

# Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins\*

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## 1. Introduction

The question of Jesus' resurrection continues to haunt the thinking and writing of many scholars. I shall not debate in detail with them here; there are other places for that. I want instead to sketch, in broad strokes, a historical argument about what happened three days after Jesus' crucifixion.

The question divides into four. First, what did people in the first century, both pagans and Jews, hope for? What did they believe about life after death, and particularly about resurrection? Second, what did the early Christians believe on the same subjects? What did they hope for? Third, what reasons did the early Christians give for their hope and belief, and what did they mean by the key word 'resurrection' which they used of Jesus? Finally, what can the historian say by way of comment on this early Christian claim?

## 2. Life after Death in the First Century

### i. Paganism

Homer was hugely important in the world of late antiquity; and in Homer life after death is pretty bleak. Odysseus's journey to the under world (in Books 10 and 11 of the *Odyssey*) hardly encourages readers to suppose that death will take them into a better world. Hades, the abode of the dead, is a place of shadows and wraiths, who can just about remember what life was like but not much more. This view persists in popular first-century culture, as witnessed by thousands of funerary monuments, tailing off into the shoulder-shrugging agnosticism of the well-known inscription: 'Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo – I wasn't, I was, I am not, I don't care.' Within the more serious philosophies of the first century, this view, suitably refined, would have been shared by many Epicureans at least.<sup>1</sup>

Plato held out a different possibility, the chance of a blissful after-life at least for some. He even speculated about reincarnation, though this is not central to his thought, nor is it stressed in later Platonism. His ideas come through into popular first-century culture not least in the mystery religions. Once philosophical speculation began devising alternatives to the Homeric viewpoint, other positions emerged; for instance, that of Stoicism, that the entire world would be destroyed by fire and be reborn, phoenix-like, only for everything to happen again in exactly the same way as before.

There are numerous sub-topics within ancient pagan views of life after death. Of particular interest is Euripides's play *Alcestis*, where Hercules does battle with the god Thanatos and rescues Alcestis from his clutches, bringing her back to her sorrowing husband. The representation of the scene in ancient art may have influenced the Christian iconography in which Jesus leads Adam and Eve out of Hades. But the flagrantly mythological character of the whole drama does not encourage us to think that either philosophers or ordinary folk really believed that Hercules or anyone else could or would rescue people from actual death.

Indeed, whenever the question of bodily resurrection is raised in the ancient world the answer is negative. Homer does not imagine that there is a way back; Plato does not suppose anyone in their right mind would want one. There may or may not be various forms of life after death, but the one thing there isn't is resurrection: the word *anastasis*

refers to something that everybody knows doesn't happen. The classic statement is in Aeschylus's play *Eumenides* (647-8), in which, during the founding of the Court of the Areopagus, Apollo himself declares that when a man has died, and his blood is spilt on the ground, there is no resurrection. The language of resurrection, or something like it, was used in Egypt in connection with the very full and developed view of the world beyond death. But this new life was something that had, it was believed, already begun, and it did not involve actual bodily return to the present world. Nor was everybody fooled by the idea that the dead were already enjoying a full life beyond the grave. When the eager Egyptians tried to show their new ruler Augustus their hoard of wonderful mummies, he replied that he wanted to see kings, not corpses.<sup>2</sup>

What then did people mean when they spoke of 'hope', and indeed built temples to the goddess Spes, including some in Rome itself? Very much this-worldly futures: peace and security, social stability, crops and harvests, large families and good fortune. The best future, indeed for some the only future, was a lasting name and reputation. Though the importance of the individual is hardly a modern invention, as is sometimes supposed, there was in the classical world considerable fluidity between one's own fate and that of one's family, one's city, and one's culture.

Some within the ancient pagan world believed in the apotheosis of heroes and kings. The mythological Hercules began as a mortal and was exalted to quasi-divinity. Kings and emperors, from Alexander to the Julio-Claudians and beyond, were regularly deified, using various legitimating devices, mostly to do with witnessing the departed person's soul ascending to heaven, perhaps in the form of a comet, as with Julius Caesar, or an eagle, as depicted on Titus's Arch. Ordinary mortals did not expect this treatment, of course. And Seneca's merry parody of the apotheosis of Claudius, though itself of course written to highlight Rome's good fortune in having Nero as his successor, makes us question how many Romans believed that emperors, or at least good ones, were now alive and well alongside Jupiter, Apollo and the rest.<sup>3</sup> The language in question did, however, relate to the hope of the ancient world: many believed, despite evidence to the contrary, that a strong central ruler would guarantee freedom, peace, and future security.

## ii. *Judaism*

When we turn to ancient Judaism the picture is both very similar and very different. The Hebrew Sheol, the place of the dead, is not very different from Homer's Hades. People are asleep there; they can sometimes be woken up, as with Saul and Samuel, but to do so is dangerous, and forbidden.<sup>4</sup> That is the picture we get from most of the Old Testament.

