

## **JFK and Jesus: Historical Records and Reasoning**

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In his article, The Gospel Truth? (Tufts Daily, 4/25/95), Ananda Gupta sets out to "show that the parts of the bible pertaining to the resurrection are not good history, and that such re-examination of belief is necessary for Christians who had previously relied on the bible's reputation as historical record." However, in his attempts, Gupta displays a very weak grasp of both the historical records and historical reasoning behind the resurrection of Jesus.

Gupta bases his argument on what he calls "a typical standard for reliable history -- consistency." Applying this standard of consistency to the Gospel accounts, he concludes the documents are "revealed to be conflicting, confusing set of stories, from which it is hard to glean anything at all consistent." He asserts such a definitive conclusion by citing three specific differences in the Gospel accounts. First, do the disciples visiting the tomb actually meet the resurrected Jesus? According to Gupta, in the books of Matthew and John, they do; in the books of Mark and Luke, they don't. Second, he claims the exact composition of the visiting group is not clear, although he concedes Mary Magdalene is in each account. Third, the Gospels differ over whether men or angels were at the tomb and how many of the men/angels were present.

The most immediate problem with Gupta's evidence, however, is that different accounts do not necessarily equal contradictory accounts. Suppose four cars collide in a busy intersection. The event would most certainly produce at least four different accounts which select different details to include or omit, depending on the different vantage points involved, the "point" each is making, each one's personal storytelling style, etc. So, Matthew and John report encounters with Jesus at the tomb. Mark cuts off his story before either of those occurrences would have happened (mainly for stylistic reasons, as most scholars agree). Luke chooses a condensed version of the scene at the tomb which does omit reference to Jesus at the tomb, preferring instead to highlight other post-resurrection encounters with Jesus omitted by the other writers. However, neither Mark nor Luke deny that Jesus appeared to the women at the tomb. None of the accounts actually contradict each other. In fact they concur overwhelmingly in all the important characters involve: chronology, location, even specific dialogue. Moreover, as any scholar of myths will know, such consistency in the reported historical details sharply distinguishes the Gospels from the mythology genre that Gupta claims they are.

Indeed, the different -- though not inconsistent -- accounts of the Gospels are crucial to their authenticity as true history. Even outright but minor inconsistencies point to the reliability of eyewitness accounts. Hans Stier, a German classical historian, notes that if the biblical accounts of the resurrection "were the fabrication of a congregation or of a similar group of people, then the tale would be consistently and obviously complete. For that reason every historian is especially skeptical at that moment when an extraordinary happening is only reported in accounts which are completely free of contradictions."

Gupta himself unknowingly demonstrates this reasoning with his second claim, "the exact

composition of the group that goes to the tomb is not clear [although] Mary Magdalene is in each account." First of all, none of the Gospels claim to present an exhaustive list of names of people who make the trip. Indeed, the accounts make clear different people made different trips at different times (Luke 24:12; John 20:1-8). However, the names that are specifically mentioned for the first trip are all consistent: they are women, with Mary Magdalene figuring prominently in all accounts, as Gupta concedes. This consistent detail is again significant for distinguishing the male, Jewish authors of Gospels from myth makers or fabricators. As Boston College professor of literature Peter Kreeft, reminds us: "In first century Judaism, women had low social status and no legal right to serve as witnesses. If the empty tomb were an invented legend, its inventors surely would not have had it discovered by women, whose testimony was considered worthless. If, on the other hand, the writers were simply reporting what they saw, they would have to tell the truth, however socially and legally inconvenient."

There exists a considerable amount of research on the historical records surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. They range from the classic, Who Moved the Stone, by Frank Morrison, (an atheist lawyer who examined the evidence and had to conclude that Jesus actually did rise from the dead) to a very interesting debate in 1987 between Christian and atheist philosophers, Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? John Wenham's book, Easter Enigma: Do the Resurrection Stories Contradict One Another? is devoted to resolving to the kind of differences Gupta believes are so critical. Had he examined the literature, he would have discovered a very possible answer to his third piece of alleged contradiction -- whether angels or men and how many of each were present at the tomb. Biblical writers, Wenham reports, generally alternate in describing messengers of God both as "angels" (literally "messenger" in the New Testament Greek) and "men" (see Genesis 18-19 for numerous examples of this switching back and forth). Moreover, "if one of the two were the primary spokesman, it would not be surprising if sometimes only he were mentioned."

One could take Gupta to task for completely dismissing the accounts because of such trivial issues. But Gupta fails to get even very basic facts of the historical record correct. He claims, "as for post-resurrection appearances, only one Bible author (Paul) claims direct contact." But John, "the beloved disciple," reports many lengthy encounters with the post-resurrection Jesus in John 20-21 (see especially 21:20-24). Peter, author of two books, preaches explicitly on the resurrection (Acts 2:14-36) and the author of the Gospel of Matthew most likely was one of the eleven who meet the post-resurrection Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20).

