

THE OPEN TOMB OF JESUS

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THE open tomb of Jesus, which all the gospels report in spite of their many other divergencies concerning the resurrection of Jesus, differences which can never be harmonized, has always been a matter of speculation for those, who can not accept a miraculous supernatural opening of the tomb, especially since the transformed body of Jesus did not need an open tomb according to the Pauline theory, as he expresses it in 1 Cor. XV to the doubters respecting the resurrection in the church at Corinth.

According to Paul's theory the bodies of the dead believers in Christ, as also the bodies of those believers yet living at the time of the consummation of all things, which Paul also hopes to see living according to 1 Thess. 4:17, and other places, will be transformed in the twinkling of an eye into spiritual uncorruptible bodies without any trace of the mortal corruptible, in order to be carried into the clouds to meet the Lord. If the bodies of the believers, analogous to the transformed resurrected body of their Lord, would not be hindered by any law of gravitation to be carried to the skies, naturally no closed tomb would have hindered the transformed body of Jesus to escape the final resting place of his mortal remains.

In that noted chapter addressed to the Corinthian doubters we have the oldest and authentic report on the resurrection story, written only about thirty years after the death of Jesus. Paul gives his report on the basis of what has been delivered to him, probably by Peter and the brother of Jesus, James, whom he met, as he says Gal. vi. 18, for the first time, three years after his conversion. Paul may have had also other sources. Although he speaks of the burial and resurrection of Jesus, he does not mention the open tomb. What he stresses mainly are the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection, which he gives in the following order: first to Kephias

(Peter), then to the twelve, then to 500 brethren at the same time, of which the most were still living up to his time, then to James, then to all the apostles, meaning by this not only the original disciples, but including also such persons, as James, the brother of Jesus, according to Gal. 1:19, where James is called an apostle, finally to Paul himself. As the last appearance, happening several years after the death of Jesus, was apparently a vision, due to the peculiar state of mind, in which Paul then was, and Paul places as much value in it as upon the previously mentioned, we are justified to assume these latter also as being of that character, and as also being brought about by the peculiar state of mind into which the earliest followers of Jesus had been thrown by the unexpected terrifying execution of the master, through which all their hopes seemed to have been shattered, but still coupled with the intense wish and belief, that all was not in vain but that Jesus was still living, even though not in a material body any more, and that he would come again. This firm belief and the wish to see him again brought about the visions. What we wish to see, we see in a transported and agitated state of mind. Even the appearance of Jesus to the five hundred is explainable in this way. Every year at Naples the assembled people, believing in the possibility that the dried blood of saint Januarius will become fluid again in the vial containing it, sees this happen at the fixed hour, carried away by repeated prayers in their self-hypnotized state of mind. All religions, even the highest and purest, Christianity included, have started by visions, which were as real to the founders, experiencing them, as any experience in material life. We might almost call visions the necessary forms of religious revelation, at least in antiquity. And as to the continued existence of their leaders after death, other religions were as firmly convinced of this, as the first followers of Jesus were of his continued existence, though crucified. The Shiitic Mohammedans, i. e. the followers of Ali, the son-in-law of Mohammed, believed firmly, that Mohammed the Holy, the seventh descendant of Ali, was not dead, but that he will once come again from his subterranean concealment as the true *Mahdi* (Messiah).

Though Paul speaks of the mentioned appearances of Jesus, as told to him, it is very questionable though whether he had heard of those materialistic appearances in flesh and bone, which already make a faint beginning in Matthew 28, 9, and then come out strongly

in Luke and the fourth gospel. It is very significant that the later the gospels are in point of time, the more materialized the appearances become. We must not forget that all the gospels are much later than Paul. Still even the oldest gospel, Mark, speaks only in a very general way, even the later addition to it (XVI, 9-20), of the appearances. It is also questionable, whether Paul had heard the story of the open tomb. But though he does not mention it, this does not mean, that he did not hear the story. Probably he knew it, but being of less importance and of less convincing power to the Corinthian doubters in comparison with the many appearances of Jesus, Paul did not give it any place. He may have accepted the open tomb as being an external miraculous testimony and symbol to the first followers that their master was risen. Still even in spite of the open tomb, all the gospels tell us that there was much doubt and unbelief in the first circles about the resurrection, till they were convinced of the living master by his appearances.

If then there were doubts among the first disciples about a resurrection of Jesus with flesh and bone, which an open tomb would presuppose, provided it was brought about by a miraculous supernatural event and not by natural causes, though these doubters surely did not disbelieve in a continued existence of the spirit and soul of Jesus beyond death, because such an existence was a general belief in antiquity, as is yet today, and if the doubters in Corinth very probably also only doubted a materialistic resurrection of the body, it is not astonishing that ever since a sceptical attitude has been always evinced with many concerning the open tomb. The question always arose: Was the opening of the tomb not due perhaps to natural causes?

