Cruci-Fiction and Resuscitation

A paid advertisement in a campus newspaper declaring Christ's resurrection a hoax was deeply disturbing to its readers. This essay raises 9 problems with the ad and answers them.

This article is also available in Spanish.

The title used above was the headline of a paid advertisement in a campus newspaper from a major university. Allegedly written by a university student named "Daniel," the ad appeared as a result of Resurrection Week on that campus in the spring of 1997.

I received a copy of the ad in a letter from a long-time friend of my son. He was angry, confused, and scared by the article. He opened his letter by saying, "This is one of the most upsetting articles that I have ever read. This paid advertisement' has contradicted everything that I believe in. It makes a mockery out of the way I have chosen to pattern my life. It even frightens me."

In this essay we are going to address the misleading statements and half-truths found in the article. A few days after receiving this correspondence, I took the article and broke it down into nine significant errors or issues raised by the author. My procedure will be quote each half-truth or misleading statement, then address it.

I do not presume that this brief treatment will completely answer all of the objections raised by the "paid advertisement," but these thoughts were a great help to my son's friend as he took a deeper look at his faith. I trust that they will be equally helpful to you.

Christian Scholars and the Bible

Problem #1

"Have you ever wondered why so many biblical experts are so skeptical about Jesus' resurrection' and why even a growing number of Christian scholars and theologians are heard saying that his resurrection is not so central to Christianity" ("Cruci-fiction").

It appears that Daniel is only interested in going to those "biblical experts" and "Christian scholars" that support his position. It is no secret that there are a number of Christian scholars who hold a low view of the Bible and the deity of Christ, i.e., they do not believe in the veracity or trustworthiness of the Scriptures or the deity of Christ.

They very often question not only the deity of Christ and His resurrection, but also the Trinity, His uniqueness as a Savior, and His second coming. They also tend to discount hell as a place for eternal damnation and consider sin as only a mistake. They see guilt as being of no consequence because it is imposed on humanity by those who would enforce a strict moral code of conduct.

Daniel's comment about Christian scholars and theologians not considering the resurrection of Jesus being of any real importance is a ridiculous notion that denigrates the uniqueness of Jesus and ultimately places Him on the same plane as Buddha, Krishna, or any other "holy man" in history. Jesus is totally unique and that distinct difference is based on His resurrection in bodily form. Without the Resurrection, there is no salvation for we are still in our sin.

Next, we will look at Daniel's assumption that there were tens and possibly hundreds of "gospels" in existence at the time the church selectively chose the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as a basis for understanding God's truth, along

with his assertion that the Apostle Paul fabricated these writings to alter the truth.

Numerous Gospels

Problem #2

Now we are going to look at the question of the canon: just where did the Bible come from and how can we know that it is trustworthy?

Our antagonist, Daniel, continues by making this statement:

"Since preachers have often failed to inform the people of what really happened in events surrounding the so called resurrection,' I will make an attempt to give the most possible accurate picture. Our information source will be the four surviving gospels even though they have been carefully selected by the Church from a pool of a multitude of gospels' tens, possibly hundreds. . . . The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" ("Cruci-fiction").

There is no doubt that there were a number of "gospels" circulating during and after the first century. But, Daniel's problem is that he does not have an understanding of how the Bible was canonized. There were several ways various writings were judged to be authentic. If they failed in any one area, they were suspect overall.

First, for a gospel or other book to be considered authentic by the early church, the author must have been an Apostle, one who had been with Jesus during His ministry.

Remember that Jesus promised His disciples the Holy Spirit would enable them to remember His teachings so that they could communicate them accurately to others. He said to the Apostles, "These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father

will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 16:25-26). Jesus, who is absolutely reliable, believed that what the disciples wrote about Him would be just as true as if He wrote it Himself. That means that it would be historically accurate.

Second, the book had to be authoritative. Did it come from the hand of God? The previous passage indicates that a genuine message from God would come through the Holy Spirit.

