

REAL EASTER: THE PLAUSIBILITY and HISTORICITY of JESUS' RESURRECTION

Introduction: The Central Significance of the Resurrection

From a biblical perspective, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is of prime importance. The earliest account of it in the New Testament, as provided by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, makes this point in stark terms:

...if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (v.14)

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (v.17)

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people to be most pitied. (v.19)

If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." (v.32)

The supreme place and indispensability of the resurrection are stressed in many other New Testament passages. The gospels, written after 1 Corinthians 15 but recording the events of Jesus' own life and ministry, all climax in reports that on the third day after his crucifixion, death and burial, Jesus rose from the grave, leaving an empty tomb (Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:11-15; Luke 24:1-12; John 20: 11-18).

Jesus' own Gospel teaching had indicated that his resurrection would definitively validate his claims to divine Sonship and messianic redemption (Matt. 17:23; 29:39-41; Luke 11:29-32; John 2:19-22; 11:25). These claims are reiterated in the various appearances which he is reported to have made to his followers after his resurrection and prior to his ascension (John 20:10-31; Matt. 28:1-10, 16-20; Mark 16:12-18; Luke 24:13-49, cf. 1 Cor. 15:5-8).

10 days after the ascension, on the Day of Pentecost, Luke shows Peter making the resurrection of Christ foundational for the Church's mission: the tomb of King David, he points out, is 'with us to this day'; in stark contrast, the same Jesus who was crucified in shame has been raised to glory (Acts 2:29-36). Beyond this, the brief early creed recorded by Paul at Romans 1:3-4 presents the resurrection as confirming Christ's divinity and Lordship. In Romans 10:9-10, it is seen to be the source of our salvation; elsewhere, it is taken to be the proof and ground of the resurrection to glory of all believers in the Last Days (1 Cor 15: 20; 1 Thess. 4:14). Indeed, after an extensive assessment of the biblical record, G.E. Ladd goes so far as to state that 'The entire New Testament was written from the perspective of the resurrection ... the resurrection may be called the major premise of the early Christian faith.'¹

The post-apostolic and patristic periods saw the early fathers of the Church affirming the essential place of the resurrection. At the end of the first century Clement of Rome

¹ Ladd, G.E., *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975, p.42.

reiterated the teaching of 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ is ‘the first fruits’ of the resurrection of the dead; a decade or so later Ignatius stressed that that the resurrection of Jesus was fleshly, or bodily; Tertullian wrote around 197 that ‘the very same body that fell in death, and which lay in the sepulchre, did rise again’.² Although some debate did arise over the precise nature of the body with which Jesus ascended to heaven, there was little doubt that his resurrection was an historical event which entailed a real death, a real burial in a real tomb and a real, physical vacating of that tomb by the same Jesus who had lived and died a real man in the Holy Land of the first century.³

More recently, the rise of philosophical rationalism and modern biblical criticism have challenged this orthodox understanding of the resurrection.⁴ Yet even today, while many scholars question the nature and veracity of the resurrection *per se*, most accept that it remains pivotal for Christian theology and apologetics. Indeed, it is precisely because it remains such a doctrinal lynchpin that so many still focus their critiques of Christianity upon it. For example, Gerd Lüdemann, an atheist Professor of New Testament who has argued extensively against the reliability of the biblical accounts, acknowledges that for all his own scepticism, the resurrection of Jesus Christ remains ‘the central point of Christian religion’.⁵ Likewise, John Shelby Spong, the provocatively radical Bishop of Newark, while denying the historical facticity of the resurrection, nonetheless still accepts that it is ‘the foundation of Christianity itself’. Certainly, one does not have to be an Evangelical to recognise the priority of the resurrection: hence Günter Bornkamm’s asserts that without it there would be no Church, and Jürgen Moltmann insists that Christianity either stands or falls by it.⁶

Accepting the key role of Jesus’ resurrection in Christian belief is one thing, however. Establishing what ‘resurrection’ actually means, whether it does in fact necessitate belief in an empty tomb, and whether Jesus in truth did come back from the dead to appear to his disciples before ascending to heaven – all this is quite a different matter, and is now subject to often fierce controversy.

In the British setting, such controversy crystallised in 1984 around the consecration of David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham. Although hitherto known as a relatively conservative theologian, Jenkins generated considerable debate at the time when he questioned the bodily nature of Jesus’ resurrection and appeared to liken such an event to ‘a conjuring trick with bones’.⁷ Incendiary though his comments were, they reflected at least two centuries of serious academic debate on the credibility of the

² For more detail on these and other discussions of the resurrection in the early church see Fuller, D.P., *Easter Faith and History*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, Evans, C.F., *Resurrection and the New Testament*, London: SCM, 1970, pp.19-54.

