

END
OF THE
ROAD?

Encounters with one who returned from the grave

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A MYSTERIOUS FIND

When German scholar Wilhelm Fröhner died in 1925, a marble tablet, the size of an average computer screen, was discovered at his Parisian home.

Today it belongs to the Louvre Museum, where Fröhner worked as curator. The private notes found among his belongings revealed that, in 1878, it had been sent to him from the Palestinian town of Nazareth.

The inscription on the tablet turned out to be the decree of a Roman Emperor, possibly Claudius (10^{BC}–AD54): it said that whoever removed a dead body from a tomb would be committing a capital crime.

First century. Roman imperial edict. Grave robbery. Nazareth. Coincidence or pieces of the same puzzle?

Might, just might, Claudius, or whoever it was, have heard

of a strange sect of Christians claiming that a certain Jesus of Nazareth, executed on a Roman cross, had come back to life? Jesus, the Son of God, stronger than death, mightier than Caesar?

Suppose the Emperor concluded that Jesus' followers had robbed the corpse from the tomb before spreading the subversive rumour of his resurrection? And as the story took hold, was Rome's supreme ruler anxious to keep others from getting up to similar pranks, so much so that he threatened grave robbers with the death penalty?

The evidence is inconclusive. Nobody knows.

And yet, it is an intriguing thought. A small marble slab, shipped from Nazareth to Paris, stashed away in a secretive scholar's home: could the ancient inscription be a veiled reference to the empty tomb of Christ?

DELUDED?

Every year, people all over the world celebrate Easter as they commemorate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. 'Christ is risen,' the priest proclaims. 'He is risen indeed,' the congregation reply.

Wishful thinking, to say the least? Then again, why should raising a man from the grave be a big deal for God? Provided God exists, obviously.

But does he?

Consciously or not, people these days tend to look at the world through the lens of science. The accepted view goes something like this: science is about what we can know, whereas God is, at best, the great *unknown*. We can't see him, we can't prove he is real, so bringing him into the equation adds nothing to our understanding of the world.

As science closes gap after gap in our knowledge, critics of

religion wonder why anyone would want to fill the remaining gaps with a hypothetical divine being. Why not just carry on doing science, solve apparent mysteries, one by one, and leave God out of the picture?

But are things that simple? Is science fit to tell us whether God is a delusion? Is what we know about the world through science the only thing we can know? The only thing worth knowing?

Throughout history, some of the world's greatest thinkers have wrestled with the God question. That, if nothing else, should tell us it is a serious question, one that derives from other questions, like:

- Why is there not nothing?
- If the universe emerged from a quantum vacuum, why was there a quantum vacuum?
- How come anything from galaxies to microbes is governed by laws of science? Where did those laws come from? Is it scientifically established that the natural order around us is the product of chance?
- What about us humans? Can unconscious matter produce conscious beings? If we are no more than lumps of

mindless molecules, how come we keep engaging in complex musings about life, the universe and everything? And is 'love' just a chemical reaction in a physical brain?

The truth is, science can't help us with any of this. Facing our ignorance, we have two options. We can either shrug our shoulders or keep probing. Could there be a creator who set everything in motion – an 'unmoved mover', as the Greek philosopher Aristotle put it? Is there any such thing as the human spirit and, if so, does that make an Ultimate Spirit more likely?

There is another issue about which science remains silent. One day, death will put an end to our achievements, dreams, hopes and loves. Does that brute fact render life meaningless? Or might there be a point to it all, despite and beyond death?

That final question takes us right to Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

LAW AND ORDER

Ancient Judaism revolved round the Torah – the Holy Scriptures – and the temple. Year on year, Jews from all over Israel and beyond flocked to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Passover, commemorating their ancestors' escape from slavery in Egypt, centuries before.

During one particular Passover season, around AD30, travelling preacher Jesus of Nazareth, from the northern region of Galilee, caused a stir in the temple as he confronted the religious leaders. They didn't take kindly to this; in fact, Jerusalem's high priest, Caiaphas, ended up handing him over to the local Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate.

The Jewish lands had been Roman territory since Pompey the Great's conquest of Jerusalem, nearly a century earlier. The land meant a great deal to Jews, for they believed it was God's gift

to them. In other words, no self-respecting Israelite would have been keen on the sound of Roman boots on their ground. But after Jesus had publicly opposed the religious leaders, they had no qualms about teaming up with the enemy.

Jesus had fired more than one dart at the heart of the religious elite. He had challenged their take on the Torah, reinterpreted the Sabbath – the holy day of rest – and questioned some of their temple practices. He was a liability. And the Romans, forever determined to keep their Empire strong and stable, disapproved of people putting the status quo at risk. In fact, they tended to execute them without much ado.

In the end, Pilate behaved no differently; he could not afford to alienate the Jewish elite who helped keep the people under control. On the day we call Good Friday, Jesus was sentenced to death, tortured, nailed to a cross and left to suffocate or bleed to death, whichever came first.

Archaeologists have unearthed two remarkable items in Israel: a stone with Pontius Pilate's name on it and an ossuary (a stone box used to house a deceased person's bones after the flesh had wasted away) bearing the name of Caiaphas – possibly the very

Caiaphas who was Jerusalem's high priest at the time of Jesus' arrest.

And so we have two historical individuals at the centre of Good Friday: a religious and a political leader. Caiaphas and Pilate. Two men so keen on law and order that their brief, fateful encounter with Jesus may have blinded them to who he really was.