

# THE STONE MOVER

by Jim Davies

The Christian religion is founded on the beliefs that (a) God exists, as the creator of the universe who takes a close interest in the human race, and that (b) Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth who lived 2,000 years ago in what is now Israel, was the manifestation of that God upon Earth. This divinity of Jesus is the cornerstone of the faith; it says Jesus **was** the creator, in human form.

The evidence for the existence of God as in (a) is varied; Kepler observed the stars and concluded he was "thinking God's thoughts after" Him - that's one expression of the "argument from design". It's taken a beating since Darwin discovered another explanation for design in living things, and since 20th Century cosmologists have modeled the oscillating "Big Bang" theory of the universe. But it's still there. Many other arguments too have been advanced, on both sides.

Some who argue for a creator say that what we call "evolution" is a process that he designed in the first place. The French biochemist Jacques Monod responded to that to point out that if he did, he did a lousy job; for the *mechanism* of evolution is random (apparently mutations occur when cosmic particles collide with a DNA molecule) and cruel (mutants survive if they are suited to

their environment but die of starvation if not.) Monod contrasted randomness and cruelty with the biblically asserted attributes of wisdom and loving kindness.

Such cruelty and contrast are evident at the macro, not just the micro level; canine teeth form, to my mind, powerful reasons to reject the notion of a benevolent God. If God designed graceful and beautiful animals that can survive only by terrifying, killing and eating other graceful and beautiful animals, He is by no means benevolent; or if benevolent, then He is not their Creator. Jews and Christians try to escape this logical trap by saying that mankind, created with free will, chose to "fall" into sin and that fall somehow infected the rest of creation; an argument whose slender merits dissolve completely in the fact that carnivores existed millions of years before humans did. And so the debate continues.

Probably the most powerful argument for (a) is (b) itself; that is, if we conclude that the claim in (b) - that Jesus was God - is true, then it follows that (a) must also be true. And without doubt, the life story of that man is remarkable to the point of being unique. If (b) were not found correct, (a) still might be so, but then one must revert to non-Christian religions and none of them come close to Christianity in terms of the interpretation of the universe that they propose.

Many feel that Jesus' deity is proved by his life, death and resurrection.

First, his life was exemplary beyond any other human being in history. Nobody could find any fault with his character. When his enemies brought accusations at trial, all they could say was that he claimed to be the Messiah; a claim which was either true or else blasphemous in their law; they argued for the latter, and had him executed. This "blameless life" argument is powerful.

Second, during his 3-year ministry he performed a number of well-attested miracles. Food was multiplied from a few loaves and fishes to feed a crowd of 5,000 followers; water at a wedding was changed into wine; Lazarus, three days in his grave, was called out alive, and a blind man was made to see. These are claims made by the Gospel writers, and are hard to explain unless Jesus had a most unusual set of talents, at the least. Proof of divinity? - probably not, for many have performed "healing miracles" not easily disproven, and of course we're dealing with documents which may, over time, have been embellished.

Third, he foretold his own death and linked it with the old prophecies in the Torah of the death of the Messiah; and it happened as he said. This, too, is hardly convincing on its own. Many a claimant can point to aspects of his life and death which correspond to some old and imprecise prediction.

Fourth, although Jesus led a blameless life, he did make astonishing claims for himself which are, if untrue, in no

way consistent with that virtue. While not standing on a soap box and announcing "I am God", he did point his closest followers to that conclusion and praised them when they reached it. The claim was made quietly and subtly, but very firmly. He obviously believed himself to be divine, and so taught; therefore, he was either (i) deluded, like all other such claimants, or (ii) correct. Unique in that his life was otherwise blameless, alternative (ii) is strongly implied.

And fifth, and by far the most important of all, after crucifixion he is said to have risen from the dead; an event unique in history. This was the crowning proof and was acknowledged as such by Paul, who wrote in First Corinthians 15 "If Christ be not raised... we are of all men most miserable."