The Psalms begin to explore ways in which YHWH's love will be known after death. It is notoriously difficult to date these passages, and they remain controversial. Psalm 73 is perhaps the clearest statement of a post-mortem hope. Unlike Plato, the biblical mentions of a hope beyond the grave are not predicated on the existence of an immortal soul which will automatically have a future life, but on the love and faithfulness of YHWH in the present, which must, the poets suppose, continue into the future.

The Jewish hope burst the bounds of ancient paganism altogether by speaking of resurrection. The supposed Zoroastrian origin of this belief is still argued by some but strenuously denied by others, who see the metaphors of Isaiah 26 and Ezekiel 37, and the earlier hints in Hosea 6, as opening the way for a new view, generated by Israel's own basic beliefs and contingent circumstances, which comes to full expression in Daniel chapter 12. Despite what is often supposed, this belief, when it arises, is in paradoxical continuity with the ancient Hebrew belief in Sheol. Unlike Platonists, who preferred a disembodied immortality, those who believed in resurrection agreed with the ancient Israelites that real life meant embodied life. The difference is that in the earlier view those in Sheol cannot have it again (as in the book of Job, apart from the controversial

passage in chapter 19), whereas in the resurrection passages they can and will. It is therefore misleading to suggest a steady development through the Old Testament, from 'no future hope' to 'a disembodied future hope' to 'a fully-blown resurrection hope'. The first and the third stages have more in common with each other — a strong belief in the goodness of the present created order and of human life within it— than either has with the second.

Post-biblical Judaism offers a range of beliefs about life after death. Resurrection is by no means the only option; and, when it is specified, it is not a general word for life after death, but a term for one particular belief. In fact, resurrection is not simply a form of 'life after death'; resurrection hasn't happened yet. People do not pass directly from death to resurrection, but go through an interim period, after which the death of the body will be reversed in resurrection. Resurrection does not, then, mean 'survival'; it is not a way of describing the kind of life one might have immediately following physical death. It is not a *redescription* of death and/or the state which results from death. In both paganism and Judaism it refers to the reversal, the undoing, the conquest of death and its effects. That is its whole point. That is what Homer, Plato, Aeschylus and the others denied; and it is what some Jews, and all early Christians, affirmed.

Resurrection, in other words, means being given back one's body, or perhaps God creating a new similar body, some time after death. It is, in fact, life *after* 'life after death'; because where you find a belief in resurrection you also find, unsurprisingly, a belief in some kind of intermediate state in between death and resurrection. Various ways of describing this were developed: the souls of the righteous, said Wisdom (3.1), were in God's hand. Others spoke of a quasi-angelic intermediate existence, or of spirits that lived on prior to the resurrection. The patriarchs were 'alive to God'. The Persian term 'Paradise' was employed, not necessarily for the final destination of resurrection, but, sometimes at least (e.g. *1 Enoch* 37-70), for the peaceful garden where people rested before their new bodily life began.

There is no space here to itemize individual sources, themselves often matters of dispute. I merely sketch the overall shape of Jewish belief. The spectrum runs from those who deny the resurrection to those who insist upon it. The Sadducees deny the world to come altogether, reminding us that resurrection was and remained an explicitly political doctrine, about God turning the present world and its power structures upside down. Thus the Pharisees' belief in the resurrection was part of their generally revolutionary ideology: as in Daniel and Maccabees, resurrection was an incentive to martyrdom. I am not convinced that the Essenes believed in resurrection; but I do hold that Wisdom of Solomon 3.7-8 teaches resurrection, a re-embodiment for the righteous whose souls are presently in the hand of God, who will be given a new life in which, to the consternation of their former persecutors, they will return and rule over nations and kingdoms. Finally, a much more Platonic picture is held by Philo of Alexandria, who believed in disembodied bliss for the immortal soul. This belief is shared by Jubilees.

Resurrection is thus one point on the spectrum of Jewish beliefs about life after death. If Christianity had been simply a sect of miscellaneous Jews who had followed Jesus or approved his teaching, we might have expected a similar spread of views, and the fact that we do not is a major part of our question about Christian origins; but that is to run ahead of my story. The second point to note about Jewish belief in resurrection is that, where it did occur, it was never a detached belief. It was always part of a larger picture of what God was going to do for the nation and indeed the world.

This is where Isaiah 26 and Ezekiel 37 come into their own. Though already by the first century, perhaps already in Daniel, some were reading them as prophecies of a literal resurrection, their context insists that God intends to restore Israel as a reaction is not an isolated hope for the individual, as so often in the modern west. It is part of the hope for the nation. And, as often as not, it is part of the hope that God will put the whole world to rights, bringing judgment upon the powerful and arrogant, and mercy to the poor and downtrodden. And when resurrection happened, it would therefore happen to all God's

people at the same moment.

