32)

The apostle Paul, also, placed great emphasis on this miracle. When he preached in the city of Athens, Greece, he said:

"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:30,31)

From the dawn of the first day of the week after the crucifixion, the disciples of Jesus recognized that the tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid was empty. In addition, various people began to testify that Jesus, returned to life, had shown himself to them. First there was Mary Magdalene, then certain other women; next Cleopas and another disciple spoke with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Upon their return to Jerusalem, they learned that Peter was also saying that he had seen the Lord. Finally, Jesus presented himself to ten apostles at one time. Judas has already committed suicide, and Thomas was not with the others. But the ten others were able, that first Sunday evening after the death of Jesus, to speak with him, to touch him and to see him eat so that they would know that he was not a ghost. Other appearances of the resurrected Lord would follow for a period of forty days. These two things fully attest to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth: the empty tomb and the eyewitnesses.

The Empty Tomb

Three days after the crucifixion of Jesus his tomb was found to be empty. This is a well-substantiated historical fact. If the body of Jesus had been in the tomb where it was laid, Christianity would have

been stillborn. Who would have proclaimed Jesus as the living Lord while his corpse was rotting in the grave? No one.

Those who do not want to accept the idea that Jesus rose from the dead have proposed other theories to explain why the body was no longer there.

1. The body stolen by the disciples? Some tell us that the disciples of Jesus stole his body. This was the first explanation offered by the unbelievers. Remember that after the death of Jesus, the Jewish chief priests and the Pharisees had gone before the governor Pilate,

“saying, ‘Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, “After three days I will rise.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, “He has risen from the dead.” So the last deception will be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.’” (Matthew 27:63-65)

So all possible precautions were taken: the tomb was carved out of solid rock; a great stone, weighing at least a ton, was rolled in place to close the entrance to it; the seal of the Roman government was placed on the stone as a warning to anyone who might think of disturbing the grave; and soldiers were posted, according to some experts as many as sixteen men, four of whom would be on guard duty at any given time. According to Roman custom, a soldier caught sleeping while he was supposed to be at his post was to be put to death for his transgression. In spite of all these precautions, some have claimed that the body was stolen.

In Matthew 28:11-15 the Bible tells us what happened after some women saw the Lord:

“Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, ‘Tell them, “His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.” And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.’ So they took the money and did as they were in-

structed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.”

Matthew does not even bother to refute this idea—after all, who can say what happens around him while he is asleep? Besides, all these soldiers would not have dared to go to sleep at the risk of their lives. The disciples would not have had the opportunity to steal the body of Jesus.

If the disciples had been able to steal the body of Jesus, they would have committed the greatest fraud ever carried out. It would also mean they had knowingly lied. But their behavior is not that of deliberate liars: to the contrary, almost all the apostles died for their testimony (and all of them were beaten and imprisoned for it). One would not be willing to undergo that and even give one’s life to uphold what one knew to be a deliberate lie. Not only did they give their own lives rather than retracting their words, but they also knew that many of those who would accept their testimony would also die for having believed. And yet, not one of them renounced his testimony concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

2. The body stolen by the Jewish authorities? A second theory says that the body of Jesus was stolen by his enemies. But this idea is even more unbelievable than the first. The Jewish authorities wanted to put a stop to the preaching of the Christians. They told the apostles: “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine” (Acts 5:28). If they had the body of Jesus, they would have simply been able to produce it and parade it through the streets of Jerusalem. There would have been no need to tell the apostles not to preach—they would have been laughed at. No one would have been converted to Christianity. The fact that the authorities did not produce the corpse of Jesus proves clearly that they had not stolen it.

Let’s be frank: apart from the resurrection, there is no reasonable explanation for the empty tomb of Jesus. But there is another incontrovertible proof of the resurrection:

The Eyewitnesses

Remember that already on the very day of his resurrection, Jesus showed himself to a variety of

people and under a variety of circumstances. The witnesses did not all have the same temperament. There were men and also women who saw him. He showed himself to individuals and to groups. Some of his appearances took place in closed spaces and others out in the open, some in the morning and others at evening.

Notice also that the witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus were not expecting to see him. In spite of the promise that he had made to come back from the dead, it could not be said that the disciples were fervently desiring or hoping for the resurrection. The women who saw him were going to the tomb to embalm a body and not to find a living Lord. When these women came back saying that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, the other disciples made fun of them. Before Jesus made himself known to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 beginning in verse 13, he found them sad and downcast, without any hope, in spite of the testimony they had heard from the women. All of this shows that the appearances of Jesus were not hallucinations or mirages. They were not comparable to the person in the desert who thinks he sees a well-watered oasis surrounded by palm trees, where, in fact, there is nothing but sand. Such visions are not a group activity where everyone sees and hears the same thing. In addition, people who hallucinate generally see something they hope for or desire strongly. And finally, had they been hallucinations, all these appearances would not have suddenly ceased 40 days after the resurrection. But they did stop after 40 days, because Jesus ascended back up to heaven in the sight of his disciples.

The witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus were men and women who knew him very well. They could not have been mistaken about his identity. They were also devout people who were never accused of dishonesty or immorality. They called on others, also, to follow righteousness. If they were deliberately lying, it would be hard to figure out their motivation in doing so. They never gained any material advantages for what they preached. On the contrary, they were persecuted and even killed. If this were a modern trial, no reason would be found to remove them from the jury. Historians find no reason not to accept their writings. Several

historians have solemnly stated that no event in history can be more firmly established than the resurrection of Jesus.

What other prophet announced ahead of time that he would be put to death and would rise from the dead on the third day? More importantly, what other prophet was able to fulfill such a promise?

THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT ONE BELIEVES ABOUT JESUS

Jesus spoke, of course, of faith in God, but no other prophet insisted as he did on himself and the necessity of believing in him. Jesus dared to say that the eternal destiny of each one of us depends on the conclusion that we come to regarding his identity. Does it not seem to you that he must have been more than a prophet? Perhaps the greatest danger for us, whether we be readers of the Bible or of the Qur'an, would be to adopt the attitude that the inhabitants of Nazareth had. When Jesus, having begun his ministry, went to the town where he had grown up, the people were amazed. They were saying:

“Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?’ So they were offended at Him... Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.” (Matthew 13:54-58)

These people thought they already knew who Jesus was. But their conception of him was much too limited. They did not discover his true identity, because they had too many preconceived ideas about him. Their prejudices prevented them from taking advantage of what Jesus would have done for them.

According to Surah 3 – *Al-Imram*, “When Allah said: O Jesus, I will cause thee to die and exalt thee in My presence and clear thee of those who disbelieve and make those who follow thee above those who disbelieve to the day of Resurrection.” If you have not already done so, get a copy of the Gospel and fully discover this one called Jesus.