Elsewhere, he uses what can most charitably be described as very questionable historical reasoning. Flavius Josephus, an ancient historian and a Jew, also reported that Jesus was raised from the dead in his writings. To counter such independent evidence, Gupta concludes that the Josephus's account was "probably changed or expanded by Christian translators." However, he provides no historical or textual evidence for this charge. Instead, Gupta draws this conclusion by arguing "it is unlikely that Josephus, a Pharisee [member of a sect which was strongly anti-Jesus] would have endorsed the Resurrection as strongly as he is alleged to have done." Note here the reasoning: if a reporter recounts an event which cuts against his natural sympathies, then he could not possibly have written the account; his writing has been tampered with. In other words, if we read in the Boston Globe sportspages that the hated New York Knicks beat the hometown

Celtics, we must therefore conclude that the Boston sportswriter never wrote that article. How could a hometown reporter write that his team lost? Instead, by this illogical reasoning, we must maintain that the Celtics actually won and that Knicks fans have undertaken a massive conspiracy to tamper with the copies of the Globe that we read. Is it not more reasonable to conclude that Josephus was simply relating a widely known historical occurrence of the time?

But Gupta fails most fundamentally in his article by judging the historicity of the resurrection in a way he would never judge any other historical event. If he were to apply the same standard of consistency widely, he must conclude John F. Kennedy is alive and well. Take any four compiled accounts of JFK's assassination. They will differ -- indeed present outright inconsistencies -- in details ranging from how many shots were fired, was there a second gunman in that grassy knoll, what were Lee Harvey Oswald's connections to the KGB, to even a basic question of who actually was responsible for the fatal bullet? Indeed, the rather trivial differences Gupta cites about the resurrection accounts pale in comparison. Yet, no one in his or her right mind would thus conclude that the actual key event -- the death of JFK -- never occurred. National Enquirer adherents aside, we all believe JFK died, for at least three obvious reasons: 1) because we have reliable, eyewitness accounts that, whatever the details, JFK died, 2) because his body is in the grave, and 3) because the people closest to him acted afterwards as if he had really died.

We can apply the same reasoning about one historical victim of death to another historical victor over death. The accounts are reliable. Empirical evidence has shown the Gospel accounts probably and Paul's resurrection account certainly to be dated within one generation of the actual event. Historian Julius Muller has noted "there is not a single example anywhere in history of a great myth or legend arising around a historical figure and being generally believed within thirty years after that figure's death." There would be too many eyewitnesses alive to challenge obviously false reports. Every single one of the accounts agree on all the important details of the resurrection, and as mentioned, the minor differences can be explained. Furthermore, the literary style is one of eyewitness account, not fantasy. There are more reliable ancient copies of the Gospels than of any other ancient manuscript. As scholar Richard Purtrill summarizes, "If the biblical narratives did not contain accounts of miraculous events... biblical history would probably be regarded as much more firmly established than most of the history of classical Greece and Rome."

Moreover, there is the clear fact that just as JFK's body is in his grave, Jesus' is not in his. No one has yet offered a cogent alternative explanation for the empty tomb. The old "swoon theory" -- that Jesus recovered from the crucifixion and escaped the tomb -- has been long discredited as a medical impossibility. None of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus fit the psychological conditions necessary for hallucination. Even if there had been a mass hallucination, the accounts could have been quickly disproved by unearthing and showing the body. This never happened, despite great incentive on the part of the ruling authorities to do so.

Positing a theft of the body by Jesus' followers is even more dubious historical reasoning. Kreeft notes that "the historical fact that no one, weak or strong, saint or sinner, Christian or heretic, ever confessed, freely or under pressure, bribe, or even torture, that the whole story of the resurrection was a fake, a lie, a deliberate deception." Indeed, almost all of the disciples suffered

martyrdom for maintaining the truth of the resurrection. Only lunatics will actually die for an assertion they themselves fabricated. And yet, under the conspiracy/theft theory, these same lunatics also would have to be clever enough somehow to manufacture the appearance of Jesus to over 500 people (see 1 Cor. 15:3-8) and start a movement (supposedly based on deception) that would ultimately change the world. A much more plausible explanation for why these uneducated, simple peasants who were terrified at first by Jesus' crucifixion suddenly became emboldened to preach and die for Jesus is that they really saw him defeat death. Just as the fall of Kennedy's Camelot is the unmistakable result of an historical event, so too is the rise of Christianity as a world transforming movement.

Although I believe Gupta has egregiously failed to engage historical records and historical reasoning properly, I must confess I still respect him highly. At least he takes the effort to examine the issue. And well he should. For if the resurrection is a myth or hoax, then readers of this newspaper should make every effort to combat Christianity as having no place in a university supposedly dedicated to the truth. I should be expelled from Tufts as a lunatic. However, if the resurrection is a historically reliable event, then what Jesus had to say about life, relationships, money, power, sex, and death needs to be examined. If Jesus really did rise from the tomb, then he might really be the Lord and Savior, and his words would be far more important than any textbook offered by this university.

There is a reason why Christianity offers a weak case: namely the hypocrisy I and all of Jesus' followers inevitably fall into. For such failures, we can only repent and humbly ask forgiveness. But we can testify strongly Jesus' death and resurrection as historical evidence for his claims. Christianity is the one and only religion which claims God entered real human time and space and left historical evidence littered in his wake. Moreover, as we today seek to live faithfully to the words of the risen Jesus, we can also testify to changed lives and hope for our many failures. We invite anyone to ask us about that past, present, and future reality.