

DO DEAD PEOPLE STAY DEAD?

The resurrection question

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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A certain philosopher was surprised when, having accused me of believing that dead people aren't dead, I said "They're dead, alright; the question is whether they stay dead."

Can one be a Christian while disagreeing with Daniel 12.2, which says that "some" (NRSV; NIV, "multitudes") will not stay dead? Specifically one instance: Can one be a Christian though believing--as, e.g., Marcus Borg--that Jesus stayed dead?

1 The above was written three days before the Craigville XIV Theological Colloquy planning committee decided that the theme (July 14-18) would be the resurrection question. We welcome suggestions as to avenues of approach, relevancy to religious rumblings ecclesiastical & academic, & tangency to private & public life today.

2 Of the batch of Thinksheets on the Borg Event (the current splash, esp. in the United Church of Christ, this Jesus Seminar thinker is making), the one I've had the most response to is #2786, "Marcus Borg's NO-EASTER JESUS," in which I say (among other things): Borg's pre- & post-Easter Jesus, "in plain honest terms, is the pre-death Jesus & the post-death Jesus, since for him there is no Easter Jesus: the person Jesus of Nazareth died and remains dead." In his response (23 June 96), he did not counter my accusation but admitted that he is "skeptical that anything [revivifying or transforming] happened to the corpse of Jesus."

3 Except in an attenuated & metaphorical sense, "resurrection" means something happening to a human being (a basar-lev, outer[body]-inner[heart-soul-spirit-mind]) as an **entity**, after something else happened to that entity, viz. death. Greeks believed that the human being is a **duality** (body/soul); Jews, an entity (indivisible). Borg being (philosophically) a Greek, "the resurrection of the body" (Apostles' Creed; Nicene Creed, "...of the dead [lit., "the corpses"]") is irrelevant to (a) Easter & (b) the Christian's future.

While the Thinksheet does not mention the empty tomb, his letter mentions it thrice, beginning with "Of course, I do not believe in the empty tomb" & ending with "the question of the empty tomb...[is] a red herring." And he asks "is that where our difference about Easter lies--that you affirm an empty tomb, and see that as the indispensable grounding of the truth of Easter?" (My underlining.)

4 Note the two underlinings in §3. Both are words from his letter: (a) "what happened to the body of Jesus is irrelevant," & (b) he surmises that I find the empty tomb "indispensable" to Easter-belief. Indispensable? Why should I dispense with it? Why should Borg? It's a perfect story-fit with the fact that "resurrection" means (as the appositive in the article-title in THE INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE puts it) "the raising of the dead." (Abingdon/62)

Borg dispenses with the empty tomb for extrabiblical & extraneous reasons, chiefly that the notion of bodily resurrection is an embarrassment to Enlightenment consciousness (as the notion of the Bible's masculine deity is an embarrassment to gender-feminist consciousness, an embarrassment Borg shares).

My conversation & travel with J.A.T. Robinson (the great NT scholar who did seminal work on "The Body" before writing the popular HONEST TO GOD) confirm in my memory the conviction that the NT data do not weigh against the empty tomb but rather in favor of it. Hear him (op.cit., 45-47): "The earliest records...insistently speak of the full tomb." "One of the most firmly grounded facts of Jesus' life" is that (unusual for an executed criminal) Jesus was entombed (Mt.27, M.15, L.23, Jn.19): why bother to mention it except as prelude to his tomb's being found empty? "In contrast, e.g., with the Virgin Birth, it [the empty tomb] is an integral part of the earliest gospel account." It's "almost certainly implicit" in Paul (1Cor.15.4: "buried,...raised") & in Acts (13.29-30: "in a tomb. But God raised him"; cp.2.31). "All [pertinent Paul & Ac. reff.] imply belief in a bodily resurrection. Indeed, it would have been inconceivable for a Jew to think of resurrection except in bodily terms. As 1Cor.15:35 indicates, the issue involved in the question: 'How are the dead raised?' was, not whether it would be with a body, but: 'With what kind of body do they come?' A bodiless resurrection, or the notion that a man might be 'spiritually' raised while his body lay on in the tomb, would have seemed to the Jew an absurdity. In whatever form the Resurrection was first proclaimed by the