Resurrection is one point on a larger spectrum; it will happen all at once as part of God's future for Israel and the world; and, third, it was fairly unspecific in detail. The rabbis debate whether God will start with the soul and gradually build up to the solid body, or whether, as in Ezekiel, God will begin with the bones and add flesh and sinews, finally adding breath as in Genesis 2. In each case, of course, what you end up with is what we would call a physical body; but there was no agreement as to whether this body would be exactly like the one you had before, or significantly different in some way. The Maccabean martyrs taunt their torturers with the promise that God will give them back their hands, tongues and so forth, which are presently being mutilated. This is consistent with, and probably indicates, a belief that resurrection means a return to a form of life very similar to the present one. But there is no unanimity on this; other texts, such as Daniel 12, can be interpreted in terms of an astral resurrection, shining like stars.<sup>5</sup> The belief remains vague and unfocused.

Finally, some at least of those who believed in the resurrection also believed in the coming of the Messiah, though the relation between Messiah and resurrection is not usually clear. The Messiah would defeat YHWH's enemies, rebuild or cleanse the Temple, and establish YHWH's rule in the world. Belief in the coming of a Messiah was obviously political as well as theological, as the messianic movements in the period bear witness. Resurrection and Messiah together speak of the time when God will be king and the present rulers (Caesar, Herod, the Sadducees) will be deposed. Together they speak of the coming Reign of God.

It was from within one such prophetic and messianic renewal movement that the early Christians emerged, saying two things in particular: Jesus was and is the Messiah, and this is proved because he has been raised from the dead. But before we can look at these claims we must set the early Christian views about future hope, including life after death, resurrection, and some wider issues like Messiahship, in parallel with Judaism and paganism.

### ***3. The Early Christian Hope: Modified and Realised***

Early Christian views about life after death, clearly belonged within the Jewish spectrum, not the pagan one, but were also clearly different. This gives us a fresh purchase on the question, why did they reshape the hope in that way?

Almost all early Christians known to us believed that their ultimate hope was the resurrection of the body. There is no spectrum such as in Judaism. Some in Corinth denied the future resurrection (1 Corinthians 15.12), but Paul put them straight; they were most likely reverting to pagan views, not opting for an over-realized Jewish eschatology. Two named individuals in 2 Timothy 2.18 say the resurrection has already happened, but they stand out by their oddity, and they too bear witness to the fact that mainstream early Christianity did indeed hope for resurrection, even if by the end of the first generation some were using that language in a new way, to refer simply to a new present identity or spiritual experience — marking the road to the gnostic views of, for instance, the *Epistle to Rheginos*.

This almost complete absence of a spectrum of belief itself demands explanation, but before we can offer one we must add two further points. First, the early Christian belief in resurrection had a much more precise shape and content than anything we find in Judaism. In early Christianity, obviously in Paul but not only there, resurrection will be an act of new creation, accomplished by the Holy Spirit, and the body which is to be is already planned by God. This will not be a simple return to the same sort of body as before; nor will it be an abandonment of embodiedness in order to enjoy a disembodied

bliss. It will involve transformation, the gift of a new body with different properties. This is so engrained in earliest Christianity that it already affects teaching on other subjects, such as baptism (Romans 6) and ethics (Colossians 3).

Where did that idea come from? Not from any ancient paganism known to us; and not, or not straightforwardly, from any ancient Judaism. The best-known feature of resurrection in Daniel 12 is that the righteous will shine like stars; that, interestingly, is one thing the early Christians do *not* say about the hope of resurrection, except in one gospel passage (Matthew 13.43) not echoed elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The hope of resurrection is thus not only virtually universal in early Christianity; it is much more sharply focussed than its Jewish equivalent.

What then do the New Testament writers mean when they speak of an inheritance waiting for us in heaven? This has been much misunderstood, with awesome results in traditions of thought, prayer, life and art. The point of such passages, as in 1 Peter 1.4, 2 Corinthians 5.1, Philippians 3.20, and so forth, is not that one must 'go to heaven', as in much-popular imagination, in order to enjoy the inheritance there. It is rather that 'heaven' is the place where God stores up his plans and purposes for the future. If I tell a friend that there is beer in the fridge, that doesn't mean he has to get into the fridge in order to enjoy the beer. When the early Christians speak of a new body in heaven, or an inheritance in heaven, they mean what St John the Divine means in Revelation 21: the new identity which at present is kept safe in heaven will be brought from heaven *to* earth at the great moment of renewal. Yes: the great majority of Christian expressions of hope through the middle ages, the reformation, and the counter-reformation periods have been misleading. 'Heaven' is not the Christian's ultimate destination. For renewed bodies we need a renewed cosmos, including a renewed earth. That is what the New Testament promises.

The third way in which early Christian belief about resurrection is significantly different from that of second-Temple Judaism is that, particularly in Paul, 'the resurrection' has split into two. Paul still sees 'the resurrection of the dead' as a single theological event,<sup>7</sup> but it takes place in two phases: first the Messiah, then at his coming all his people.<sup>8</sup> This too only makes sense within second-Temple Judaism, but it is something no second-Temple Jew had said before. Resurrection had been a single all-embracing moment, not a matter of one person being raised ahead of everybody else.