According to Matthew (the second gospel in time) the Jewish enemies of the first Christians already at the time of the composition of the gospel declared, that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus and interred it elsewhere, and then spread the report that he had risen. This was answered by the Christian legend, that the stealing was not possible, as the tomb had been guarded on the suggestion of the priests.

The possibility of the body being taken out of the tomb by someone and laid elsewhere is even hinted at in the latest gospel. The unknown writer of the second century pictures Mary Magdalene as believing that the body of Jesus had been taken from the tomb. She suspects the gardener of the garden, where the tomb was

according to the fertile imagination of the writer. This opinion of the Magdalene, that the body had been laid somewhere else by somebody seems peculiar in a gospel like the fourth, which relates the story of the resurrection of Lazarus already in a state of decomposition, the greatest of all miracles of the gospels, even going beyond the resurrection of Jesus. But if we consider that this gospel was written on the principle of the words spoken to the unbelieving Thomas: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed," the opinion of the Magdalene is not so strange. The fourth gospel was intended not only as a rebuke to the Jews who were not even convinced of the godship of Jesus by the resurrection of Lazarus, thus substantiating the words in the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus in Luke, upon the basis of which the writer of the fourth gospel formed his symbolic story of the resurrected Lazarus: "If they do not believe Moses and the prophets, they will not believe if any one is raised from the dead," but also as a rebuke to the christian *Docetae*. These believed either, that the redeeming *aeon* (an emanation from the supreme Deity) only entered into a temporary connection with the historical human Jesus at the time of his baptism and left him at his death; or that the earthly Jesus only was the appearance of the heavenly redeemer, who had to assume a body to become visible, or finally the whole appearance of Christ, his birth and his life was only semblance. To such a doctrine, the belief in a bodily resurrection, which required an open tomb, was not necessary. It may, by the way, be remarked that Paul's theory of the heavenly Christ coming down on earth, was dangerously near to the first of these three docetic views. To the *Docetae* therefore it must not have been of any importance, whether the body of Jesus remained in a closed tomb or whether it was taken from it by some natural cause.

On the assumption that the open tomb was a fact, different theories have been proposed by those averse to a miraculous supernatural opening of the tomb.

The theory of the stealing of the body by the disciples was again renewed in modern times by Reimarus in the eighteenth century in the *Wolfenbuettler Fragmente* edited by Lessing. But it is a very clumsy one. The disciples were not in a state of mind upon the terrifying blow of the execution of Jesus, which scattered them in all directions, to do such an act. Besides a religion of the highest order in its essentials and of the loftiest morality like Christianity

could not have started with a low and at the same time clumsy fraud.

Another assumption was that Jesus had only been apparently dead, since he died so quickly, while the death on the cross was a very slow death. It is pointed out, that Josephus reports in his *Life* a case of one of his friends crucified by the Romans, who was saved to life again on the permission of Titus by the assistance of doctors. But this theory of an apparent death of Jesus, and that, when he awakened from it, he left the tomb and was seen for a short time again by the disciples, suffered under the drawback, besides being extremely doubtful, that such a Christ, who lived an earthly life again for a while, could never match the vision of an exalted glorified Christ with all that it implied for the believer.

Another theory, upon which the writer hit himself, is that the tomb was opened by an earthquake, the stone closing the tomb, having been moved from its position. Such things have happened in historical earthquakes; graves were opened by them. And Palestine has always been subjected to earthquakes. A very great one occurred during the reign of Herod the Great, as Josephus tells us. Upon this theory the body of Jesus would have become a prey to hyenas, who live in old ruins and caverns, and roam about in packs. But the earthquakes at the death of Jesus and on the morning of the resurrection, of which Matthew tells us, are probably only poetical embellishments, since there are many extraordinary natural phenomena reported as having taken place at the birth and death of great men in antiquity. And thus this theory has very little basis.

Another theory is, that Joseph of Arimathea had put the body of Jesus only temporarily in the tomb and that he secretly laid the body somewhere else, for the reason of not being compromised in public opinion by having in his tomb an executed man, who was considered accursed according to the Mosaic law. But it is only Matthew, who says the tomb was Joseph's. And if it was Joseph's, we should expect, that a man who braved public opinion by daring to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus, as Mark tells us, would not have cared further on to brave public opinion by leaving the body, where he laid it. Besides we must also not forget, that the author of Matthew very probably wrongly attributed the tomb to Joseph on the basis of Is. 53:9, where it is said "the grave of the servant of Yahve was made with the rich," because he calls Joseph

a rich man. None of the gospels applies Old Testament passages to Jesus and his work so frequently as Matthew, and often very wrongly, even absurdly, as in the case of the ass and the colt at the entry of Jesus in Jerusalem, showing that he did not understand Hebrew phraseology at all. It is likewise so in regard to the mentioned Isaiah passage. In that passage in the original Hebrew "wicked" and "rich" mean the same, because the rich were considered as overweening and violent. Thus the tomb, in which Jesus was laid, was very likely not Joseph's at all. The garden with the tomb in the fourth gospel does not count. That gospel has little historical worth but is purely speculative and symbolic.