If the resurrection is a proven fact, then so are the two central tenets of Christianity, (a) and (b) as above; further, that since Jesus was God, everything he taught was also accurate and, since one of those things was the authority of the Bible, therefore the Bible is trustworthy. The first four arguments are strong; the fifth would be overwhelming.

## **Evidence for the Resurrection**

The case for the resurrection is as follows.

(i) Jesus' grave was empty, when examined early on the Sunday morning following the Friday crucifixion. The stone at its entrance was moved aside and the grave clothes were neatly placed.

(ii) His close followers claimed to have seen him in risen but bodily form, several times during the following few weeks, before he "ascended into heaven."

(iii) They so firmly and passionately believed he was risen that they preached it vigorously for the rest of their lives, accepting torture and death rather than recanting.

Let's examine this evidence.

Item (ii) can be explained by hallucination. True, the details of the accounts given in the New Testament differ from the experiences of many plain people down the ages, who claim to have interviewed folk who "passed on"; but those details are hard to establish, given that they were written down long after the events. The first appearance occurred right after the tomb had been found empty. The impact of that astonishing news on a group which had, just two days before, been emotionally devastated would have been overwhelming; fertile ground indeed for group hallucination. Other appearances are said to have been made to "thousands" at a time; a

claim we can compare with such stories as the appearance of Mary at Fatima. Mass suggestibility, call it what we may, all these tales lack the essential element of objectivity.

As to item (iii), assuredly, the disciples **believed** they had seen the risen Jesus, but that does not prove they were right. Manifestations of dead persons are relatively common in history and are not restricted to the "spiritualist" religions; the stories and claims may be true or false but they certainly aren't unique.

Therefore, we are back to item (i), the empty grave - and that is good, for item (i) is concerned with objective facts and witnesses, and the cold light of day rather than the inner workings of intensely stressed, passionate minds and emotions.

### **So: who moved the stone and the body, and why?**

If no rational answer can be found to that question, the supernatural one must prevail; **however if a rational one can be found, then it must prevail.** The onus is not on me to prove that a rational explanation of the known facts did actually occur, but on the supernaturalist to prove *it could not have occurred*; for it is he who claims "the only explanation is that Jesus rose from the dead."

We need not question the broad-brush account given in the Gospels, of the facts of the matter. The interpretation put on those facts is of course another question, but we

can accept that what the Gospels say is an honest record of sincere writers. So there is no need to doubt that the grave was found empty, that the body was missing and never discovered, that the grave-clothes were left as described.

There are five kinds of people who might conceivably have done the moving.

1. The disciples
2. The Jewish leaders
3. The Roman Governor
4. Jesus, recovering from injury
5. Someone else, unknown to history

It's rather clear that **(1)** must be false. There is no way those ardent preachers would continue preaching a known falsehood even in the face of torture and death. That explanation just has no legs.

Possibly, **option (5)** might be true; an unknown grave robber might have noticed that Jesus' body was being placed in a premium grave (Joseph's) and, during the Saturday night, entered the grave while the soldiers were asleep (as they later confessed) and, finding no jewelry they took the whole body for closer scrutiny elsewhere. Finding none, they disposed of it in some unknown place.

There are two problems with this explanation: firstly, they would have no reason to leave the grave-clothes tidily or even remove them at all. And secondly, such robbers

would not be able to manhandle the body past two guards without waking them; so, if unable to do their work quietly inside the tomb, they would give up and leave.

Might such grave-robbers have done their work during the *Friday* night, while the grave was unguarded? - yes, possibly; but I presume that the Roman soldiers, as professionals, would take the elementary precaution at the start of their shift of making certain that the body they were to guard was still in place on the Saturday evening. So that too is not credible.

**Option (4)**, popular in the Muslim world, holds that Jesus never actually died on the cross but was merely badly injured and made unconscious; that during the second night in the cool of the tomb he managed to recover, unwrap his own grave clothes à la Houdini, roll the heavy stone away without the guards noticing, and sit to recover nearby until Mary arrived early Sunday morning.

