

SECTION 77

JESUS' GUARDS TESTIFY TO HIS RESURRECTION

TEXT: 28:11-15

11 Now while they were going, behold, some of the guards came into the city, and told unto the chief priests all the things that were come to pass. 12 And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave much money unto the soldiers, 13 saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. 14 And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and rid you of care. 15 So they took the money, and did as they were taught; and this saying was spread abroad among the Jews, *and continueth* until this day.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Is there any evidence in the text that the soldiers fled from the tomb in terror, once they overcame their initial fright? In what sense is it true that "some of the watch went into the city and reported to the chief priests"?
- b. Why did the soldiers report to the chief priests and not directly to Pilate? Are these not Roman soldiers?
- c. What do you think the soldiers actually reported? If you had to write the script for their report to the authorities, how would you word it?
- d. Why would the chief priests need to consult with other authorities?
- e. If the authorities were certain Jesus could not rise from the dead, why did they bribe the soldiers to tell a fabricated story? Why not present the evidence to prove Jesus was still dead, without all this difficulty?
- f. Do you think the authorities, upon hearing the soldiers' report, recognized that they were defeated? What does their reaction reveal about their character?
- g. Why do you suppose the soldiers had to be bribed? Were they black-mailing the Jewish authorities?
- h. Why would the governor be concerned that some of his men had slept on guard duty?
- i. Is it not blatantly inconsistent to affirm a fact purportedly observed while asleep? If so, in what way(s) would the soldiers spread the rumor that the disciples stole the body while they slept?

- j. The disciples disbelieved the eyewitnesses who testified that Jesus had risen. How does this disbelief prove that they could not have perpetrated a resurrection hoax?

PARAPHRASE

The women had started on their way, when some of the guards went into the city to report to the religious authorities everything that had happened. After these latter held a meeting with the elders, and discussed the matter, they gave a substantial bribe to the soldiers with these instructions: "Tell people, 'His disciples came during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' Should the governor hear about his, we will convince him and you will have nothing to worry about."

So the soldiers accepted the money and carried out their instructions. Furthermore, this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to the present day.

SUMMARY

After the departure of the women and perhaps also of the angels, the guards find their courage and report to the Jewish authorities for instructions. The hierarchy and civil officials prefer to hush up this damaging news by bribery and dishonesty. Jesus' disciples are to be blamed for stealing the corpse, while the guard slept. Further, the authorities promised to persuade the governor too, should the guards run into difficulties because of their story. At the writing of Matthew's Gospel this report was still circulating throughout Judaism.

NOTES

Truth Suppressed by Wickedness

28:11 Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city, and told unto the chief priests all the things that were come to pass. It would appear that, contemporaneous with the women's second departure on their mission, part of the guard arrived in the city. Although the exact timing of the women's arrival and departure is not indicated with relation to that of the men's, there is no need to believe that the women did not also

see the stunned soldiers still at the tomb. Matthew's silence about the presence of the guard while the angel talked with the women is no proof the soldiers were not there. In this case, the soldiers may have heard the angelic message to the women and this would become part of their deeply disconcerting report to the Jewish officials. The stupefied soldiers possibly got hold of themselves when the angel and the women disappeared. So, *while they were going*, the guards perhaps hastily evaluated their own alternatives.

1. All could remain at the tomb until relieved from duty by further orders. But, if the tomb is empty, there is no further purpose to guard it.
2. All the men could abandon their post. In a shameful display of unmilitary conduct some could scatter in fear, while only *some of the guard* had the courage to report to the authorities.
3. While some men remained on duty until relieved, *some of the guard* could leave the tomb to report and update the status of their mission.

Apparently, they chose the third option, because, if they all abandoned the tomb, they would *all have gone into the city*, since their barracks lay inside the city at the Castle Antonia, and not *some of them (tines)*, as Matthew affirms. So, while the women perhaps took one route to find the lodgings of Peter, John and the other disciples, the soldiers took the most direct route to the house of Caiaphas.

That Roman guards reported to Jewish *chief priests* is not surprising, because they were granted by Pilate to the Jewish authorities for temporary service (26:65f.). Further, the very character of their report required that these supernatural events be reported to those most qualified to interpret them and give counsel. To have reported them to the Roman officers would have been to invite unmitigated humiliation, but to go to the Jews meant receiving information and counsel in the explosive situation. Further, had they rashly broadcast the news that Jesus was risen, this testimony could have meant their death too, since to testify to that fact which they were supposed to prevent, would expose them to the unjustified wrath of those most determined to keep it from happening. So, they desperately needed to get advice from the Jews.