Another theory of mine is the following. Up to modern times the superstition has existed that a special healing and conjuring power attaches to the remains of an executed person. This opinion rests upon the idea of sacrifice. The executed is an appeasing sacrifice to the avenging and justice seeking spirits. If human sacrifices have the power to appease some deity, their remains must also be of value otherwise, to conjure with. Sacrifice always partakes, according to ancient opinion, of the nature of the powers to which it is offered, it has miraculous power. Hecate, the Greek goddess of the underworld, was supposed to teach sorcery and witchcraft. The blood of an executed criminal was believed to cure the falling sickness, likewise the fat was especially valuable. The witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* make use of it. In the reign of James I of England (1603-25) in consequence of his work on *Daemonologie*, one of the acts of parliament was: "That if any person shall take up any dead man, woman or child out of the grave, or the skin, bone or any part of the dead person, to be employed or used in any manner of witchcraft, sorcery or charm or enchantment, such a person being convicted shall suffer death." If such practices existed in antiquity, may it not have been possible, that the Roman soldiery, recruited at that time to a great extent from barbaric peoples, and who attended to the crucifixion of Jesus and had to remove the other malefactors from the cross before nightfall, according to Jewish law, that no criminal was to hang overnight, Deut. XXI, 1-23, rifled the tomb of Jesus, especially because he was a distinguished criminal in their eyes? They perhaps disposed of his corpse otherwise.

Finally I offer a theory, which is perhaps the most plausible of all. Pilate, according to Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, and

Josephus, was a man, on the one side cruel, unjust, insolent, corrupt, rapacious, obstinate and trickish, continually having to do with tumults of his subjects brought about by disregarding the customs of the Jews and insulting them, on the other side he was at times yielding, timid and full of fear of losing his governorship, which he did finally on the complaints of the Jews and Samaritans. Though he knew that the Jews objected to having the imperial ensigns with the image of the Roman eagle or that of the emperor within Jerusalem, claiming their law forbade images in the holy city, he brought these ensigns at night into the city. Former governors had avoided this vexation. When the stealthy act came out and a tumult arose, he finally yielded and removed the ensigns. In the matter of Jesus we also see him yielding to the hierarchy, because his conscience was not free otherwise, though it surely vexed him to be drawn into a religious question of the Jews. He took his revenge by his inscription over the head of Jesus, an insult to the Jews. Probably he was glad when the whole affair was over and Jesus was dispatched. But when Joseph of Arimathia asked for the body of Jesus, to give him a decent burial, Pilate saw that the Nazarene had perhaps more adherents, than expected and that his tomb would perhaps become honored by his followers. Such a thing might renew the trouble about Jesus. Pilate may therefore have given secret orders to his officers to remove the body by night to another place, in order to forestall all further trouble.

We do not claim to have solved the question of the open tomb. But we must not forget that sometimes very insignificant things, which came about in a very natural way, have been the cause of starting important things, which were in the air, in human history and to hurry them on. The work which Jesus had begun, would not have been in vain, even if his tomb would have remained closed. The belief that Jesus was still living and not dead and that he would come again in glory, just as in the case of the aforementioned Mohammed the Holy and similar other cases of Messiahs in history, did not depend on the open tomb, but the open tomb, if it was a fact, and the mysterious disappearance of the body of Jesus perhaps gave the movement started more impetus.

Antiquity was ripe for a new religion. Much of the old religions had outlived itself. Many new cults and philosophical and religious brotherhoods had started which promised to answer questions, which the old religious forms did not answer. Christianity

was not the only new religion and brotherhood, but it overcame its rivals, in spite of still much admixture of ancient mythical and superstitious thought, by its faith in a redeemer, who was not mythical like Mithra and other such redeemers of new cults, but who had actually lived as a human personality and who had given an example, that he did not come "to rule and lord it over," whether like the hierarchy, who brought him to trial, or like the tool of secular authority, who acted as his executioner, but who had come to serve and be faithful in this service unto death. About that personality a community gathered who strove to put into practice all that was best in antiquity, whether it was taught by Pagan or Hebrew teachers and prophets, a brotherhood, in which there was to be neither Greek nor Jew, neither freeman nor bondsman, neither master nor slave, neither man nor woman but all one in Christ. And to such an ideal of a new humanity as expressed in these words of Paul, his vision long after the death of Jesus, and his gnostic, metaphysical, mythical view of a "heavenly Christ," or a "heavenly," "second man," the ideal man, in distinction from the first man, coming down upon earth and dwelling in the human Jesus, has contributed more than the open tomb.