These modifications and sharpenings of the Jewish belief demand a historical explanation, and we shall come to that presently. But there were other modifications as well. Those Jews who believed in resurrection developed, as we saw, ways of speaking about the interim state of those who had died, ways of holding on to the belief that the physically dead had not entirely ceased to exist, but that they were still 'there' to be raised again on the last day. The early Christians, seeking to say the same thing, used some of the same language but some different expressions as well. They spoke of people being 'asleep in Christ'.<sup>9</sup> Revelation speaks of the souls under the altar who wake up, ask what time it is, and are told to go back to sleep again.<sup>10</sup> The penitent thief will be with Jesus in Paradise — presumably not a final destination, even if we take 'today' metaphorically.<sup>11</sup> Paul speaks of his desire being to 'depart and be with the Messiah, which is far better'.<sup>12</sup> The closest the New Testament gets to speaking of the dead being in 'heaven', even as a temporary resting place, is when in Revelation 21 the New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, comes down to earth from heaven, where presumably she has been waiting, in order that the wedding can take place.

Finally, the early Christians speak of one major aspect of the Jewish hope as already emphatically realised. Jesus himself was and is the Messiah, and they looked for no other. This deserves much more elaboration than I can give it here.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus had not done what Messiahs were supposed to do. He had neither won a decisive victory over Israel's political enemies, nor restored the Temple (except in the most ambiguous symbolic fashion). Nor had he brought God's justice and peace to the

world; the wolf was not yet lying down with the lamb. But the early gospel traditions are already shaped by the belief that Jesus was Israel's Messiah; Paul regularly calls him Christos, and if that term had become for him merely a proper name (which I dispute) that only goes to show how firmly Jesus' messianic identity was already established by Paul's day. For Revelation, Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. The historian is bound to face the question: once Jesus had been crucified, why would anyone say that he was Israel's Messiah?

Nobody said that about Judas the Galilean after his revolt ended in failure in AD 6. Nobody said it of Simon bar-Giora after his death at the end of Titus's triumph in AD 70. Nobody said it about bar-Kochbar after his defeat and death in 135. On the contrary. Where messianic movements tried to carry on after the death of their would-be Messiah, their most important task was to find another Messiah.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the early Christians did not do that, but continued, against all precedent, to regard Jesus himself as Messiah, despite outstanding alternative candidates such as the righteous, devout and well-respected James, Jesus' own brother, is evidence that demands an explanation. As with their beliefs about resurrection, they redefined Messiahship itself, and with it their whole view of the problem that Israel and the world faced and the solution that they believed God had provided. They remained at one level a classic Jewish messianic movement, owing fierce allegiance to their Messiah and claiming Israel and the whole world in his name. But the mode of that claim, and the underlying allegiance itself, were drastically redefined.

The rise of early Christianity, and the shape that it took in two central and vital respects, thus presses upon the historian the question for an explanation. The early Christians retained the Jewish belief in resurrection, but both modified it and made it more sharp and precise. They retained the Jewish belief in a coming Messiah, but redrew it quite drastically around Jesus himself. Why?

#### ***4. Reasons for the Development: From Theology to Story***

The answer the early Christians themselves give for these changes, of course, is that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. It is Jesus' own resurrection that has given force and new shape to the Christian hope.<sup>15</sup> It was, they insist, Jesus' own resurrection which constituted him as Messiah, and, if Messiah, then Lord of the world.<sup>16</sup> But what exactly did they mean by this, and what brought them to such a belief?

We must now come to the third and fourth stages of my argument. First, we must establish, against some rival claims, that they really did intend to say that Jesus had been bodily raised; they were not simply using that language to describe something else, a different belief about Jesus or a different experience they had had. Second, we must enquire as historians what could have caused them to say such a thing.

It is out of the question, for a start, that the disciples were simply extrapolating from the teaching of Jesus himself. One of the many curious things about Jesus' teaching is that though resurrection was a well-known topic of debate at the time we only have one short comment of his on the subject, in reply to the question from the Sadducees — a comment which is itself notoriously cryptic, like some of its companion pieces in the synoptic tradition. Apart from that, there are the short repeated predictions of Jesus' passion and resurrection, which many of course assume are *vaticinia ex eventu*, and two or three other cryptic references.<sup>17</sup>

These are scarcely enough to suggest that the disciples invented stories of Jesus' resurrection, on the basis of his teaching, after his death. Other Jews had died promising resurrection, the Maccabees being the most obvious example (2 Maccabees 7, etc.); their

followers regarded them as heroes and martyrs, and believed devoutly that they *would* be raised from the dead; but nobody said they *had* been, for the rather obvious reason that they hadn't.<sup>18</sup> And even if, against all probability, we were to suggest that the disciples had indeed invented resurrection-stories on the basis of Jesus' sayings, this would still not account for the modifications and new focus they gave to the existing Jewish notions of resurrection.

One regular proposal, which has taken various forms, is that though the early church used the language of resurrection about Jesus, and eventually wrote down stories about how it had happened, this developed originally from something else, a different experience or belief. In particular, some have said, Jesus' followers came first to a belief in his exaltation, and they deduced from this, either by logic or devotion, that he had been raised from the dead.