What would these unwilling witnesses have reported? Their humiliating shock in the presence of one superterrestrial being? Were they fully conscious, even if immobile, to stare helplessly while the angel

rolled away the stone and sat on it? Were they in a position to see inside the tomb, hence to testify to the fact that it was empty, even though no one had disturbed it or them before that first terrible fright? Did they hear the angel's confident announcement to the women: "He is not here! He is risen as He said! Come see the place where He lay!"? Was this message relayed to the Jews? The fact remained that the seal was broken, the stone rolled away, the tomb was empty, its temporary Tenant gone.

The Pious Pay-Off

28:12 And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave much money unto the soldiers. The emergency assembly thus convoked brought together the ruling body of Israel, present in its constituent members. It matters little whether it was called as an official session of the Sanhedrin or not, for these official advisors are not acting as private citizens, but as Israel's spiritual heads. There is no backing out now. They were all too deeply implicated in this supremely crucial question, and so must decide their future course together. The choice which lay before them was either to admit the obvious or to maintain their dignity only by the most preposterous lie.

Here is invincible blindness: they received the unimpeachable testimony of soldiers who honestly reported undeniable, supernatural events. Punishing the guard was never even discussed: their story was irresistibly convincing. How could they escape the undeniable conclusion that, if what the soldiers testify is true, the Sanhedrin and priesthood of Israel have been soundly defeated? They had done everything humanly possible to insure the absolute certainty of the Nazarene's death. Now they could not claim that He had merely fainted or that, after recovering in the tomb, He managed to escape alone. Their own disbelief excluded the hypothesis of a break-out from within the tomb. The testimony of armed guards among the best disciplined in the world excluded a break-in from without. By all their precautions, they had defeated themselves. They all knew that Jesus had threatened to rise from the dead on the third day (27:63ff.). Incredibly, the authorities persist in denying the possibility that Jesus' highest claims were true.

The authorities were immobilized into inaction, because they knew that producing a fraudulent corpse would be disastrous. The usually

shrewd Caiaphas and his crew could not pass off a mauled, decaying body of just anyone recently dead in place of the executed Nazarene. Such a contrived rebuttal must backfire, because not all of the soldiers had left the tomb over which the Jews themselves had set them. They could easily identify its location and could publicly swear that this tomb previously occupied by only one body was now empty. There could not be the confusion of disciples who might have gone to the wrong tomb and lied about a resurrection, since the enemies knew the correct one and guarded it. The mental paralysis and failure of Caiaphas and his holy brethren demands explanation: they could find no reasonable solution to their dilemma, because they knew that something had really happened at that tomb that spelled disaster for them. Aside from understandable fear that someone would talk, they were forced to concede that what they feared was true.

They gave much money unto the soldiers. These pious men thoroughly grasped the magic influence of money to shut mouths. But the pay-off must be generous, if the Romans must testify to a lie which could cost them their lives. That men as notoriously covetous as Annas would spare no cost to gain their point gauges how determined they were that the soldiers' testimony be heard by no other ear. The Man who had cost them initially only thirty pieces of silver is beginning to cost them much, much more.

Where could Christians have learned about this secret corruption of the guards? Everyone learned what the guards were to say, but who could have leaked the news of the corruption itself? From inside the Sanhedrin from Nicodemus or perhaps Josephus of Arimathea? From some of the priests converted later (Acts 6:7)?

The Official Account

28:13 saying, **Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.** The authorities must openly admit that the absence of the body is a fact requiring public explanation. A quick examination of the tomb could verify this. But the empty tomb alone does not prove that Jesus emerged from it alive. It is merely circumstantial evidence of a fact, if it can be proved to be a fact on some other basis, as by His presenting Himself alive to competent witnesses. His foes recognized that an empty tomb has another possible interpretation: the body was hauled out dead. So, a face-saving statement could yet be worded so as to counter the damaging report

of a resurrection. The Romans must never again tell the story they had just reported. The only viable solution open to those hardened men living with the concrete realities was to accuse the disciples unjustly of a theft that everyone on the inside knew could not have taken place.