³ For a helpful account of patristic understandings of Jesus’ resurrection, and the nature of his resurrection body, see Kelly, J.N.D., *Early Christian Doctrines*, London: A & C Black, pp.461ff.;

⁴ For a historical survey of theological interpretations of the resurrection, see Fuller, D.P., *Easter Faith and History*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965.

⁵ Lüdemann, Gerd, *What really Happened to Jesus? An Historical Approach to the Resurrection*, trans. John Bowden, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Know, 1995, p.1.

⁶ Bornkanmm, Gunther, *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: Harper & Row, 1960; Moltmann, Jurgen, *Revolution and the Future*, London: SCM.

⁷ For an account of the ‘Bishop of Durham’ controversy, see Harris, Murray J., *Easter in Durham: Bishop Jenkins and the Resurrection of Jesus*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1985; Harrison, T., *The Durham Phenomenon*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985.

resurrection. The main points of this debate can be summarised under the following two headings:

- The plausibility of the resurrection: scientific and philosophical issues
- The historicity of the resurrection: issues of corroboration and evidence

There is not space in this brief paper to deal with each of these points in great detail. Those who want to look further are encouraged to follow up the references given in the footnotes and bibliography. Here, we shall outline core concerns, and suggest the main ways in which the validity of the resurrection may be demonstrated.

1. The Plausibility of the Resurrection: Scientific and Philosophical Issues

Prior even to questioning the biblical record, many reject Jesus' resurrection on the basis that such an event would contravene the laws of nature and physics. In the universe as we know it, they submit, resurrections do not happen, indeed *cannot* happen. It is therefore untenable, they suggest, to believe in unprovable exceptions to the rule. So they firstly reject those references which report Jesus and his disciples bringing people 'temporarily' back to life (e.g. Jairus' daughter (Matt. 9:18-26), the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17) and Lazarus (John 11:38-44); cf. Matt. 10:8, 11:5). And more particularly, they deny that Jesus himself was raised permanently on Easter Day.

As Paul Copan and Ronald Tacelli have pointed out, this sceptical line of thinking runs most prominently from the philosophy of David Hume (1711-1766), through Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), to the 'demythologizing' of modern scholars like Lüdemann and his influential forbear, Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976).⁸

In his major work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume cast the resurrection of Jesus as the paradigm example of a miracle. By their very nature, he argued, miracles require the extraordinary suspension of physical norms. As such, they are unlikely to be patient of experimental repetition and direct empirical testing. This, for Hume, was reason enough to dismiss them: '[a] miracle', he wrote, 'is a violation of the laws of nature, and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, a proof against miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be established.'⁹

Later, Kant consolidated the notion that concrete knowledge cannot be derived from nonempirical sources. The resurrection might function as a hypothetical or 'metaphysical' concept upon which to base certain beliefs and actions, but in Kant's view, it could have little or nothing to do with the world of scientific or historical demonstration. Once the historical-critical method in biblical scholarship took hold in the decades following Kant's death, this separation of 'concrete knowledge' from metaphysical faith-claims was developed even more overtly over against the

⁸ Copan, Paul & Tacelli, Ronald K., 'Introduction', in Copan, Paul & Tacelli, Ronald K (eds.), *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann*, Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2000, pp.9-14.

⁹ Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (3rd edn), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, with text and revised notes by P.H., Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p.114.

resurrection. Hence Bultmann's now (in)famous assertion that it is 'impossible to use the electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.'¹⁰

Whether consciously or unconsciously, these empiricist presuppositions underlie most contemporary dismissals of the resurrection of Jesus. Yet they are presuppositions which entail serious problems, even before they are applied to the resurrection as such. For one thing, Hume's argument falls prey to the charge of circular reasoning when it appeals to the 'firm and unalterable' testimony of 'rational' human beings in regard to natural laws, only then to dismiss the testimony of *other* human beings that those laws have from time to time been suspended. Indeed, Hume's argument does not rest purely on the facts as they are, but on the supposed intellectual sophistication of those who process such facts – that is, on the testimony of one preferred group over the testimony of another. Indeed, the *Essay* relies at this point on crass racial stereotyping to make its case:

It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations that they are observed chiefly among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilised people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be seen to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority which always attend received opinions.¹¹

