

## Supernaturalism and Historical Study: An Account of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead

© Franz S. Klein

### ABSTRACT

The modern historical criticism which follows in Bultmann's steps involves the contradiction of accepting both the formless, personal salvation of introspection, and the universal salvation of Jesus Christ. This is caused by a denial of supernatural intervention in human events due to the advances of modern science. Historical studies need not defer to current scientific theory, for the question of the supernatural will never be fully answered by science. Therefore, the supernatural falls within the realm of probability as an explanation for the Resurrection. An argument is provided which proves that a supernatural explanation is the most probable explanation for the Resurrection based on the evidence provided in the canonical and extra-canonical books, and living tradition of the Church.

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. The Real Jesus and the Historical Jesus
- III. The Place of Historical Criticism
- IV. Modern Man's Historical Jesus
- V. The Supernatural
- VI. Existence of the Supernatural
- VII. A Preview of the Argument for Miracles.
- VIII. Three Sources for Knowing the Resurrection
- IX. The Death and Burial of Jesus
- X. The Canonical Resurrection
- XI. The Non-Canonical Sources
- XII. Living Tradition as a Source for the Historical Jesus
- XIII. An Application of the Facts
- XIV. The Argument for the Supernatural
- XV. Implications for Historical Studies
- XVI. Conclusion
- XVII. Bibliography

### I.

#### Introduction

The void between theology and the sciences has spent several hundred years making itself pronounced in the realm of academia. This is seen most vividly in the physical sciences, where conflicts have arisen since before the days of Galileo. In the quest for the historical Jesus, this split began to be pronounced when David Friedrich Strauss opened the first quest in the 1830's by dismissing many of the mythical elements found in the Bible. More than a hundred years later, Rudolph Bultmann writes, "Is it possible to expect that we shall make a sacrifice of understanding, *sacrificium intellectus*, in order to accept what we cannot sincerely consider true?"<sup>[1]</sup> Even so, Bultmann continues to find value in the Bible. However, it is in the Bultmannian school that we get the final split. Van Austin Harvey takes Bultmann's conclusion that the supernatural has no place in modern thought, dislodges his fingers from their precarious hold on the

formlessness and emptiness of Bultmann's concept, and leaves his position in the Theology department to instead teach Philosophy.

Herein I shall argue for the place of the supernatural in historical criticism of the life of Jesus. The questor's job is to unearth the historical Jesus from those sources available to him. I shall argue that it is bad method to deny or modify an account that has elements of the supernatural on the basis of that supernaturalism. To accomplish this, I shall examine the definition of the historical Jesus, and his development through the historians' quests. Specifically, I shall examine what is to many Christians the most important tenant of their faith, namely the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, as a supernatural, historical event, using a probabilistic thesis to argue that the supernatural is the best historical explanation for this event. Lastly, I shall argue that when the supernatural explanation is abandoned, there is no viable reason to remain Christian. Must we then take the path of Harvey, not only abandoning our quest for Jesus, but giving up on Christianity as a whole? Or, perhaps, can we return to the stigmatized supernatural, which has been so painfully wrested away?

## II.

### The Real Jesus and the Historical Jesus

Of all the historical scholars' distinctions between the real and historical Jesuses, that of the Reverend John P. Meier stands out. In part one of *A Marginal Jew*, Meier writes, "The historical Jesus is not the real Jesus. The real Jesus is not the historical Jesus."<sup>ii</sup>[2] Meier makes this distinction to point out that no matter how much historical information we have on Jesus, the man who lived, breathed, and walked the earth two thousand years ago, we will never be able to capture Jesus as he was. History is limited in many ways, and there is no event that we can truly re-live, nor any person in any event for whom we can know the totality of his thoughts, actions, and desires. We are instead limited to the incomplete observations of those who witnessed the event and lived with the person. In the case of a person who lived two thousand years in the past, preached to illiterate crowds of Jewish peasants, and whose words were only copied down as best remembered and passed down orally for at least a few generations in most cases, our limitations become so great that they caused the first quest to break down.

Meier, however, lives and writes today in the aftermath of the Old Quest, meaning that he has found some reason to continue questing. If we can never discover the real Jesus through historical research, why keep after it? If we can never know who really shot JFK, why do people still search for an answer? Will we ever really be sure when we find an answer? How much evidence do we need before we have the "real" answer? An historical account of JFK is indeed important, and Meier says an historical account of Jesus is important as well. He defines the historical Jesus as being found in "a reasonably complete biographical portrait,"<sup>iii</sup>[3] and as he who is recovered and examined by "using the scientific tools of modern historical research."<sup>iv</sup>[4] Meier, unlike some historians, recognizes that while historical research can give us a reasonably complete biography through modern methods, and while this recovered material finds its purpose in fighting against reduction of faith in Christ to a "content-less cipher," the swallowing of Christ's humanity in his divinity, the "domestication" of Jesus, or Jesus' becoming a social problems guru,<sup>v</sup>[5] it still has its proper place. And what is the "proper place" of historical criticism?