That is absurd, and is mentioned here only for completeness. First, the Roman executioners knew their job and would not remove a crucified body without being sure it was properly dead; and John 19:34 reports that "one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water", both; indicating death had occurred. Then Mary his mother caressed the body, and it's not credible that she wouldn't make sure. If he then appeared to his disciples he would have shown unmistakable signs of utter exhaustion, none



of which are mentioned in that part of the text. None of them could have mistaken his weakened condition for a triumphant conquest over death and therefore none could have gone on to preach a risen Christ with a certainty that bore them through martyrdom, as in (1) above. This "explanation" is legless.

So now to **option (2)**; the Jews. They would not wish the grave to become an object of veneration, a nucleus around which the new religion could grow and displace them. So maybe they removed the body to forestall that possibility.

That too does not fly. As soon as the preaching began, the theme was strong: "This Jesus, whom you crucified, God hath raised from the dead, whereof we are all witnesses!" (Acts 3:15) - and the preacher pointed to the empty grave. To throttle the new religion, all the priests had to do was to produce the body. They did not. The only credible reason for them not doing so was: they couldn't.

That leaves **option (3)**: the Romans, under Governor Pilate. Might he have ordered the body removed? What motive and opportunity did he have?

It's surprising that nobody I'm aware of has ever suggested that he had the job done. He obviously had the opportunity: soldiers under his command were in charge of the grave during the whole of Saturday night. When they took charge the entrance stone was in place; when Sunday dawned, it was moved aside and the body was

gone. They had no coherent explanation, except that they fell asleep and that Jesus' followers stole the body; but see the above demolition of explanation (1). So, clearly, Pilate **could** have done it, easily. But, did he have any reason to do it?

### **Pilate Did It: Why and How**

I perceive **two motives** - a general background motive that amplified the specific one but would not have sufficed on its own, and a specific one.

Pilate's **general motive** was to help keep the nation he was trying to rule *divided*, so that factions would squabble among themselves but not unite against Rome in an insurrection, which was always a possibility.

A modern parallel can be seen in 2005 Iraq. There is some widespread resentment there against American occupation, but the most savage terrorism happens between two factions of Islam - Sunni and Shia - who need no US encouragement to hate each other. Imagine the burden borne by US occupiers if, instead, both were united by a determination to drive out Americans!

So among other ways to maintain his authority Pilate would constantly watch for a way to *divide the Jews, so as to subdue them* - a Macchiavellian trick. Thus on the Thursday and Friday of the crucifixion, he tried hard to get Jesus released; partly no doubt because he found him innocent and impressive and no threat to Rome, and

wanted to be just - but also because he could see Jesus had a sizable following and was (obviously, since they wanted him dead) a serious threat to the Jewish leaders; and so would serve Roman interests by undermining their authority. But, as the record shows, they outwitted him.

Their success was so humiliating as to furnish his **specific motive: revenge** for that humiliation. A spiteful, petty, childish revenge, from a man whose responsibilities exceeded his abilities. There are several incidents on record to show that Pilate had been promoted above the level of his natural skills and maturity; he was tactless and clumsy when dealing with those he was appointed to govern.

So here, on the Friday, he had been bitterly and publicly humiliated by the Jewish leadership. After trying Jesus he attempted to acquit him; they changed his mind by implying a threat to spread the word that he was less than loyal to his Caesar. Then after he tried to release Jesus as a customary gesture of Passover goodwill, they worked the crowd so well that he had to release the robber Barabbas instead. He had already concluded Jesus was innocent, perhaps remarkable; but he had been publicly manipulated into ordering his execution anyway. By the Friday afternoon, he would be smarting under that humiliation and possibly suffering a bad conscience, and already he expressed his frustration and desire to "hit back" at his humiliators by posting on the cross that the man he'd just executed was "King of the Jews"; words

intended to scorn not so much the victim (with whom he'd clearly said he had no quarrel) as the leaders who had caused his death. It asserted that Rome and its governor were still supreme; that here was hanging the Jewish king, by his order - so that when pressed by his adversaries to soften the wording to "*he said* he was King..." Pilate curtly refused: "What I have written, I have written."