Furthermore, those who maintain Kant's dualism between 'concrete knowledge' and 'metaphysics' are prone to present an unjustifiably fixed and closed view of the methods by which historical and scientific enquiry actually proceed – a view which assumes that a lack of present, demonstrable, *prima facie* evidence must perforce block consideration of a truth claim. Copan and Tacelli expose the shortcomings of this view very clearly:

Historians should certainly be on the lookout for whatever in the natural course of events seems to account for the things they investigate. And if they find themselves stumped and puzzled, they will keep on looking until every plausible natural alternative has been weighed. But suppose the puzzle remains. Suppose they eventually throw up their hands and admit that no empirical factors seem sufficient to account for some event. This would be admitting that empirical history is insufficient to account for it – in other words, that something transcending the web of natural, space- and time-bound causes would be the place to look for a satisfying explanation. The historian then – as one who seeks to explain empirical events in terms of empirical antecedents – might simply have to admit: "I don't know what caused this to happen." In the same way, a doctor, confronted with a sudden cure, which escapes his best efforts at physical and psychological explanation, might say: "As a doctor, I can't explain what happened here." But historians and doctors are more than their specialities. They are also human persons, beings who ask

¹⁰ Bultmann, Rudolph, 'The New Testament and Mythology', in Hans Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.5.

¹¹ Hume, David, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* X, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch (3rd edn), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

questions and seek answers. And if surrounding the historically unexplained event or medically mysterious cure there is a pervasive and coherent religious context, then the historian or doctor, who is also a human being – a person searching for truth – might reasonably come to believe that the limitations of history or medicine point to a cause lying beyond those limitations. The historian and doctor would not have to believe that history of medicine *as such* should invoke God as an explanatory hypothesis. But they could and should believe that when empirical explanation has been given every fair chance and found wanting, then persons seeking satisfying answers to their real questions cannot be afraid to look where such evidence as they have seems to point – even if it points higher than they had initially ever dreamed of looking.¹²

Similar points were also plainly in the mind of Dr. A.C. Ivy, President of the American Physiological Society from 1939-49, when he wrote: ‘I cannot prove this belief as I can prove certain scientific facts in my library which one hundred years ago were almost as mysterious as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the basis of historical evidence of existing biological knowledge, the scientist who is true to the philosophy of science can doubt the bodily resurrection of Christ, but he cannot deny it. Because to do so means that he can prove that it *did not* occur.’ Ivy added, ‘I can only say that present-day biological science cannot resurrect a body that has been dead and entombed for three days. [But] to deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the basis of what biology now knows is to manifest an unscientific attitude....’¹³ In much the same vein, Professor R.J. Berry, President of the Linnean Society, wrote on behalf of fourteen distinguished Christians in science on 13 July 1984: ‘It is not logically valid to use science as an argument against miracles. To believe that miracles cannot happen is as much an act of faith as to believe that they can happen.’ Miracles, Berry continued, ‘are unprecedented events. Whatever the current fashions in philosophy or the revelations of opinion polls may suggest, it is important to affirm that science (based as it is upon the observation of precedents) can have nothing to say on the subject. Its ‘laws’ are only generalisations of our experience. Faith rests on other grounds.’¹⁴

While such philosophical and methodological issues are clearly significant, it should not be supposed that the resurrection of Jesus is entirely supra-rational or supra-historical. It might never have been repeated, and might thus not be *experimentally* verifiable. But it is still subject to certain rules of evidence – rules which rely on the reports of witnesses, the assemblage of circumstantial information and the inference of causes from effects. On these criteria, in fact, the resurrection of Jesus Christ can be seen to hold up very well indeed.

2. The Historicity of the Resurrection: Issues of Corroboration and Evidence

We may not be able to recreate the resurrection of Christ in a laboratory. Even so, there are many ‘one off’ historical events for which we could say the same thing - events which are nonetheless accepted as ‘fact’ on the basis of contemporary eye-

¹² Copan, Paul & Tacelli, Ronald K., ‘Introduction’, in Paul Copan & Ronald K. Tacelli (eds), *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* Downers Grove: IVP, 2000, pp.13-14.

¹³ Cit. McDowell, Josh, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Vol. 1*, San Bernardino, CA., 1972, p.201.

