

Pass Over “The Passover Plot”

Pass Over “The Passover Plot” June 9, 2003 by Jason Jackson

For some twenty centuries critics of the Bible have sought to discredit the scriptural narrative regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. These efforts have all been characterized by a similarly frustrated and futile line of baseless argument. One such endeavor in recent decades was Hugh J. Schonfield’s infamous, *The Passover Plot*. In this weeks Penpoints, Jason Jackson reminds us of this anemic enterprise.

Many of the world’s religions revolve around a person, and such persons are now entombed. These shrines are visited by interested followers to this day. Only Christianity claims the resurrection of its founder, and only Christ claimed to be the Son of God in the flesh. Therein, Christianity stands distinct from all other religions.

Either Christ was raised from the dead, or he was not. If Christ arose from the dead, then his words were verified—he is the exclusive way to the Father (John 14:6). He is the Son of God, he is the Redeemer, and he will judge the living and dead (Acts 17:31). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the test for the veracity of Christianity (cf. Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:13-15).

Within theological circles, discussions abound on the meaning of the resurrection. There are theological implications connected with the resurrection for sure. But the fact of the Lord’s resurrection is an historical matter. The tomb was empty, or it was not. Christ arose from the dead, or he did not.

The church of Christ was founded upon the conviction that Christ was raised from the dead (Acts 4:10-12). Were these duped disciples, or were they diabolical deceivers? The New Testament presents the earliest disciples as believing in the fact of the resurrected Christ, which historical event was the center of their preaching. Accordingly, R.A. Torrey says, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ is mentioned directly 104 or more times in the New Testament” (*What the Bible Teaches*. 1898. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998, p. 159).

We live, however, in a time when the certitude of the resurrection is questioned, even by many so-called theologians. A new breed was propagated by the liberal schools of biblical destruction, beginning in the nineteenth century. This breed does not quack, walk, or swim like a duck, but it still wants to be identified as a duck. The descendents of destructiveism supposedly father a conviction in the real Jesus while setting us free from “fairy dust called faith” (Hugh Schonfield. *The Passover Plot*. New York: Bantam, 1967, p. 41).

William Woodson surveys the development of this kind of cut and paste treatment of the Bible. He writes: “A primary focus of modernism was its view of Scripture as judged by reason, guided by evolution, and revised in its nature and authority. Biblical criticism, in the hands of German and English scholars, went far beyond efforts to ascertain the most accurate text of Scripture (‘lower criticism’) and proceeded to declare what the writers intended to say, as well as the historical causes that accounted for the development of Scripture” (“Modernism.” *The Spiritual Sword*. Vol. 33. Num. 3, Apr., 2002. Memphis: Getwell Church of Christ, p. 21-22).

How is this liberation from the text of Scripture to be accomplished? Hugh Schonfield shows the way in his infamous tale, *The Passover Plot*. Schonfield wrote:

“To reach conclusions which can fairly be regarded as corresponding as nearly as possible to the reality entails a vast amount of analysis and comparisons, the patient piecing together of a host of hints and scraps of tradition, and in particular a sympathetic involvement in the affairs of the Jewish people and detachment from considerations of Christian theology” (p. 11).

And who do you suppose is going to help us scrape and piece together by vast analyses and comparisons? Mr. Hugh Schonfield. He alleged, “If they [people] depend entirely on the New Testament they cannot form a correct judgement of Jesus” (p. 5). “The authors,” of the New Testament, he claimed, “had to write up their subject with rather meagre resources of documentation and living recollection” (p. 6). Schonfield maintained, “Actually we are better placed now than they [the New Testament writers]” (p. 6).

So Mr. Schonfield will take a book which “fathered a myth,” that should not be considered “wholly fictitious,” and he will help us “ferret out” the “hints and scraps” in order to “dispell … the mists through which the figure much larger than life looms before us in the Gospels” (p. 43).

It appears that Mr. Schonfield intends to use a little fairy dust of his own in his “quest” for the historical Jesus. We discover common ground when Schonfield writes, “We are nowhere claiming for our reconstruction that it represents what actually happened” (p. 165). He goes on to say that “on the evidence” it may be

close to the truth.

We concur that it does not represent what actually happened—;not even close.

Here is Mr. Schonfield's telling presupposition. He opined:

"Our minds are confused by the matter of fact manner of narration. The presentation of what takes place does not distinguish at all between the factual and the legendary, and no criteria are provided to enable us to separate the one from the other. We feel this to be grossly unfair, an imposition on our credulity."