## III.

### The Place of Historical Criticism

In 1964, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published a document that the Reverend Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., says "will go down in history as the first official statement which openly countenances the [historical critical] method."<sup>vi</sup>[6] The *Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels*, while opening the historical quest to Catholics, was also very quick to put the study in its proper place:

Holy Mother the Church, "the pillar and bulwark of truth," has always used Sacred Scripture in her task of imparting heavenly salvation to men. She has always defended it, too, from

every sort of false interpretation. Since there will never be an end to (biblical) problems, the Catholic exegete should never lose heart in explaining the divine word and in solving the difficulties proposed to him. Rather, let him strive earnestly to open up still more the real meaning of the Scriptures. Let him rely firmly not only on his own resources, but above all on the help of God and the light of the Church.vii[7]

Knowledge regarding Jesus, then, seems to have a very different purpose than knowledge regarding JFK. The purpose of finding out who shot JFK seems to be making sure that justice is done. Justice is placed in the hands of the court system. The courts have certain rules for deciding what evidence is admissible, and these rules keep the courts from being inundated with material worthless or unrelated to the stated purpose. What is the purpose of finding out facts about the life of Jesus?

It seems that if one has interest in Jesus as an ordinary human being who lived two thousand years ago, it would be vacuous to make an account of him. The Church makes a claim that the purpose of the research of Jesus in the Scriptures is to work toward one's own salvation and that of others. The Church has laid down certain rules for obtaining to this purpose; thus it seems, if one has this goal, that he should work within the rules. If he doesn't have salvation as his goal, his work appears vacuous. With this said, it is of course proper to acknowledge that the purpose of many historians in their research of Scripture is indeed salvation, but that at the same time, they do not see any need to follow the instruction of the Church. It is clear, though, that when the "light of the Church" is not used in *some* way, that the conclusions of the research begin to diverge. This is not to discredit the work of non-Catholic historians (most historical study is non-Catholic), for many Christians use the "light of the Church" in some way. In its definition of Jesus, however, much of modern historical research works outside this light, and therefore becomes divergent – some would say vacuous as well. What is it that brings about this divergence?

#### IV.

##### Modern Man's Historical Jesus

Martin Kahler wrote his book The So-Called Historical Jesus against the "life-of-Jesus" movement that produced countless versions around the turn of the century. Many of his theses are important in distinguishing between the Jesus of faith and the Jesus of history. Kahler defined his "historic Christ of the Bible" as him who is seen by means of the Old Testament, whose life is recorded in the Gospels, and who is preached in the Epistles. To Kahler, "The risen Lord is not the historical Jesus behind the Gospels, but the Christ of the apostolic preaching, of the whole New Testament."viii[8] This Christ, Kahler says, is the one whom we seek, and one who is the seeker's opposite, his fulfillment, his "Savior." A very important point of Kahler's is evidenced in a story he relates. He tells of a young man who did not find modern rationalism satisfactory. This young man heard Tholuck say that if the Fourth Gospel was not written by John the Zebedean, this would be Christianity's fatal blow. This bothered the young man deeply, and Kahler says "he descended the ladder of doubt rung by rung." Kahler concludes, "Since then I have become increasingly certain that my Christian faith cannot have a causal connection with the 'authenticity' of the Gospels."ix[9] In saying this, Kahler seems unaware of the doors he opens.

Rudolf Bultmann's conclusions regarding Christ follow in some ways those of Kahler, but not in other ways. Bultmann's views are best summed up in the following paragraph:

For modern man the mythological conception of the world, the conceptions of eschatology, of redeemer and of redemption, are over and done with. Is it possible to expect that we shall make a sacrifice of understanding, *sacrificium intellectus*, in order to accept what we cannot sincerely consider true – merely because such conceptions are suggested by the Bible? Or ought we to pass over those sayings of the New Testament which contain such mythological conceptions and to select other sayings which are not such stumbling-blocks to modern man?x[10]