¹⁴ Letter to the *Times* newspaper.

witness accounts, corroborative data and various observable, ongoing consequences which arise from them. It is often said, for example, that the resurrection of Christ is better attested in terms of the volume of ancient sources, and in terms of their closeness to the event, than many of the incidents recorded in Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, or in the *Histories* of Pliny the Younger, Thucydidides and Herodotus.¹⁵ But even a modern occurrence like the conquering of Mount Everest by Sherper Tensing and Edmund Hilary is accepted by the vast majority as 'fact' on the basis of Tensing and Hilary's own words, and a few photographs which could, conceivably, have been 'doctored'.¹⁶ Granted, the resurrection is more out-of-the-ordinary than an ancient battle or a Himalayan climb, and far more rides on its being true than on the report of a military or mountaineering triumph. But if we are to assess its status as history, we must surely be prepared to work with thresholds of verification comparable to those used in other fields of historical study. In the case of the resurrection, this more specifically means examining the veracity of certain key claims made in the New Testament:

- That Jesus was really dead
- That his corpse was really kept sealed in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb
- That Jesus' resurrection was a bodily or physical resurrection
- That Jesus really appeared to his disciples

Secondarily, it also means taking due account of the apparent *effects* of the resurrection, most particularly on:

- The disciples' approach and attitude
- The growth of the early Church

We shall consider each of these issues in turn, taking account where necessary of alternative explanations and theories.

Was Jesus Really Dead?

There is no doubt that the Gospel accounts present Jesus as having died on the cross of Golgotha. Matthew and John report him as having 'given up his spirit' (Matt. 27:50; John 19:30), while Mark and Luke use the similar phrase 'he breathed his last' (Mark 15:37, 39; Luke 23:46). Both forms of speech would have been understood by first century readers as denoting actual death. John underlines the point when he recounts that the soldiers at the crucifixion approached the Jesus in order to speed his death by breaking his legs (thus making it harder for him to haul himself up to breathe), but discovered on doing so that 'he was already dead' (John 19:33). Furthermore, when one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with his spear, blood and

¹⁵ This point is regularly made in Christian apologetics books, e.g., McDowell, Josh, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict Vol. 1*, San Bernadino, CA.,: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972, and *The Resurrection Factor*, Carlisle: Alpha, 2000; Muncaster, Ralph O., *What is the Proof for the Resurrection?* Eugene, Or.: Harvest House, 2000, pp.12-21.

¹⁶ This analogy is drawn by Richard Bewes in his brief study, *The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?*, Oxford: Lion, 1999, p.22.

serum flowed out of the wound distinctly – a strong medical indication that death had indeed already occurred.¹⁷

On the evening of the crucifixion, Mark recalls that Pontius Pilate checked on whether Jesus had in fact died before handing him over to Joseph of Arimathea for entombment (Mark 15:43-5). Only after death had been verified by a centurion – who by custom would have been accompanied by four executioners - was the body released. It was then wrapped in what would have been around 100 pounds of linen and spices, and was sealed in new sepulchre which had been hewn out of rock. Even if the evangelists lied or were mistaken about the fact of Jesus' death on the cross, it seems unlikely that a man who had been beaten, whipped and crucified from 9 in the morning until just before sunset (Mark 15:25, 33) could have survived without food, water or medical attention in such a cold environment from Friday night until Sunday morning.¹⁸

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul bears all this out when he urges his readers to hold firmly to the fact that Jesus 'died' and 'was buried'. His insistence on these points might have been prompted by rumours - which would later develop into a full-blown thesis - that Jesus' death had been only apparent, that he had somehow managed to remain alive throughout, and that he had gone on to recover from the whole experience. As expounded in the so-called 'Swoon Theory' advanced by Paulus of Heidelberg at the start of the nineteenth century, this view held that far from 'breathing his last', Jesus had merely fainted from exhaustion on the cross, then to be revived by the spices and cool air in the tomb. However, while Paulus initially invoked medical science in defence of this claim, it is medical science which now decisively counts against it. We have already hinted that conditions in the sepulchre would, in Paulus' scenario, have done more harm than good: given that circulation would already have been badly affected by crucifixion, the cool stone of the tomb would quite conceivably have brought on a syncope due to an inevitable congelation of the blood. Far from aiding revival, the atmosphere in the tomb would have been thick with strong spices which would have killed a man who had just come close to death by suffocation, and who was still, at best, semi-conscious.

In truth, there is no good reason to suppose that Jesus did not actually die as described in the Gospels. Indeed, debate today centres not on whether he died as such, but on what happened to his dead body once he had 'given up his spirit'.

Was Jesus' Corpse Really Kept Sealed in Joseph of Arimathea's Tomb?

All four evangelists agree that corpse of Jesus was placed in a sepulchre by Joseph of Arimathea and that the entrance to this tomb was then covered by a stone (Matt. 27:59-28:2; Mark 15:42-16:4; Luke 23:53-24:2; John 19:40-20:1). They also agree that the corpse remained there until it was resurrected some time before dawn on Sunday morning.