Third, is it prophetic? Was it written by a man of God?

Fourth, is it authentic? When in doubt about a manuscript, the Church fathers threw it out.

Fifth, is it dynamic? Did it contain the life-transforming power of God?

Sixth, was the book received and used by the people and considered to be authentic and authoritative?

Daniel uses Irenaeus as a source for the idea of tens, even hundreds, of possible gospels circulating in the first century and subtly implies that he (Irenaeus) questioned their authenticity out of hand. However, we know that Irenaeus, according to historical documentation, gave credence to the four Gospels of the Bible.

Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, had been a Christian for eighty-six years, and was a disciple of John the Apostle. Irenaeus wrote the following regarding the four Gospels of the New Testament:

> *So firm is the ground upon which the Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these (documents), each one of them endeavors to establish his own particular doctrine. For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church dispersed over all the earth, and*

> *the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit (Against Heresies III).*

It seems as if Irenaeus would probably differ with Daniel on this count.

The latter part of Daniel's statement, "The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" holds no water as well.

Daniel makes it seem that Paul was the official editor of the New Testament and that nothing made the canon unless he approved of its inclusion.

Daniel seems to overlook the fact that the books of the Bible were decided upon by Church Councils and not individuals. Plus, there is an overwhelming amount of manuscript evidence to help the inquiring student to recognize that there was no wholesale editing of the Gospels. (For more information on this, see the Probe article Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?)

Remember these manuscripts were being used daily by the Church and those using the Scripture were contemporaries of Paul. If, in fact, he had edited or distorted the writings of the Apostles, he would have had his hand called (see Acts 17:10-11) and would have been ostracized. The fact is, it didn't happen.

Crucifixion and Prophecies

Problem #3 Next, our antagonist, Daniel, questions the fact

that Jesus really died on the cross and makes this statement regarding the event.

"In order to speed up death of the crucified , he ordered the soldiers to break the legs of both criminals, but not those of Jesus" ("Cruci-fiction").

It appears that Daniel is not familiar with prophecy and, in particular, those prophecies relating to Jesus' death. Psalms 34:20 says, "He keeps all his bones; Not one of them is broken." The fulfillment of this prophecy is found in John 19:33 where it is said, "But coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs."

The Romans were not novices when it came to crucifixion and death. They knew a dead person when they saw one. It seems that Daniel cannot accept this possibility.

Problem #4

"But one soldier thrust a lance into his side. How can one see that a person is dead without a careful close inspection of signs of life as heartbeat and breathing? How many times are people pulled from water, fires, car wrecks who appear to be dead, but then are resurrected?' And if the soldier saw that Jesus was dead, why the lancing? No reason for it.

"Moreover, Romans never lanced the crucified. If the soldier did not get special orders from Pilate and if he was only a bit suspicious that Jesus was alive (as he had all reasons to be), he would have broken Jesus' legs like anyone else's, no preferential treatment. It seems that the lancing (was) observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness" ("Cruci-fiction").

Once again Daniel is allowing his bias to overtake his lack of understanding of the prophecies surrounding the Crucifixion

Zechariah 12:10 says, “They will look on me whom they have pierced.”

John 19:34 offers the fulfillment of this prophecy. It reads, “But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear.”

Daniel is caught up with the notion that Jesus did not die on the cross, but seemed to have fainted and was resuscitated at a later time, thereby ignoring some basic facts regarding the death of Christ. There is no record that any of the onlookers questioned the fact of Jesus’ death; also the centurion gave testimony of the death of Jesus to Pilate (Mark 15:44).

Furthermore, the piercing of His side confirmed that Jesus was indeed dead. But, equally important is the fact that from the wound came both blood and water. John 19:34 35 gives us an eyewitness account of the effect of the piercing. We read that blood and water poured from the wound, but had Jesus been alive at the time of the piercing, strong spurts of blood would have come forth with every heartbeat. Instead, we are told that a semi-dark red clot was seeping out and was separate from a flow of watery serum. These signs are evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries and, therefore, proof of death.