For Bultmann, supernatural intervention is unacceptable to modern man given the light science has thrown upon the world. For him, Schweitzer's stark disjunction of either naturalism or supernaturalism is more

boldly stated than it was for Schweitzer himself. Bultmann's entire way of viewing Jesus lies in his denial of the supernatural, in his process of the "de-mythologizing" of the Scriptures. But Bultmann, unlike Strauss before him, who advocated a casting aside of the purely mythological elements of the Scripture, instead puts forward a method of re-interpretation. Thus, unlike many of his predecessors, he does indeed have a place for events such as the Resurrection. However, such purely mythological events must be de-mythologized. What is left when pure myth is de-mythologized? It is in this portion of his belief, strange as it may seem to equate the two, that Bultmann agrees with Kahler. Both men feel that the Jesus discovered through history cannot be the Jesus of faith. Kahler thereupon separates the Jesus of faith from the Jesus of history. Bultmann, however, takes the Jesus of history, re-interprets him through introspection, and from this process gets the personal savior whom he sought.

Bultmann diverges directly from Kahler in saying that the Jesus of faith is not an opposite, a Savior, but rather *something* we can identify with personally as modern men. Myth enters when the writers of Scripture explained what they saw in the language of their time. For these men, this meant clothing truths in the supernatural. Modern man, being beyond such explanations, needs to translate these truths into something useful to himself. Bultmann speaks of modern man as needing to find a deep self-understanding of himself in the death and resurrection of Jesus, rather than seeking to believe objective truths about these events. Man must seek a significance for his life, and ultimately for his death, *and this is something he will ultimately find only in the act of Jesus Christ*. Bultmann writes that the Word of God "is not a timeless statement, but a concrete word addressed to men here and now."<sup>xi</sup>[11] The purpose of historical studies for Bultmann is not to aid salvation (as the Church understands it), but rather to translate the supernatural into something useful to modern man. This message is a personal one, different for each man who realizes its importance.

The historian and philosopher Van Austin Harvey proceeds from the thought of Bultmann in his 1966 book The Historian and the Believer, but takes Bultmannian thought to its outermost logical step. Harvey points out a deadly flaw in Bultmann's theory, namely the insistence that "radical faith" is something to which all men can aspire, but at the same time this faith is necessarily dependent upon the Jesus Christ, the acting Word of God. Pointing out that Bultmann's description of revelation is contentless, he writes, "If one asks what function Bultmann's appeal to Jesus has, the only answer is that it serves to denote the cause precipitating the passage from unfaith to faith."<sup>xii</sup>[12] If this is so, "how can Bultmann argue that this possibility is made actual only by an act of God in Christ?"<sup>xiii</sup>[13] Why must the passage from unfaith to faith rely upon this claim of revelation which has so little to back it up? How can Bultmann hold that faith is relative to each man but universal to all men in Jesus Christ?

Harvey concludes that Bultmann is left with two choices, either faith is simply formless, contentless relativism or else it is formless, contentless relativism based in the universal truth of Christ. Bultmann seemed to be fine with the contradiction of the second choice. Harvey chose plain formless relativism, and because of the choice left his seminary position to teach Philosophy. I, unable to abandon my faith, and unable to base my faith, or even my historical study for that matter, upon a contradiction, here choose to abandon Bultmann's path altogether, and to retreat to the miraculous. But, is it possible to be a historian and one who believes in miracles at the same time? Perhaps it is more accurate to ask whether one can fail to admit supernatural explanation if one is a good historian – but we ought not get ahead of ourselves. First we must ask, what is the supernatural?

## V.

### The Supernatural

David Friedrich Strauss introduced the concept of *mythus* with his ground-breaking book The Life of Jesus Critically Examined in 1835. Strauss, defining evangelical, pure, and historical *mythi*, writes, "...if the mythical view be once admitted... the discrepancies ... in the gospel histories disappear."<sup>xiv</sup>[14] Unlike his predecessors, Strauss wants to put the birth narratives and the Resurrection within the confines of pure *mythus*. Nothing in the realm of pure *mythus* has historical basis. Strauss says of the Resurrection, "I proved exegetically and by the philosophy of nature the resurrection of the dead, with complete conviction, and as I dotted the last *i* it was clear to me that there is nothing to the entire story."<sup>xv</sup>[15] For Strauss a

purely mythological event is a “religious idea” which has been given a mythical substance under the auspices of historical fact. Albert Schweitzer writes of Strauss’ true conception of *mythus*, one in which the “offence of the word disappears,” by saying, “It is nothing but the clothing in historic form of religious ideas, shaped by the unconsciously inventive power of legend, and embodied in a historic personality.”xvi[16]

