

Matthew 28:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.

Analysis

Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. The fabricated story is absurd on its face. If the guards 'slept' (κοιμωμένων ἥμῶν/koimōmenōn hēmōn), how could they know who took the body? Sleeping witnesses cannot testify to events during sleep. Roman soldiers sleeping on duty faced execution; admitting they slept was potentially suicidal yet this was their ordered story.

'His disciples came by night' (Οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ νυκτὸς ἐλθόντες/Hoi mathētai autou nyktos elthontes) portrays the disciples as grave robbers. But these same disciples were hiding in terror, having fled when Jesus was arrested (Matthew 26:56). Peter had denied Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-75). They showed no courage or coordination that would enable overpowering armed guards and moving a massive stone in darkness.

'Stole him away' (ἔκλεψαν αὐτόν/eklepsan auton)—the verb means to steal, take secretly. This accusation implies criminal activity. Yet if disciples stole the body, why did they leave grave clothes neatly arranged (John 20:6-7)? Thieves in a hurry would have taken the entire shrouded body, not carefully unwrapped it.

Most decisively, would the disciples die for a known lie? History records that most apostles were martyred for preaching resurrection (tradition and early church testimony, though not all deaths are biblically recorded). People may die for a believed falsehood, but they don't suffer martyrdom for a conspiracy they

fabricated. The disciples' willingness to die for resurrection testimony confirms they genuinely believed it—and they were in position to know whether it was true.

Historical Context

This theft allegation was the primary Jewish polemic against Christianity in the early centuries. Justin Martyr (c. AD 150) records that Jewish authorities sent messengers throughout the Roman world to spread this claim. Origen (c. AD 248) notes that Jews of his day still made this accusation.

The story's persistence actually confirms the empty tomb's reality. If Jesus's body remained in the tomb, authorities could have simply produced it, ending Christianity immediately. That they resorted to theft allegations proves they couldn't produce the body. The debate was never whether the tomb was empty but why it was empty.

The charge also inadvertently supports Gospel reliability. If Christians fabricated resurrection stories, they would never have included this embarrassing detail that their own testimony was publicly contradicted and dismissed. The inclusion of this counter-narrative suggests Matthew recorded what actually happened, including details unfavorable to Christian claims.

The sealed tomb and guard were meant to prevent precisely what they now accused—theft by disciples. The irony is that these very precautions (demanded by chief priests themselves, Matthew 27:64) made theft virtually impossible, strengthening the case that supernatural resurrection occurred.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the illogical nature of the theft story (sleeping guards as witnesses) illustrate how unbelief leads to irrational explanations when rejecting obvious truth?
2. What does the apostles' later willingness to die for resurrection testimony tell us about the objective reality of what they witnessed versus subjective hallucination or fraud?
3. Why would Matthew include this embarrassing detail about a counter-narrative against resurrection rather than omitting it if he were fabricating the account?

Interlinear Text

λέγοντες Εἴπατε ὅτι Οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτὸν νυκτὸς
Saying **Say ye** G3754 G3588 **disciples** **His** **by night**
G3004 G2036 G3101 G846 G3571

ἐλθόντες ἔκλεψαν αὐτὸν ἡμῶν κοιμωμένων
came **and stole** **His** **away while we** **slept**
G2064 G2813 G846 G2257 G2837

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 26:64 (Parallel theme): Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.