This needs a little more unpacking. Sometimes it has been argued, or more often assumed, that the early Christians believed that Jesus had been in some sense exalted (though why they believed this remains uncertain) and that they either *expressed* this belief by saying that he had been raised from the dead (misleadingly, because there was never what 'resurrection' meant in their world) or *deduced* from this that he *had in fact* been raised from the dead (though again why they would make such a deduction, in a world where 'resurrection' was something to do with bodies, and for that matter something that would happen to all the righteous at once, is not clear). At other times it has been argued that the disciples came to believe in Jesus' actual divinity, perhaps by experiencing him as a divine presence, and again either *expressed* this by saying he had been raised, or *deduced from it* the fact that he had been raised. In this case, too, the logic fails at every point when we remind ourselves of how these ideas worked within the historical world of the first century.<sup>19</sup>

It is true that Paul can sometimes speak simply of Jesus' death and exaltation, without mentioning the resurrection explicitly, as in the poem of Philippians 2.6-11 — though it is equally true that in the same letter he can speak emphatically of the bodily transformation that Jesus will effect on believers still alive at his return.<sup>20</sup> And when he sums up the traditional gospel announcement in 1 Corinthians 15.21 a summary which must have done justice to what Cephas and Apollos said as well, otherwise the Corinthians would have been able to challenge him on it, it is clear that the gospel is about *an event which happened at some interval after Jesus' death*.<sup>21</sup>

This has not, I think, been sufficiently thought through. If we assume, as is often done, that talking of Jesus' resurrection is simply a flowery, perhaps Jewish, way of talking about him 'going to heaven when he died', so that his death and his 'exaltation' were actually the same thing, and together constitute him as divine, where did the notion of an *interval* come from? I have often heard it said, sometimes by people who should know better, that Jesus died and was 'resurrected to heaven', but that is precisely not what the early Christians said. Raised from the dead, yes; exalted to heaven, yes; but resurrection never did mean 'going to heaven when you die', and it certainly did not mean that when people used it to talk about Jesus.<sup>22</sup> No: if the early Christians had been merely 'deducing' Jesus' resurrection from some other belief about something he had become through dying, the talk of an interval between death and resurrection would never have arisen — unless we are to postulate yet another cycle of improbable development of tradition, moving from exaltation to resurrection to a three-day gap.<sup>23</sup> Jews, after all, had well-developed ways of talking about martyrs being honoured and respected, and they believed that they would be raised in the future. If the early Christians thought Jesus, upon his death, had gone to a special place of honour with God, that would have been the obvious language for them to use.

The key questions here are the following: (a) whether Jesus' death would by itself have precipitated the language of exaltation or vindication; (b) if not, whether any subsequent experience (other than resurrection itself) would have done so; and (c) what

reason there is, even if we were to grant that people had begun to speak of Jesus being exalted, being glorified, or even perhaps being seen as divine, to suppose that they would *deduce* from that that he had been raised from the dead? The answers are all obviously negative. One can understand why, if they believed that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead, they came to believe, after he had ceased to appear to them, that he had now been exalted to heaven. But when you think about the options open to first-century Jews faced with a dead Messiah, there is simply no route in the opposite direction.

Some theologians have brought together Jesus' resurrection and the early disciples' recognition of his divinity in a way which seems to me to short-circuit any process that we can reasonably suppose to have been historical. Even if Peter and the rest, two or three days after Jesus' crucifixion, had somehow become convinced that he was the second person of the Trinity — an idea which takes some imagination — there is no reason to suppose that they would have deduced from this that God 'must have' raised him from the dead. Apotheosis along the lines of Hercules, Alexander and the Caesars was of course unknown in Judaism, but even if that was the route they had gone there is no reason to suppose that they would have added resurrection to the mix. No: I believe we must firmly uncouple the historical discussion of Jesus' resurrection from the historical discussion of the rise of an early, high Christology (in which I also believe); or, at least, we must insist that the only credible line of explanation runs *from* resurrection *to* Christology (about which more anon), rather than in the opposite direction.

In any case, with all of these accounts which suppose that the disciples *deduced* Jesus' resurrection from something else, or expressed some other belief in the (misleading) fashion of 'he's been raised from the dead', we are still faced with the major problem: why would 'resurrection' itself, and the hope for a Messiah, have been so drastically adjusted as we find them to have been in early Christianity?

We are forced to conclude that when the early Christians said that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and gave that as their reason for reshaping their beliefs about resurrection itself on the one hand and Messiahship on the other, they were using the language in its normal sense. That which Aeschylus said couldn't happen to anyone, and Daniel said would, to all God's people at once, had happened to Jesus, all by himself. That was what they intended to say. And this brings us, at last, to the resurrection narratives themselves.

The first point to make here is vital. I have argued that the early Christians looked forward to a resurrection which was not a mere resuscitation, nor yet the abandonment of the body and the liberation of the soul, but a transformation, a new type of body living within a new type of world. This belief is embroidered with biblical motifs, articulated in rich theology. Yet in the gospel narratives we find a story, told from different angles of course, without such embroidering and theology — told indeed in restrained, largely unadorned prose. Yet the story is precisely of a single body neither abandoned, nor merely resuscitated, but transformed; and this, though itself totally unexpected, could give rise to exactly that developed view of which I have spoken. The Easter narratives, in other words, appear to offer an answer to why the early Christian hope and life took the form and shape they did.