¹⁷ For further detail on this point see Geisler, Norman, 'Christ, Death Of' in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999, p.128.

¹⁸ For more detail, again see Geisler, Norman, 'Christ, Death Of' in *Baker Encyclopaedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999, p.128.

Some, however, have questioned this version of events, and have offered various alternative accounts of what happened to the dead body of Jesus.

Alternative Theories and Their Shortcomings

The Disciples Stole the Body

This explanation is mooted within the text of the New Testament itself, when the chief priests and Pharisees go to Pilate and suggest that the sepulchre be made secure “lest Jesus’ disciples go and steal him away, and tell the people, “He has risen from the dead” and the last fraud will be worse than the first” (Matt. 27:62-66). Although the consequent sealing up of the stone, and the guard which Pilate allows to be placed on the tomb, indicate that the theft of Jesus’ body came to nothing, the very fact that Matthew mentions this episode suggests that some might have been propounding the ‘stolen body’ theory around the time he wrote his Gospel. Clearly, by confirming the presence of the guard, which would typically have comprised some 16 soldiers, Matthew is seeking to rebut such a notion.

In any case, for the disciples to have broken into the tomb and physically removed the body, every member of the guard would have had to have fallen into a deep sleep. Then again, even if this *had* somehow occurred, the guard could clearly not have been sure that the body had disappeared on account of the disciples! Theoretically, the whole group could have colluded with Jesus’ followers, but one must wonder what motive pagan Roman soldiers would have had for such an action. It would have incurred severe penalties if discovered, as would the negligence of sleeping on duty. Furthermore, it would have required that no one ever revealed the deal, and this is, quite frankly, fantastic.

Almost as improbable is the idea that a band of shell-shocked disciples would, within 36 hours or so of their leader’s death, devise a deception in which his body would be stolen and disposed of anonymously, so that they could devote their lives to a new religion born of that same deception. The fact that many of them went on to die for their convictions makes this notion even less credible.

Jesus’ Corpse Was Dumped in a Common Grave

In debate with the renowned Evangelical leader John Stott, the liberal Anglican theologian David L. Edwards has rehearsed the following alternative to the Gospel record:

...the most likely alternative to [the resurrection miracle] is that the corpse of Jesus was thrown into the same grave as the corpses of other crucified criminals (presumably in the nearby valley of Hinnom, Jerusalem’s rubbish dump) and was beyond recovery and recognition by the time that the story of the resurrection reached the ears of the authorities – a time which may have been many months or years after the death. Almost all Christians will find this

alternative distressing to contemplate; I do. But from a strictly historical point of view, excluding all religious faith or emotion, it, too, is possible.¹⁹

This scenario echoes that sketched out by Charles A. Guignebert,²⁰ and has more recently been popularised by the prominent Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan, who adds for good measure that having been dealt with in this way, Jesus' corpse was most probably eaten by dogs.²¹

While there is no doubt that many executed criminals were thrown into the Valley of Hinnom, to assume that Jesus' body was dumped there is to assume that from top to bottom, the Gospel accounts of his burial and resurrection are a pack of lies. It is to assume that the actions, the donated tomb and perhaps even the figure of Joseph himself, are inventions after the fact; that the story of the guard is a fabrication; that Jesus' female followers did not view body of Jesus, or discover the tomb's location, that they did not go to it, and that, by definition, they did not see Jesus risen from it (cf. Matt. 27:61 ff., and par.).

Leaving aside the implausibility of so thick a tissue of falsehoods being woven within a generation of Jesus' death, the evidence for these details is in fact remarkably good. Even Bultmann accepted that the story of Joseph of Arimathea is basically free from theological or apologetic embellishment.²² It is entirely credible that as a leading Jew, Joseph would have been wealthy enough to possess his own tomb, while Arimathea itself has no prior symbolic significance. Indeed, most scholars across the theological spectrum agree that Joseph himself is far more likely to be an historical person than not. Raymond Brown represents this consensus when he concludes that the Christian invention of a Sanhedrin member accommodating the body of an assumed subversive like Jesus is 'almost inexplicable': it would belie the hostility of contemporary Christian writings towards the Jewish authorities, for their part in Jesus' death.²³ In other words, if it were not true, there would be very little reason to dream it up.

