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Not Dead but Sleeping

“Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping.”

(Mark 5:39)

Summary: Background – did he mean sleeping? – did he mean dead, but not permanent? – “sleep” as figurative – two Greek words – conclusion.

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The statement that Jairus's twelve-year-old daughter was “not dead, but sleeping” appears in all three synoptic narratives (see also Matthew 9:24; Luke 8:52). But what did Jesus mean when he said so? The girl's death had certainly been reported. As Jesus was on the way to the house where she lived, in response to her father's anguished plea for him to come and lay his healing hands on her, a messenger arrived to say that she had died, so there was no reason to “trouble the Teacher any further”

But Jesus encouraged her father, “Do not be afraid; only believe,” and Jesus went with the father to the house. It was then that he rebuked the crowd that had gathered for the noise they were making.

Did he mean that she was not dead (as had been reported) but only sleeping in the literal sense of the word? The crowd took him to mean that, but it was perfectly evident to them that she was dead. All three evangelists say that “they laughed at him,” and Luke adds “knowing that she was dead” (and the fact that he says “knowing” rather than “supposing” suggests that he believed that she had died).

Or did Jesus mean that her state of death, though real, was not to be permanent – that it would prove to be nothing more than a temporary sleep? Did he, in other words, use the word “sleep”

figuratively, as he did when he reported the death of Lazarus to his disciples by saying, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep” (John 11:11)?

It’s beside the point to say that two different Greek words for “sleep” are used – one in the story of Jairus's daughter and the other in the Lazarus narrative. Both can be used figuratively for death in suitable contexts.

Which way, then, should we interpret our Lord's words? We cannot be certain without the confirmation that a medical certificate would provide. To the modern reader, his words seem ambiguous. To the child, he used the kind of language that might be used to wake a child from sleep: *Talitha cumi* is the Aramaic for “Little girl, get up!” But merely waking a child from sleep is not the kind of event that warrants special mention.

The fact that the evangelists record the incident, along with the way in which they recorded it, suggests they believed she was truly (if only temporarily) dead.