However, the resulting, well-financed lie is blatantly self-contradictory. It reveals more than it conceals:

1. The soldiers would be testifying to a fact that required their own death, "*we slept* on guard duty." But they were obviously not going to suffer punishment for it, or they would not admit it.
2. The soldiers must swear to a fact supposedly observed while the observers themselves were asleep: they positively identify the transgressors of the tomb as none other than *His disciples*. If they recognized them, why did they not stop them? If they slept, how could they recognize them?
3. The disciples showed no readiness to rescue Jesus from death. They had not expected His death, much less now His resurrection (John 20:9; Luke 24:6, 25f.). Every available indication shows that the disciples knew nothing of the seal or the guards at the tomb and learned of these precautions only after the resurrection. Like Jesus, their Teacher, these men were too honest even to think in terms of molesting the tomb or perpetrating a hoax. Then, when they were notified that the resurrection had actually occurred, they continued to demonstrate their inability to invent the resurrection story, by stubbornly disbelieving the witness (Mark 16:11; Luke 24:11). So far from being visionaries ready to believe any convenient story, their dissatisfaction with numerous, competent witnesses proved them far too skeptical to be psychologically capable of that of which they are accused. Although the Jews could not know this, the modern critics can, if they will.
4. The soldiers could be believed, if they told of their being overpowered by a force superior to their own. But who would believe that they were overwhelmed by an inferior number of unarmed, discouraged men?
5. But even had they dared, the logistics of moving the body from the tomb without detection by even one of the many supposedly sleeping guards is also highly improbable. The night was illuminated by a full Paschal moon and moving a heavy stone door away from the tomb in absolute silence on a still night is virtually impossible. Further, they risked detection by anyone among the thousands of Passover pilgrims encamped all around Jerusalem.

6. Everything about the tomb's interior bespoke calm and order: had men stolen the body, they would not have calmly removed the burial garments and folded them (John 20:5-7). The success of such an operation depended upon speed and stealth. Anything that compromises either must be rigorously eliminated, and yet there lay those perfumed wrappings and the face-cloth, evidence inconsistent with the theory of a hurried theft.

The Insurance Coverage

28:14 **And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and rid you of care.** The eventuality of a military inquest defines these soldiers as Romans, since Jewish guards could have no fear of a military punishment from the Roman *governor*. Sleeping on guard duty was punishable by death, but *everyone knew that these men had not slept*. Their only fault is that they witnessed a politically embarrassing fact. So, should a judicial investigation be made into the soldiers' story, the Jews promised their influence: *We will persuade him*, a promise that communicated more than would be diplomatic to reveal: the only penalty to pay would be another handsome bribe or some dark political threat for Pilate. Corruption through bribery was the standard operating procedure to achieve political power in Palestine (*Ant.*, XVIII,6,5; XX,6,1; 8,9; 9,2; Acts 24:26). However, as Bruce (*Exp. Gr. T.*, I,338) suggests: "Of course they might take the money and go away laughing at the donors, meaning to tell their general the truth. Could the priests expect anything else? If not, could they propose the story seriously? The story has its difficulties." Their dilemma consisted in the impossibility of inventing a plausible story that could stand up against undeniable truth.

The Snow Job

28:15 **So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying was spread abroad among the Jews, and continueth until this day.** Because the soldiers' orders had come from the Jews, they could risk admitting whatever their Jewish superiors wanted published. If they are satisfied, then everyone is satisfied. Matthew does not affirm that the soldiers actively spread the rumor. The soldiers simply *did as they were taught*, while *this saying* made the rounds throughout Judaism.

This saying was spread abroad among the Jews, and continueth until this day. Aside from the expression, "King of the Jews," this

is the only time Matthew, himself a Jew, uses the expression *the Jews*. Squarely facing the prejudiced unbelief circulating among his readers and dealing with it, of all places, *even in his next to last paragraph*, he defused it. Jewish readers could reason thus: "If the author of this testimony were trying to deceive the gullible in Judaism, he would not have dared reveal the origin of this absurd rumor and the facts which explode it. Too many would yet be able to disprove his thesis." Further, even decades after this event, any Jew could know what Matthew affirms: opponents of Christ's resurrection had still turned up no more convincing explanation of the phenomena than the soldiers' tale.

Naturally, this section has come under attack from anti-supernaturalists. The attack objects that the Jewish attempt at a rebuttal of the resurrection is so flimsy that men so astute as the Sanhedrinists could not have originated it nor the soldiers propagated it. Farrar (*Life*, 664, note 1) exposes their inconsistency:

Those who are shocked at this suggested possibility of deceit on the part of a few hard, worldly and infatuated Sanhedrists, do not shrink from insinuating that the faith of Christendom was founded on most facile and reprehensible credulity, almost amounting to conscious deception, by men who died for the truth of what they asserted, and who have taught the spirit of truthfulness as a primary duty of the religion which they preached.