Problem #5

Next in our analysis of Christ’s crucifixion, we are going to deal with several problems about which our antagonist, Daniel, attempts to create doubt. In doing so, we catch Daniel using poor logic to make his case against the Resurrection.

Daniel continues by observing that the lancing of Jesus was *“observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness which appears only in John’s gospel (and) was the author’s initiative to correct the previously written three gospels which did not document any such lancing”* (“Cruci-fiction”).

Each of the gospel writers had different interests: Matthew

was a tax-collector; Mark was the son of Mary and close to the Apostles; Luke was a physician; and John was a fisherman. Each of these men likewise had a different perspective in their Gospel narrative. Luke, although he was a physician, wrote his Gospel as a historical account. John offers the reader no account of the birth of Jesus, His baptism, or His temptations; it tells us nothing of the Last Supper, nothing of Gethsemane, and nothing of the Ascension, to name just a few omissions.

However, if we are to use Daniel's logic we would have to discount all these facts because they were not mentioned in all four Gospels that "survived the editing of Paul."

Genealogies of Christ

Problem #6

"When Matthew and Luke were independently editing the earlier Mark's gospel, they knew that its contemporary critics pointed out that the Messiah must come from David's line and Mark did not mention Jesus' genealogy. So each made up his own list of names" ("Cruci-fiction").

Here, Daniel seems to be a bit lazy. Instead of doing a little research to gain an understanding of Jesus' lineage, he simply makes the comment that each writer just made it up to suit his own wishes.

In Judaism a man's lineage was his pedigree. It was a matter of high regard for a Jew to have direct lineage from Abraham, thereby proving his Jewishness. The Gospel writers had different reasons for including Jesus' pedigree.

As Daniel points out, the genealogies given by Matthew and Luke are quite different. There are several possibilities for this occurrence.

Luke includes the genealogy between Adam and Abraham. The

section between Abraham and David is the same in both Matthew and Luke. However, the genealogies between David and Joseph are almost completely different. Why is this?

One school of thought is that both genealogies are symbolic and that Matthew gives us the line of royal descent of Jesus and Luke gives us the line of priestly descent.

Another school of thought is that one genealogy (Matthew's) gives Christ's ancestral line from Abraham through Joseph (Jesus' legal father, though not His natural one) establishing Jesus' legal right to the throne of David. This fits the Jewishness of the Gospel of Matthew. The second part of this approach is that the genealogy in Luke traces Jesus' ancestry from Mary (Jesus' physical mother) back to Adam (physical father of the human race). (There are some minor concerns about the spelling of some names in this genealogy, but this seems to be the best answer.) It is also very compatible with the universal character of the book of Luke.

The fact is that we do not fully know which genealogical approach is more correct. However, we do know that genealogies were extremely important to the Jews and the idea of making them up is preposterous and would have been exposed.

Our next discussion will center on the claim that Jesus did not die on the cross, but only swooned.

Burial of Christ

Problem #7

"Thus Jesus was taken off the cross after approximately three hours by Joseph of Arimathea and was buried on his property in his new tomb that he (Joseph) had hewn in the rock.' Why there? Why didn't Joseph bury Jesus in the ground as most people were buried, but instead he put him into his own tomb? Because in the ground Jesus would have certainly suffocated. Moreover, Joseph knew that he would be able to reuse the tomb

in the future" ("Cruci-fiction").

It is true that the Romans normally buried those who were crucified in a pit unless the body was claimed. The body of Jesus was not claimed by a family member or by one of the disciples. They were evidently too scared and feared the possible outcome of doing so. It was Joseph of Arimathea who desired a more appropriate resting place for the body of the Lord.

Joseph realized that he had to move quickly in order to accomplish his goal of burial because the Sabbath was close. There was no time for elaborate preparations, and Joseph did what any other believer would have done he made his newly hewn sepulcher available to our Lord.