apostles, it must have implied an empty sepulchre. The stories about it may, indeed, be secondary--they must be judged on their own merits--but the idea that they represent a materialization of an originally 'spiritual' understanding of the resurrection event betrays a purely modern viewpoint [underlining mine]." The gospels' "evidence on the empty tomb is in substance unanimous....The very absence of uniformity or harmonization [in the empty-tomb accounts] tells against any subsequent fabrication or agreed story," & "the relatively minor legendary accretions" in the canonical gospels "contrast greatly with the highly colorful accounts" in gospels that didn't make it into the NT. "The basic witness is extraordinarily unanimous." And more argumentation to the same point: "the scriptural evidence" for the empty tomb is overwhelming, over against "the modern existentialist presumption that 'authentic' events take place in the realm of decision rather than of physical change."....But of course we all agree that "it was the appearances, not the tomb, that were decisive for the disciples' faith."....

....Abingdon's Supplementary Volume 14 yrs. later has E.W.Saunders writing the NT-resurrection (739-41). Against Bp.Robinson's empty-tomb belief, S. straddles: It's "an early Easter testimony or a later development of the kerygma." The Jesus Seminar mentality goes farther, dropping what precedes that "or." Note S.'s modern-istic splitting (contra the NT) of the resurrection off from the experience of Presence: "The *raising* of Jesus is not the fundamental datum of Christianity; more accurately it is that the *living and sovereign* Lord is identified with Jesus of Nazareth. The concept of resurrection recalls the historical personage and ministry; exaltation declares the heavenly power and glory of the same person."....Borg pushes even farther away from the NT: "The Christ of faith" is "what Jesus became in the faith of the early communities in the decades after his death" (not "resurrection" or even "death and resurrection"; MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME [HarperSF/94], 10): what Jesus "became" was his disciples' doing, not God's (contrast Phil.2.9 CEV: "God gave Christ the highest place"). "God"? Borg uses the word gnostically, not biblically: "God refers to the sacred at the center of existence....God--the sacred, the holy, the numinous" (14-15). The Trinity becomes a gnostic soup: "the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with [sic!] that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit" (17). "Resurrection" is so spiritualized as to lose the NT's "body" (physical-spiritual) continuity, & even continuity of consciousness is in doubt (94): "I have no idea if Jesus saw the afterlife as including the survival and awareness of one's personal identity." Borg's vague, almost vacuous, "spirit-person" "living risen Christ" doesn't deserve to be called "Lord," a title Borg gives him in this book only once, & then with muted force.

In contrast to Borg's docetic (spiritualizing) tendency, as in discrediting the empty tomb, the mature-profound-devout NT scholar Reginald Fuller (HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY [H&R/85], 864-65) emphasizes that resurrection "denotes a complete transformation of the human being in his or her psychosomatic totality (1Cor.15:53-55)" & credits the empty tomb: "The disciples after the appearances welcomed the women's report [of the empty tomb] as congruous with their faith in the resurrection and developed the empty-tomb narratives as a vehicle for the Easter proclamation. Later the Gospels developed appearance narratives....a profound conviction of the identity of the risen Lord with the earthly Jesus."

5 Again, Borg's letter: "Can Christians not disagree about the empty tomb story without one of them being labeled unChristian?" If it quacks like a duck it's a duck, but if it sings like a mockingbird it's *not* a duck. Borg sings duck (the Christian language) like a mockingbird (gnostic, with deconstructionist undertones [Derrida] & experiential-expressivist overtones [Ricoeur])--so how can I call him a duck? Reminds me of artist Jasper Johns (72NW28Oct96): "The meanings of things aren't stable. Anything can mean almost anything."

6 Again the letter: "how could I possibly affirm more strongly that the post-Easter Jesus is a living divine reality?" To begin with, he could affirm (1) that Jesus' incarnation & resurrection were unique, God the Son come among us &, after his atoning death, returning to the Father & sending the Spirit, (2) through whom Jesus the Lord continue-d,-s to speak (in-through the NT canon).