Granted, the false report was a clumsy expedient. But, under the circumstances, what better solution could have occurred to the best minds among Israel's leadership? He who would criticize as illogical the story Matthew attributes to them and discount his report as unauthentic, must furnish a more rational alternative to their best efforts. They were baffled (1) by the fearless, precise, unassailable evidence given by courageous witnesses, and (2) by their own incompetence to explain the undoubted absence of the body from the empty tomb or to produce the corpse as undeniable evidence of the disciples' supposed fraud. Naturally, they would admit no more than absolutely necessary, but some plausible interpretation of the facts must be circulated to reduce the damage to a minimum. They could do no less than admit the absence of the body. The authorities' only solution was brazenly to lie in harmony with their rationalistic evaluation of the risk they faced (27:64). The authorities arrested the early Christians for propagating the resurrection of Christ, but they never

accused them of theft of the body, showing how little they believed their own story. May we not imagine the spies of Annas and Caiaphas surreptitiously listening in on everyone's conversation for some clue to the whereabouts of the Galilean's corpse, or out wildly combing the hillsides and caves of Palestine, searching desperately for any evidence of a recent burial?

Unfortunately, *This saying . . . continueth until this day* provides no direct clue to the writing of Matthew's Gospel, since Justin Martyr (165) reported the continuance of this calumny till his time (*Dialogue With Trypho*, 108,2). In fact, Justin charged that the Jews aggressively sought to check the powerful influence of the resurrection Gospel by propagating this calumny by means of special couriers sent all over the Jewish world. Unable to dispel the power of the facts, these disbelievers settled on a legend which would hide from their descendants what they themselves could not deny was the truth.

But that Matthew alone, of all the Evangelists, reported the Jews' efforts is adequately explained by these factors:

1. Matthew addressed his Gospel to the Hebrew reader, so needed to meet this issue head-on.
2. Other Gospel writers, precisely because Matthew reported it, needed not give this even more publicity, when they too had so much more to tell.

But this passage furnishes another unexpected evidence of the Gospel's truthfulness. Matthew knew that one is known not merely by the friends he keeps, but also by the quality of his enemies. The Jewish lie must stand throughout history side by side with the life-transforming message, the heroic martyrdom, the conscientiousness and morality of these same disciples. The result of the comparison leaves no doubt as to the sincerity, dedication and ethics of the Christians as compared with the best efforts of their detractors to conceive some plausible alternative explanation of the fact everyone admitted: the empty tomb. Further, the disciples did not foster the gradual spread of a vague rumor. Rather, by their fearless proclamation of the risen Christ right in the heart of world Judaism, these eye-witnesses launched their pointed public testimony in the teeth of a vicious storm of persecutions, privations and death. If the enemies desired to demolish the data on which the Christian preaching was based, they could desire no greater or fuller opportunity.

Matthew's testimony also removes the suspicion that Jesus' body was secreted away by some of His enemies. Otherwise, when the early Christians began to shake Judaism to the core by making thousands of believers in the risen Christ, the rulers would have mercilessly exposed the hoax by simply producing the badly decomposed body themselves. That they did not means they could not.

Together with its companion passage (27:62ff.), this section stresses just how much the whole Passion was under the direction of an omnipotent God whose plans could not be frustrated by the most careful planning of rebellious men bent on having their own way. This realization prepares the mind to accept Jesus' universal authority and the Great Commission (28:18f.; cf. 10:28). Turning his attention away from unbelieving Israel that had despised its true King, in harmony with his Apostolic commission (cf. Acts 13:46), Matthew turns to the Gentiles (28:18-20). Further, by showing that God permitted the resurrection's first messengers to be the enemies' own witnesses whose report was never questioned as completely true, Matthew underlines the fact that intellectual knowledge of the greatest fact in the world is insufficient to produce saving faith. Rather, one's heart must be that of a disciple, open to God, willing to be taught, before faith can lead to salvation. (Cf. 13:18-23; esp. Luke 8:15.)

By reflection on the superficialness and absurdities involved in this story which is included as a model of what skeptics are capable, Matthew's readers are emboldened to face with intelligence, skill and courage all other rationalizing attempts to explain the empty tomb.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. State the reaction of the guards when they returned to their senses.
2. To what specific authority did the soldiers report?
3. Why report specifically to them?
4. What was the immediate reaction of this authority?
5. What was the strategem chosen by the authorities to deal with the new crisis?
6. Explain why people hostile to Jesus invented nothing more plausible than the strategem on which their council finally settled.
7. Did this strategem work? If so, to what extent? If not, to what extent did it fail?
8. List the facts that demonstrate the absurdity of the strategem.