

**Book review: *The Sign* by Thomas de Wesselow**

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In today's increasingly sceptical Western world the idea of God is slowly on its way out. Interest in arguments for unbelief is increasing, driven not only by the naturalistic pre-suppositions of post-Enlightenment philosophy but also by the view that the material universe is the sum total of all reality. The result has been a flood of literature that reveals a puzzling variety of interpretations and a corresponding increase in the number of atheists and agnostic fence-sitters, wavering non-believers and quasi-believers.

Further, the science-religion dialogue is being undermined by extremists indulging in scientism who are unable to explain why what is judged to be the pre-eminent natural phenomenon, that is, the very existence of the universe, is not really a natural phenomenon. The modern philosophical and/or scientific interpretation of the world cannot therefore be the answer to an historical question like the Resurrection of Jesus. It is against this backdrop, coupled with the failure to go deep enough into the field of scripture studies that *The Sign*, by Thomas de Wesselow, should be understood.

De Wesselow wonders why belief in the Resurrection lasted for so long and his contention is based on what, in his view, caused this belief in the first place. The centrepiece of his hypothesis, which he has called "proof" elsewhere, is that the image on the Turin Shroud was interpreted as a "living presence" by the first disciples of Jesus, the stimulus being the instinct known as "animism," which had also something to do with "anthropomorphism". All the narratives about the direct experience of the reality of the risen Jesus, and the subsequent sightings, would have to be interpreted as references to the relic.

Non-corporeal interpretations of the post-mortem experiences are not uncommon even among theologians, particularly among those who deal with systematic theology, and de Wesselow has injected his own alternative understanding into these views. What he has correctly pointed out is that modern historians --- it would have been more correct to say some of them --- have rejected metaphysical explanations for the Resurrection but provided no physical explanation for it. That is why a path was laid for him to present his original physical explanation, a path he could only make use of after dismissing --- just like the sceptical historians--- the "fanciful reports," obstacles that stood in the way.

Among the propositions he presents we read:

- Peter, Paul and James, as well as the other disciples, were convinced about the Resurrection after seeing the image on the Shroud
- It is doubtful that Joseph of Arimathea owned the tomb where Jesus was laid
- Jesus was unwrapped, enveloped again and taken to another site for re-burial and it is likely that the bones were later placed in an ossuary in the Talpiot tomb
- Emmaus should be rejected as fable
- Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is not accurate
- The Shroud --- a burial cloth, unclean in ancient Judaism! --- was shown to the five hundred within the precincts of the Temple
- The splendid mask of Tutankhamon's mummy and the image of Jesus on the Shroud provoked similar reactions, inspiring belief in the divinity of both of them
- It was the relic and not the works of Peter and Paul, not even those of Jesus that led to the birth of Christianity

These are of course only some of the contentions mentioned that rest on decidedly shaky foundations. So while there can be no doubt that de Wesselow is a highly qualified art historian, it also becomes evident when reading his book that there is no serious engagement with the texts in the New Testament. The end result is something like forcing narratives into a Procrustean bed of hypotheses where sceptics can feel comfortable. Not only cannot biblical criticism be taken as the court of final appeal --- that is, the only pipeline to Jesus --- there is also no justification to deny that metaphysical possibilities can fall outside the field of historical investigation.

The Resurrection can be described as less historical; there were much less than a thousand witnesses. Yet, that does not render such an event hard to believe. Which is what made the Orthodox Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide to state that it would have been extremely difficult for Christianity to go beyond the first century without such an extraordinary happening.

No one needs to be a biblical scholar to grasp the fact that Jesus presented himself as someone other than the rest of mankind and particularly other than the rest of contemporary teachers and prophets of old. It is precisely for this reason that Christology has dealt with the question of his pre-existence, in which the post-Easter appearances are also included. And that the question of pre-existence was not introduced by the Church Fathers is clear when even the Babylonian Talmud (b. Pesah.54a and b. Ned. 39b) includes the Messiah among the seven things created before the world came to be, which goes to say that at times the Messiah was thought of as a pre-existent being.

Hated and feared as he was, Jesus would not have been "left in peace" even in death and there would be no possibility of stealing the body for burial in a different site with the disciples proclaiming that he had been raised bodily. With so many enemies around, Christianity would have been nipped in the bud. Even more important, the setting was Palestinian Jewish-Christian, in which the after-life did not mean the Greek philosophical dichotomy of body/soul. Resurrection would necessarily mean "raised bodily," so the existence of both, a tomb where Jesus was lying buried, and a burial cloth, however evident the "living presence" was, would make no sense to the disciples. Jesus was understood and seen to have been bodily raised because of the post-Easter apparitions. And it was as a result of this that the burial cloth got a little more than a passing mention in the Gospel.

No evidence-driven or evidence-based arguments can therefore be seen in *The Sign*. De Wesselow has obviously been well-intentioned in writing this book but it has only served to draw attention to the extraordinary relic that is the Turin Shroud. That the image is subtle is known. It is left to scientists to try to find the secret.