I speculate that during the Saturday, he sulked and ruminated about how he could further restore the balance in the game of wits; how he could cheat the Jews and show them he was still superior, still in charge.

The answer reached him that afternoon, when a delegation came from the very people who had embarrassed him the previous day: they asked for a guard to be placed on the tomb "lest his disciples steal him away" and make their situation worse than it was before (Matt 27:64) - and implied that it would be worse for *him* too, as it might make him seem to be endorsing a rival to Caesar - not a King, but a God! That threat misfired, though, since Rome cared nothing for fine points of provincial religions and since he had already shown he was unworried on that score by his triple attempt the previous day to set Jesus free; an unconcern well justified by subsequent history, for no revolution followed the discovery of the empty tomb.

So, he learned then that Jesus had predicted his

resurrection on the third day, and the priests told him that to forestall any funny business they needed a guard overnight.

He answered briefly "You have a guard." That is, curiously, ambiguous - not only in English but in the original Greek. He could have meant "You have your own, temple guard, go and use that, don't bother me." Or he could have meant, "Okay, you've got a guard, I'll make arrangements."

All the commentators I could find thought that the second was the most likely. Certainly, the second type of guard was possible. Conclusion so far: Pilate was asked to place on the tomb a Roman guard on the Saturday night, and did so.

The delegation left, and then he resumed his rumination, and it hit him: he could use this newly-requested guard to gain his revenge! They had just told him they would be acutely embarrassed if the body disappeared. Fine; so he would make it disappear! The new religion would then probably prosper, the humiliators would be humiliated, and the division among his subjects would grow wider.

So he called in two of his most trusted, sober, reliable soldiers and gave them orders and a promise:

"During the night, open the grave, unwrap the body of Jesus so that it looks as if it passed through the clothes, as a spirit. Remove it, dispose

of it in the desert or somewhere else it will never be found. Then return to your post, leave the stone aside, and confess to having fallen asleep.

"Do this well, and I'll put you on the next ship home to Rome. And you are never, ever, to tell anyone of what actually happened."

And that is exactly what did happen, and why.

The soldiers did their job, kept their mouths shut, went back to Rome and were never heard from again. The disciples found the empty tomb, never guessed what had actually happened, and spread the new religion. The Jewish leaders gnashed their teeth, but kept them closed because they realized they had been outwitted by Pilate and were not about to admit that. Pilate took pleasure in his revenge and in his postponement of a Jewish insurrection - for 37 years - and passed on in due course to other assignments, and eventually died.

All the main participants in the events of that weekend behaved exactly in accord with their known characters. Nothing supernatural took place. This explanation for the empty tomb is perfectly rational; Pilate had it done. But the course of human history was changed for ever.

## Conclusion

The first part of this article reviews five arguments for the deity of Jesus and names one - his alleged resurrection - as the most critical. If that is proven, his deity is proven; and if he was God, then God exists.

I have shown that it is not proven. So the question arises: is the converse true? Yes, I think it is, for the Bible makes astounding claims - that the whole universe came about by the intelligent purpose of a supreme being who is not detectable by any of our five senses, and the more extreme the claim, the more rigorous must be the proof of its veracity - yet there is no proof at all! Further, as we saw in the words of Paul quoted above, the resurrection is said to be a certain fact and we have now seen that it's no such thing.

My simple conclusion is therefore that, like all the others and however sincerely it is believed and however gracious are its believers, the Christian religion is just an elaborate myth. The simple reality is that the universe just *exists* as we can all observe, with origins and development determined not by the design of a mythical, anthropomorphic Supreme Being but instead by the totally marvelous operation of random chance; and with a future that lies largely in the hands of individual, self-owning, intelligent human beings.

What an awesome responsibility, and what an awesome opportunity!