Were the four gospels, then, all derived from this developed theology? Are they all later narrational adaptations of a doctrinal and exegetical basis, from which of course all traces of dogma and exegesis have, in each case, been carefully extracted? Hardly. It is far easier to say that the stories, or something like them, came first, and that Paul and the other later theologians have reflected deeply upon them, have indeed reshaped and rethought one branch of mainstream Jewish theology around them, but have not substantially modified them.

A few more remarks about the narratives themselves. Matthew's story is often seen as anti-Jewish apologetic — not surprisingly, because he himself tells us that he is countering a story current among non-Christian Jews of his day. But even if Matthew

does represent a later polemic, the debate itself — that some say Jesus' body was stolen, and others say it wasn't — bears witness to my more fundamental point, that in the first century 'resurrection' wasn't about exaltation, spiritual presence, a sense of forgiveness, or divinization; it was about bodies and tombs. If someone had been able to say 'oh, don't you understand? When I say "resurrection", all I mean is that Jesus is in heaven and he is my Lord, that I've had a new sense of God's love and forgiveness,' the dangerous debate about tombs, guards, angels and bodies could have been abandoned with a sigh of relief all round.<sup>24</sup>

Second, a word about Mark. When Mark says that the women 'said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid,' he does not mean they never said anything to anyone. I do not think, in any case, that Mark finished his gospel at chapter 16 verse 8. I think he wrote more, which is now lost. But I think his emphatic denial that the women said anything to anyone is meant to counter the charge, actual or possible, that if the women really had seen something remarkable — an empty tomb, a rolled-away stone, an angel — they would have been bound to tell everyone they met. This they had not done; so (the charge would run) maybe they had not seen anything much after all? Certainly not, replies Mark: the reason they said nothing to anyone (until, we presume, they got to the disciples) is because they were scared stiff.

Third, a word about Luke and John. They tell, of course, much fuller stories than Matthew and Mark, and it is they who are normally accused of having developed, or invented, these stories to combat the danger of docetic views within the early church, beliefs that Jesus in his risen body wasn't really a physical human being, but only seemed to be. Leave aside the fact that that is not what mainstream docetism wanted to say anyway — it was a belief about Jesus' pre-crucifixion humanity more than about his risen body — and concentrate on what Luke and John actually say. Yes, they have him eating food. Yes, he invites them to touch him, to inspect him, to make sure he is a real human being. But these are the same accounts, in the same passages, which have Jesus appearing and disappearing, sometimes through locked doors. If Luke or John wanted to invent anti-docetic, no-nonsense real-body stories, they surely could have done better than this. No: it really does look as if they are telling, with continuing bewilderment, stories which, though astonishing at the time as they still are, provided the basis we are seeking for the transformed belief about resurrection we have outlined earlier: stories about Jesus' body being neither abandoned (as though he had simply 'gone to heaven' and was now a 'spiritual', 'non-bodily' presence) nor merely resuscitated, like Lazarus, and like (perhaps) the martyrs expected to be, but *transformed*, so that, though in all sorts of ways still 'bodily', and certainly so as to leave an empty tomb behind him, his body was now significantly different, with new properties, in a way that nothing in the Jewish tradition had prepared him or his followers for. Indeed, the one new property which you would have expected them to include, had they been making these stories up on the basis of scripture, they do not. In none of the accounts is there the slightest suggestion that Jesus' body was shining like a star.

I suggest, in fact, that the gospel stories themselves, though no doubt written down a good deal later than Paul, go back with minimal editorial addition to the very early stories told by the first disciples in the earliest days of Christianity. They are not the later narrational adaptation of early Christian theology; they are its foundation.

This does not mean, of course, that they are photographic descriptions of 'what happened'. No historical narrative is ever quite that. But they challenge today's historian, as they challenged their first hearers, either to accept them or to come up with a better explanation for why Christianity began and why it took the shape it did.

## ***5. From Story to Event***

This brings us, finally, to our fourth question. What can the historian say that will account for the early Christians' claim that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead, the explanation they themselves offer for their drastic modification of the Jewish hope?

There has been no shortage of hypotheses designed to explain why the early Christians really did believe that Jesus really had been raised from the dead. These come in many shapes and sizes, but most of them feature one of three types of explanation. (1) Jesus did not really die; he somehow survived. (2) The tomb was empty, but nothing else happened. (3) The disciples had visions of Jesus, but without there being an empty tomb.

(1) The first can be disposed of swiftly. Roman soldiers knew how to kill people especially rebel kings. First-century Jews knew the difference between a survivor and someone newly alive.

(2) The second is only a little more complicated. Faced with an empty tomb, but with no other evidence, the disciples would have known the answer; the body had been stolen by someone. These things happened. They were not expecting Jesus to rise again; by itself, an empty tomb would prove as little to them as it would to us.