"But we have been persuaded, quite wrongly and in complete disregard of the nature of spiritual folklore, that what is set down in the Bible is to be received as true in the literal and absolute sense of being the very word of God" (p. 41).

Talk about an imposition. Mr. Schonfield argues that since the New Testament contains "the legendary" it is spiritual folklore. How do we know it is folklore? Because it contains the legendary.

The Passover Plot illustrates every argument that tries to naturally explain the empty tomb. Whether the theory is: the disciples stole the body, the enemies stole the body, Joseph of Arimathea took the body, the women went to the wrong tomb, Jesus revived having merely "swooned" on the cross, every conjecture about the empty tomb has a common denominator. They all deny what the text really says. They all make claims that cannot square with the text. They all presuppose the New Testament documents to be unreliable, but loftily claim to discern a reliable reconstruction from unreliable sources.

Here is an amazing fact. The New Testament record is so powerful; it is so influential, it must be dealt with. And of all the denials and intimations, there is one detail that is unavoidable and unassailable. Wilbur Smith made the observation in the following words:

"No man has ever written, pro or con, on the subject of Christ's Resurrection, without finding himself compelled to face this problem of Joseph's empty tomb" (Therefore Stand. Boston: W.A. Wilde Co., 1945, p. 346-47).

The empty tomb is an historical fact, and all attempts to "demythologize" the New Testament record are, when scrutinized, the most pitiful ramblings of pitiful men.

Could it be that the New Testament writers display a "matter of fact manner of narration" because they told what happened? Could it be that the New Testament documents were products of eyewitnesses, just as they claim, and not the result of a second century "ancient zeal" that "fathered a myth"?

What looms is the question indelibly burned into the annals of history. "What happened to the body of Jesus?" There are two lines of evidence that demonstrate Christ's resurrection. First, there is the empty tomb. Second, there is the testimony of witnesses to whom the risen Christ appeared. We will presently deal with the evidence of the empty tomb.

Concerning the empty tomb, no one stole the body. The Roman guards were posted at the grave to prevent anyone from stealing the body. This presents an unavoidable obstacle in any body-snatching theory. Schonfield inadvertently concedes that the Roman guards present an insurmountable problem for resurrection theories, when he said, "We can dismiss" Matthew's account of the guards because of the "fantastic details" (The Passover Plot, p. 163). How convenient! Dismiss the evidence. Dismiss the text because it does not conform to the preconceived theory. What documentation is presented? What proof is offered? Absolutely none.

The enemies did not steal the body, for they had no motive. They surely would have produced it in order to discredit apostolic preaching. The disciples did not, for they were in no mood to steal it, had no motive to take it, certainly had no opportunity with the presence of as many as fifteen or sixteen Roman soldiers at Joseph's tomb, and they would not have experienced a radical change from depressed men to dedicated martyrs. (Rex A. Turner, Sr. Systematic Theology. Montgomery: Alabama Christian School of Religion, 1989, p. 216).

Christ's resurrection is attested by the empty tomb in that the women found it empty, Peter and John found it empty, the angels said it was empty, the Roman guards terrifyingly declared it to be empty, the chief priests believed it was empty, the grave clothes were evidence that it was empty—and even modern skeptics reluctantly agree, it was found empty.

Within walking distance of Joseph's tomb, only weeks later, Peter confidently affirmed, "...God raised up [Jesus], having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible that he should be holden

of it …. This Jesus did God raise up whereof we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:24, 32).

And 3,000 souls believed that day (Acts 2:37-42).

Concerning the anti-supernatural bias that is manifested towards the Old Testament and New Testament alike, Oswald T. Allis appropriately wrote:
“Is it any wonder that massive volumes have to be written and oceans of ink spilled in the attempt to make the Bible say exactly the opposite of what it does say? Is it any wonder that the critics find it difficult to find a satisfactory and edifying explanation for what they believe to have been a deliberate falsification of history, a ‘pious fraud’” (The Old Testament: Its Claims and Its Critics. N.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972, p. 6).

The resurrection stands or falls on the reliability of the New Testament record. It unequivocally affirms the resurrection of Christ. If the basis of denying the resurrection is that “miracles do not happen,” then one might as well affirm that the universe does not exist. Denying the resurrection falls into the same category as denying the existence of God and the creation of the universe. If we are going to base our conclusions on evidence, we must affirm them all. If one chooses to deny one or all, any argument will do.

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