As for the tomb itself, its depiction by the four evangelists accords with archaeological data on the 'bench tombs' typically used by prominent figures during this period in the Middle East. Matthew, Luke and John's emphasis on its being a newly-prepared, unused sepulchre also suggests authenticity, since by custom a criminal's corpse would have defiled any bodies lying in an existing family tomb.²⁴

Perhaps most compelling of all for the historicity of the burial accounts is the presence and involvement of the women at the entombment of Jesus (Matt. 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55). If the Gospel writers had wished retrospectively to 'normalise' these accounts, they would surely have placed the male disciples at the

¹⁹ Stott, John & Edwards, David L., *Essentials*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988, pp.200-01.

²⁰ Guignebert, Charles A., *Jesus*, New York, 1935.

²¹ See Crossan's comments in Ostling, Richard N., 'Jesus Christ, Plain and Simple', *Time*, 10 January 1994, 32-33.

²² Bultmann, Rudolph, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, (2nd Ed), Trans. John Marsh, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950, pp.274.

²³ Brown, Raymond, *The Death of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, Vol. 2., ABRL, New York: Doubleday, 1994, p.1240.

²⁴ Craig, William Lane, 'Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?' in Michael J. Wilkins & J.P Moreland (eds.), *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996, pp.141-76, p.148.

scene, rather than the women, since in Jewish culture at the time the testimony of women had a relatively much lower legal status. After all, the male disciples were in Jerusalem at the time, so it would not have taken much to insert them into the story. Yet both at this point, and at the subsequent discovery of the resurrection itself, it is the women, and not the men, who are to the fore.

The 'Empty Tomb' Was Another Tomb

Despite the fact that Matthew, Mark and Luke have the women at Joseph's tomb as Jesus' body is brought there for burial on the evening of his death, Kirsopp Lake and others have suggested that in confusion, the same women mistakenly went on Easter morning to another, long empty, tomb, and then misled the disciples into believing that this was the sepulchre in which Jesus had been placed and from which he had risen. The explanation offered for this theory is that the angel who says of the resurrected Jesus "He is not here", is in fact a young man tending the unused tomb, whom the women wrongly assume to be a messenger of God.

Plainly, this theory relies on a quite monumental lapse of collective memory on the part of the women, and is undermined by the fact that the Jewish and Roman authorities could easily have exposed the error in question by going to the actual tomb of Joseph and producing Jesus' dead body.

As it is, the failure of Jesus' opponents to produce a corpse is one of the strongest points against any notion that Jesus' followers concocted a 'resurrection myth' while his body remained in the tomb. Today, it is commonplace for police and coroners to disinter bodies years after burial for forensic purposes, but it would also have been possible to do so then. Admittedly this would not have been likely in the 'common grave' scenario, but as we have already seen, that falters on several other grounds.

Was Jesus' Resurrection Really a Physical/Bodily Resurrection?

It has become fairly standard for those who are disinclined to take the resurrection accounts in the four Gospels at face value to argue that 'resurrection' would not originally have entailed belief in a *physical* resurrection, where 'physical' is taken to refer to the body of Jesus which expired on the cross and was then buried. Rather, this school of thought typically holds that 'resurrection' should properly be understood in this context as an essentially *spiritual* phenomenon – one which is not reliant on the raising of a corpse. Most often, the case here turns on the semantics of 1 Corinthians 15:44ff., where Paul appears to contrast the 'physical' or 'natural' body which was buried on Good Friday with the 'spiritual body' of Jesus which was raised on the first Easter morning. For leading proponents of this view, like Peter Carnley, David Jenkins and John Spong, it is doubly telling that Paul's account is almost certainly the earliest record of the resurrection in the New Testament.²⁵

²⁵ Carnley, Peter, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, pp.52ff.; Jenkins, David, *God, Jesus and Life in the Spirit*, London: SCM, 1988; Spong, John Shelby, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* London: Harper Collins, 1994, pp.47-57.

Clearly, the key issue here is to determine what Paul actually meant, and whether his terminology does in fact imply a non-physical resurrection.