(3) Visions were frequent and well known — including visions of someone recently dead. We did not have to wait for modern medicine, psychology and pastoral records to tell us that these things happen. Faced with Peter knocking on the door when they thought he was about to be killed, the praying church assumed he had died and was paying them a post-mortem visit; 'it must be his angel', they said.<sup>25</sup> Even lifelike visions would not prevent people conducting a funeral, continuing to mourn, and venerating the tomb.

To cut a long story very short: to explain why the early Christians really did believe that Jesus really had been raised from the dead, we must postulate three things: Jesus really had been dead; the tomb really was empty, and it really was his tomb; they really did see, meet and talk with a figure who was not only demonstrably the crucified Jesus but who seemed to be in some ways different — though not in the ways one would have imagined from reading Isaiah, Ezekiel or Daniel.

Can we go beyond this? What then can and must be said?

To move any further back, from the empty tomb and the visions of a previously dead Jesus, is notoriously difficult, even when we have become quite clear what the early church really meant by those stories. There are a couple of related difficulties which must be cleared out of the way.

First, there is a hare-and-tortoise puzzle currently vexing cautious-minded historians. I propose we take a tough line with it and simply insist on common sense. All writing, all history, all biography, is someone's 'construction' of reality. This leads many to say, again and again, that all we can know is 'Matthew's construction of Christian origins,' 'Mark's view of Easter,' and so on. There is a grain of truth in this. But the fact that the historian has a point of view does not mean that nothing happened. History proceeds, not just by deduction from each individual piece of evidence, but by abduction, by inference to the best explanation. We must not be browbeaten by an over-cautious epistemology. This is where the hare must stride confidently past the tortoise, ignoring the protests which say all he can ever do is halve the distance between them.

Second, much more seriously, there is the problem I associate with Hans Frei and others.<sup>26</sup> If we attempt to argue for the historical truth of the resurrection on standard historical grounds, have we not allowed historical method, perhaps including its hidden Enlightenment roots, to become lord, to set the bounds of what we know, rather than allowing God himself, Jesus himself, and indeed the resurrection itself, to establish not only what we know but how we can know it? This is I think a proper question (though it is not without echoes, not least in the Yale school of which Frei was a part, of the hare-

and-tortoise problem itself), and we must face it directly.<sup>27</sup>

The problem arises, I think, not least from the fact that the events concerning Jesus, and particularly his resurrection, have often been seen, not least within a systematic theology that has lost contact with historical scholarship, as direct evidence about the divinity of Jesus, or, to put it the other way, about the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. This then poses the problem: how can the historian claim to get to that point, the point which should only be accessible to Christian faith, by the apparently 'neutral', even maybe would-be 'objective', route of historical enquiry?

The answer is that both halves of the equation are misconceived. On the one hand, the resurrection did not for the first Christians, and does not today, 'prove' that Jesus was and/or is 'divine'. If one of the brigands crucified alongside Jesus had been found to be alive again three days later, people would have said the world was a very odd place, but nobody would have said he was the second person of the Trinity. If one of the Maccabean martyrs, who died believing that God would raise them from the dead, had been found to be alive again a few days later, everyone would have been shocked, including the resurrected persons themselves; this was supposed to be something that happened to all the righteous together, not to one person ahead of the rest. But nobody would have imagined that this meant he or she was in any sense divine. And, supposing such a thing could have happened, it would in principle be open to historical investigation just like any other reported event.

On the other hand, the Frei school have overstated their case about the nature of historical investigation. By no means all historians today believe that they are 'objective' or 'neutral', attaining fixed and unalterable results by supposedly scientific means. On the contrary, I myself stand in a line of historians who have explicitly renounced that pseudo-objectivity and have instead argued for a form of 'critical realism' in which the interaction between the historian and the subject matter is fully allowed for.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, in this case, the evidence presents us with exactly the sort of result that Christian theologians ought to be happy with. I would not pretend to have found an argument that would force a sceptic to admit that Jesus 'must have' been raised from the dead. It is always open to anyone to say, at least, 'I can't think of a better explanation, but I know there must be one, because I intend to hold to my presupposition that dead people don't rise.' Cautious agnosticism is always an option. What historical investigation can do, and in this case I believe must do, is to clear away the overgrown thickets of misunderstanding, misreading, sheer bad history, and sometimes willful obfuscation, in order that the main texts can be allowed to say what they are saying and the main questions may stand out in their stark simplicity.

Historical investigation, I propose, brings us to the point where we must say that the tomb previously housing a thoroughly dead Jesus was empty, and that his followers saw and met someone they were convinced was this same Jesus, bodily alive though in a new, transformed fashion. The empty tomb on the one hand and the convincing appearances of Jesus on the other are the two conclusions the historian must draw. I do not think that history can force us to draw any particular further deductions beyond these two phenomena; the conclusion the disciples drew is there for the taking, but it is open to us, as it was to them, to remain cautious. Thomas waited a week before believing what he had been told. On Matthew's mountain, some had their doubts.