The tomb was in close proximity to Golgotha and spared Joseph and Nicodemus the trouble of preparing a burial site along with the need to prepare the body.

Problem #8

"What would you do in Joseph's place knowing Jesus had only been on the cross three hours and had not had his legs broken? Exactly what Joseph did. Once dark settled, he took several of his servants and unrolled the stone to get Jesus out. According to all expectations, Jesus was alive, so Joseph got him out and rolled the stone back. Only the next day did the Pharisees realize their mistake and asked Pilate to guard the tomb, by which time Jesus was resting in Joseph's house" ("Cruci-fiction").

On the surface this argument sounds plausible. However, it does not take into account the fact that Joseph fully believed and recognized that Jesus was indeed dead. If he were to follow through, as Daniel suggests, by removing the stone and taking Jesus to his home for recuperation, he would have been directly disobeying Jewish law.

Jewish law prohibited a Jew from working on the Sabbath. They had very strict ideas about what comprised work. It is highly unlikely that Joseph would have risked the penalty for breaking the Sabbath for removing a body that he believed was dead. For what purpose? To risk the penalty of death for breaking the Sabbath?

According to scholars, the stone that was placed at the entrance of the tomb was not only larger than what would normally be used, but one that would take twenty men to move. Beyond the above, if Joseph did return with twenty men to remove the stone and release Jesus, it would be most unlikely that it could have been kept secret. It is untenable to think that such a conspiracy would have succeeded.

Likewise, it is ludicrous to suggest that after the Roman guard was posted and the tomb sealed, that evidence of tampering—should someone be so foolhardy as to try it—would have escaped the notice of the highly trained Roman soldiers. They knew the penalty for failure was death.

Problem #9

"Next we are told that after Sabbath was over women came to the tomb. Why? To anoint the body with spices as Mark 16:1 says? No! It is not a Jewish custom to open graves and anoint corpses which have already been buried and which have been fermenting for two days!" ("Cruci-fiction").

Here Daniel is correct. However he does not take into account the special circumstances under which Jesus was interred.

Under normal conditions a body would have been properly prepared with ample time in which to complete the task. Joseph and Nicodemus had very little time to accomplish their duty before the Sabbath restrictions were imposed. The women sitting at the preparation site saw that the process was incomplete according to their custom and subsequently desired to prepare the body in the proper way. Therefore, they made

plans to return after the Sabbath and finish the process by anointing the body with sweet spices, nard, or some costly unguent.

Perhaps the most damaging piece of information to Daniel's hypothesis is the fact that the grave clothes were left undisturbed in the place where the body was laid. The body of Jesus was wrapped from the armpits to the ankles with strips of linen twelve inches wide. The linen wraps were then wound around the body placing spices, aloes, and other fine ointments between the wraps. It is believed that a minimum of seventy pounds of spices were used in the process and as much as a hundred pounds were used for someone of Jesus' position.

The grave clothes constituted quite a mass encasing the body. If we are to assume Daniel's position that Joseph and several of his servants took the body, we would expect that they were concerned about being detected. Therefore, they would have likely been in a great hurry, and we should expect that the grave clothes would have been left in great disarray with spices trailing out the doorway, not to mention that it would have been difficult to have placed the grave clothes neatly back on the resting place in the dark while being in a great hurry to do so.

However, the observers did not find spices and wrappings trailing out of the doorway. The grave clothes were intact, undisturbed with the exception of the head napkin that was placed slightly above where it should have been found.

John R. W. Stott in his book, *Basic Christianity*, makes this observation: "The body had disappeared. It would have vaporized, being transmuted into something new and different and wonderful. It would have passed through the grave clothes, as it was later to pass through closed doors, leaving them untouched and almost undisturbed. For the body clothes, under the weight of one hundred pounds of spices, once support of the body had been removed, would have subsided or collapsed,

and would now be lying flat.”

The grave clothes represent an undeniable fact: Jesus was not bodily or physically removed from their bondage, but He was indeed raised, transmuted from them in the glorious act of the Resurrection.

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