In tackling this matter, it is firstly important to understand that although Paul is writing in Greek to a Greek church, he is writing as a Jew who would have been thoroughly schooled in Hebrew anthropology (cf. Phil. 3:5). This anthropology is integrative, as over against the body-spirit dualism which characterised the prevailing Hellenistic worldview. Hence, while Paul certainly makes a distinction between spirituality and physicality, this distinction is qualitative, moral and temporal rather than ontologically absolute. Nowhere does he suggest that the resurrected Jesus is devoid of physicality *per se*: no doubt his body is *transformed* in the resurrection, but it is still referred to in the text as recognisably a ‘body’ (*soma*) – a complex detail which would have been unnecessary if Paul had simply wanted to present the risen Christ as a discarnate spirit-entity, heavenly vision or fond collective memory. Indeed, the fact that Paul goes on to recount that the pre-resurrection form of this body is ‘clothed’ with imperishability and immortality when resurrected (vv.53-54) suggests a significant continuity between one phase of its life and the other: we ‘put on’ and are ‘changed’ by clothing, but we are not finally *replaced* by it. As Norman Geisler notes,

A ‘spiritual’ body denotes and immortal one, not an immaterial one. A ‘spiritual’ body is one dominated by the spirit, not one devoid of matter. The Greek word *pneumatikos* (translated ‘spiritual’ here) means a body directed by the spirit, as opposed to one under the dominion of the flesh. It is not ruled by the flesh that perishes but by the spirit that endures (vss. 50-58). So ‘spiritual’ here does not mean immaterial and invisible but immortal and imperishable.²⁶

This reading of the text bears out the reports in the Gospels and Acts of the risen Jesus engaging in ‘physical’ activities like handling food (Luke 24:30), breathing (John 20:22), touching others (Luke 24:9; John 20:27) and eating (John 21:12-15; Acts 1:4; 10:41). Admittedly, this same risen Jesus is also capable of extraordinary actions which mark him off from his ‘flesh and blood’ followers: he can appear and disappear at will (Mark 16:12-15; Luke 24:31, 36), and can apparently pass through doors and walls (John 20:19). But as Geisler goes on to point out, the essential contrast here is between the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’, not the ‘physical’ and the ‘non-physical’:

The complete context [of 1 Cor. 15:42ff.] indicates that ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikos*) could be translated ‘supernatural’ in contrast to ‘natural’. This is made clear by the parallels of perishable and imperishable, corruptible and incorruptible. In fact, *pneumatikos* is translated ‘supernatural’ in 1 Corinthians 10:4 when it speaks of the ‘supernatural rock that followed them in the wilderness’ (RSV) ... [As it is], ‘spiritual’ [can refer] to physical objects. A study of Paul’s use of the same word in other passages reveals that it does not refer to something that is purely immaterial. First, Paul spoke of the ‘spiritual rock’ that followed Israel in the wilderness, from which they got ‘spiritual drink’ (1 Cor. 10:4). But the Old Testament reveals that it was a physical rock from which they got literal water to drink. But the actual water they drank from that material rock was produced supernaturally ... Further, when Paul

²⁶ Geisler, Norman, ‘Resurrection, Objections to’, in *Baker Encyclopaedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker books, 1999, p.658.

spoke about a ‘spiritual man’ (1 Cor. 2:15), he obviously did not mean an invisible, immaterial man with no corporeal body.²⁷

As it is, most scholars who argue for a complete discontinuity between the ‘spiritual body’ and ‘natural body’ of Jesus do so because they want to deny *a priori* that the corpse taken down from the cross was raised from Joseph’s tomb, such that that tomb was left empty on Easter morning. This is to say, they tend to be driven at least as much by an anti-supernaturalist philosophical rationalism as by biblical semantics. Yet as well as the evidence we have presented, it is surely significant that when Paul writes of Christ’s having been raised in Romans 4:24, it is with reference to a resurrection ‘from the dead’: such a resurrection would be hard to credit from a Hebrew perspective if the dead body of Jesus were still lying around. Indeed, as we have seen, once Paul’s understanding of the resurrection is viewed in context, it is hard to deny that he assumed the tomb to have been empty, even if he did not say so explicitly.

Beyond these exegetical issues, one is also led to ask what form the ‘risen Christ’ is supposed to have taken if his body actually did decompose where it was lain after his death. For David Jenkins, ‘resurrection’ in such a scenario means that ‘the very life and power and purpose and personality which was in [Jesus] was actually continuing ... in the sphere of history, so that he was a living presence and possibility’.²⁸ For Spong, it confirms that ‘the essence of Jesus is the essence of a living God’, but tells us little or nothing about life beyond the grave.²⁹ For Michael Goulder, it amounts to a series of hallucinations experienced by disciples traumatised at the loss of their beloved leader.³⁰ In each case, we are left with a psychologized Christ: a mental construct which may serve some pragmatic purpose or other, but which has no basis in objective reality. This is resurrection as reminiscence, miracle as mythology, divine intervention as poetic invention. It allows that something happened on the first Easter Day, but that it happened to the disciples, not to Jesus himself. As John Stott points out, such understandings seem barely distinguishable from those of the radical students who once shouted ‘Che Guevara lives!’, or of the Greek Cypriot patriots who sprayed buildings with the phrase ‘Makarios lives’ after their charismatic Archbishop had died.³¹ Yet the New Testament records numerous post-resurrection ‘appearances’ of Jesus which imply far more than mere emotional recollection. Indeed, assessment of these appearances is vital to any consideration of the resurrection as history.