However, the elegance and simplicity of explaining the two outstanding phenomena, the empty tomb and the visions, by means of one another, ought to be obvious. Were it not for the astounding, and world-view-challenging, claim that is thereby made, I think everyone would long since have concluded that this was the correct historical result. If some other account explained the rise of Christianity as naturally, completely and satisfyingly as does the early Christians' belief, while leaving normal worldviews intact, it would be accepted without demur.

That, I believe, is the result of the investigation I have conducted. There are many other things to say about Jesus' resurrection. But, as far as I am concerned, the historian may and must say that all other explanations for why Christianity arose, and why it took the shape it did, are far less convincing *as historical explanations* than the one the early Christians themselves offer: that Jesus really did rise from the dead on Easter morning, leaving an empty tomb behind him. The origins of Christianity, the reason why this new movement came into being and took the unexpected form it did, and particularly the strange mutations it produced within the Jewish hope for resurrection and the Jewish hope for a Messiah, are best explained by saying that something happened, two or three days after Jesus' death, for which the accounts in the four gospels are the least inadequate expression we have.

Of course, there are several reasons why people may not want, and often refuse, to believe this. But the historian must weigh, as well, the alternative accounts they themselves offer. And, to date, none of them have anything like the explanatory power of the simple, but utterly challenging, Christian one. The historian's task is not to force people to believe. It is to make it clear that the sort of reasoning historians characteristically employ — inference to the best explanation, tested rigorously in terms of the explanatory power of the hypothesis thus generated — points strongly *towards* the bodily resurrection of Jesus; and to make clear, too, that from that point on the historian alone cannot help. When you're dealing with worldviews, every community and every person must make their choices in the dark, even if there is a persistent rumour of light around the next corner.

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1 Details of these and other positions are given in my forthcoming book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress).

2 Dio Cassius, *Hist* 51.16.

3 Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*.

4 1 Samuel 28.3-25.

5 Not 'astral *immortality*', as is often said; as with all resurrection language, Daniel is talking about something that happens as a new thing to people who have already been dead for some time. Cf. too Wisd. 3.7.

6 Cf. too Phil 2.13, though that is about present Christian witness.

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7 See e.g. Rom 1.4; 1 Cor 15.20-28.

8 1 Cor 15.23.

9 e.g. 1 Cor 15.18.

10 Rev 6.9-11.

11 Luke 23.43.

12 Phil 1.23.

13 See e.g. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God (Christian Origins and the Question of God vol. 2)* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), ch. 11.

14 See *The New Testament and the People of God* 175-81 for a description of various movements.

15 1 Cor 15; 1 Pet 1.3-5; etc.

16 Acts 2.24-36, etc.; Romans 1.4, 15.12, etc.

17 The 'sign of Jonah', or at least the comments on it which are paralleled in Matthew and Luke (Matt. 12.41-2; Luke 11.30-32); *the palinggenesia* in Matt 19.28; and the command not to tell about the transfiguration until the Son of Man has been raised (Mark 9.9f.). See further N.T. Wright, 'Resurrection in Q?' in *Christology, Controversy & Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole*, ed. D.G. Horrell and C.M. Tuckett (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 85-97.

18 Against S.J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* (Hamburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), ch. 7, who suggests that Jesus' first followers began by saying he would be raised from the dead in the future, and soon changed this into the claim that he already had been.

19 Similarly with attempts along the lines of 'they experienced the Spirit'. Other people did this — e.g. Qumran — without deducing that their leader had been raised from the dead.

20 Phil 3.20f.

21 Vv. 3-9; see too 1 Thess 4.14a.

22 We may suspect that we are witnessing the assimilation of early Christian tradition to the misleading later Christian tradition about personal destiny, in which 'going to heaven when you die is the end of the story. Even at that level, the account is sadly lacking; whoever supposed that Jesus was simply the first Christian?

23 Here belongs also, properly, an account of Paul's conversion and the ways in which it was, and he and the others knew it was, peculiar; in other words; we cannot assimilate all encounters with the risen Christ to the blinding light on the Damascus Road.

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24 I have in mind here not least the treatment of E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (London: Collins, 1979), e.g. 390f.

25 Acts 12.15.

26 See e.g. H. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

27 I think particularly of those like Luke T. Johnson on the Roman Catholic side (*The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995)), and Christopher Seitz on the Protestant side (*Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) ch. 5), who have protested shrilly against any attempt to reconstruct Jesus, and particularly his resurrection, by normal historical means. It is not just that they think it is impossible; they see it as an act of treason, either against the church and its traditions (Johnson) or against scripture and its witness (Seitz). This is where the postmodern problem about the extra-textual reality seems to be influencing the supposed Christian problem of an extra-scriptural understanding.

28 See *The New Testament and the People of God*, Part II. The methodological basis for this goes back not least to Bernard Lonergan, whom I first encountered through the work of Ben Meyer, e.g. *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1978). I have discussed these matters a bit further in 'In Grateful Dialogue: A Response,' in Carey C. Newman, ed., *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999, 244-77, at 245-52).