Did the Risen Jesus Really Appear to His Disciples?

The Gospels, Acts and 1 Corinthians recount twelve separate occasions on which the risen Jesus made himself known to his disciples:

- To Mary Magdalene (John 20:10-18)

²⁷ Geisler, Norman, ‘Resurrection, Objections to’, in *Baker Encyclopaedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker books, 1999, p.658.

²⁸ ‘Credo’, April 1984

²⁹ Spong, John Shelby, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, London: Harper Collins, 1994, p.292.

³⁰ Goulder, Michael, ‘The Explanatory Power of Conversion-Visions’, in Paul Copan & Ronald K. Tacelli (eds.), *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* Downers Grove: IVP, 2000, 86-103.

³¹ Stott, John, *The Authentic Jesus (Revsd. Edn)*, London: Marshall Pickering, 1992, pp.30-31

- To the women (Matt. 28:1-10)
- To Peter (1 Cor. 15:5, cf. John 20:3-9)
- To the disciples on the Emmaus Road (Mark 16:12; Luke 24:13-35)
- To the Ten (Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23)
- To the Eleven (John 20:24-31)
- To the seven disciples by the Sea of Tiberias (John 21)
- To the disciples at the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18)
- To five hundred at one time (1 Cor. 15:6)
- To James (1 Cor. 15:7)
- To the apostles at the ascension (Acts 1:4-8)
- To Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9; 1 Cor. 15:8)

Although some have questioned these reports on the grounds that they convey only the experience of believers and thus enjoy no objective corroboration, to suggest, as Goulder, Spong and others do, that they together constitute little more than a manifestation of the early church's collective unconscious, is itself purely speculative. Doubtless such appearances cannot be 'proved', but they do possess what William Lane Craig calls 'positive marks of historical credibility'.

Firstly, just as it is remarkable that women are mentioned as witnessing his burial, so it is noteworthy from a historical point of view that they are also reported to have been the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8.; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-13). Given their lack of status as witnesses in the contemporary legal setting, the evangelists would surely have excluded such women from any fictionalised narrative.

Secondly, specific physical details in many of these twelve accounts suggest encounters which are rather more than simply visionary or mentally 'projected'. Mary does not just see a figure and hear a voice: she also touches Jesus (John 20:17). Likewise, the women clasp his feet as they worship him (Matt. 28:9); the disciples travelling to Emmaus share food with him (Luke 24:30); Thomas feels his wounded hands and sides (John 20:27-28), and those at the Lake share breakfast with him (John 21:12-13).

Thirdly, Paul's inclusion of 'the five hundred' at 1 Corinthians 15:6 boldly confronts any theory of mass delusion head on: if he had stuck to individual or small group experiences of the risen Christ, it may have been difficult to test such experiences for authenticity and consistency. In this case, however, as Geisler points out, Paul is writing in 55 or 56, only twenty-two or twenty-three years after the resurrection (33). Most of the 500 eye witnesses in question would still have been alive. Thus the apostle offers his readers a diverse multitude of witnesses with whom to verify and cross-check details.³² This would have been a foolhardy thing to do if one had wanted to preserve the mystique of a fabricated vision.

³² Geisler, Norman, 'Resurrection: Evidence for', in *Baker Encyclopaedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999, p.654.

Consequential Evidence: The Transformation of the Disciples and the Growth of the Church

As well as selling short both the reliability of the New Testament and the corroborative evidence for the empty tomb, hypotheses which reduce the resurrection of Jesus to an imaginative motif fail adequately to account for either the dramatic change in the disciples' attitude or the phenomenal growth of the Church in the decades following the first Easter.

From utter despair, the disciples were rapidly transformed by the resurrection into one of the most influential movements the world has ever known. It seems unlikely that they would have been motivated to lead this movement on the basis of a few self-generated mental pictures or by a 'legend' concocted in a matter of days. On the contrary: their faith, and the faith of the world-wide Church they pioneered, is most genuinely represented as a faith based on these core events: that Jesus Christ died on the cross, was buried in Joseph's tomb, and on the third day was raised bodily from that tomb, leaving it empty.

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