In his book marking the end of the Old Quest, Schweitzer says that while Strauss’ idea of *mythus* is correct, and while the narratives of miraculous events may be mythical in form, this concept fails to explain the origin of these events. To Schweitzer, there is more than a clothed idea, there is an historical origin to events such as the Resurrection. Bultmann, however, seems to bypass Schweitzer’s idea of historical origin, and return to Strauss’ “clothing in historic form of religious ideas.” There is indeed an “act” in Bultmann’s thought, and this act is the actualization of God’s word (and the Word became flesh). But Bultmann denies the historical kernels or “origins” Schweitzer feels are important:

In mythological thinking the action of God, whether in nature, history, human fortune, or the inner life of the soul, is understood as an action which intervenes between the natural, or historical, or psychological course of events... The divine causality is inserted as a link in the chain of events which follow one another according to the causal nexus. This is meant by the popular notion that a miraculous event cannot be understood except as a miracle, that is, as the effect of a supernatural cause.xvii[17]

Bultmann goes on to make such a radical claim as, “If someone now insists that to speak in this sense of God as acting is to speak mythologically, I have no objection...”xviii[18] For Bultmann, to speak of the causal connection of an event to the “act” of God is to speak mythologically. To speak of God in terms of the supernatural is to be limited by the natural. To speak of miracles is to misunderstand completely God’s essence.

As what, then, shall we define the supernatural? Containing the Latin prefix, *super*, and the root noun *natura*, the composite word exists as a distinction from the root noun, *natura*. Thus, *the supernatural is that which is above or beyond the natural order*. Newtonian physics make natural processes causally determined. How can there be interaction between *supernatura* and *natura*? But Richard Swinburne gives a very apt definition of the miracle in his description of revelation: “I understand by miracle a violation of the laws of nature, that is, a non-repeatable exception to the operation of these laws, brought about by God.”xix[19] There seems to be a manifold description of what takes place in an event “clothed in mythological terms:” firstly there is an acknowledgement of the supernatural order, and secondly there is an acknowledgement of interaction between the supernatural and the natural orders. At first glance Bultmann appears to deny the supernatural, but on examination it seems that he is only concerned with the interaction of the supernatural with the natural. Let us then examine the supernatural and then ask whether it interacts with the natural.

## VI.

### The Existence of the Supernatural

The natural order is bound by physical determinism. If I knew enough about the laws of physics, I could determine exactly where the balls on the pool table would go when I hit them with the cue. There is only one set of directions in which the balls can fly if the cue hits them at a certain angle, and under certain conditions. This is true throughout the physical world; we dare to send men to the Moon, trusting certain gravitational laws upon which their return depends. Bultmann thinks it abhorrent to think of Heaven and Hell being up and down, of having a physical place in creation, so it does not seem unreasonable to assume that Bultmann would think it abhorrent for God to exist as does my pen. The Son exists as act, and is found in people who introspect, says Bultmann, but even the Son does not exist alongside the liver or the kidney. Since my liver and kidney are material, and since God does not exist as do my bodily parts, then God must exist in a non-material, or immaterial way. Since the laws of nature deal with material things but not with immaterial things, it seems appropriate to say that that which is

immaterial, including God, is above the laws of nature, or supernatural. Thus, Bultmann's problem does not seem to be with the supernatural.

Bultmann's problem seems to be with miracle, or of the suspension of the laws of the natural order. "Modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated, by supernatural powers,"xx[20] Bultmann writes. Of modern historical studies, he writes that they do not "take into account any intervention of God or of the devil or of demons in the course of history."xxi[21] These are mythological for being different than what we can believe without *sacrificium intellectus*. To deny Bultmann, then, it seems necessary to prove that modern man need not make a sacrifice of intellect to believe in miracles.

## VII.

### A Preview of the Argument for Miracles

A probabilistic argument works well for "modern man," and therefore in examining miracles, I shall make use of this type of argument. In arguing for God's existence, the philosopher Richard Collins makes use of probability.xxii[22] Consider two hikers who go up a mountain, one a few miles in front of the other. As the second hiker walks underneath a certain cliff, he finds a grouping of rocks, shaped in letters that form the greeting, "Welcome to the Rocky Mountains!" Now, the hiker can come up with several theories as to why the rocks are shaped in this peculiar pattern, among them being that they naturally came to be that way, or maybe that the first hiker had formed the greeting. Collins introduces a common-sense principle by which an observation counts as evidence for the hypothesis with the highest probability. Collins argues from the evidence of fine-tuning in the universe that there is a God. Herein I will run a similar argument in favor of miracles. But like Collins, I first need a subject on which to try out my argument. Let us do some historical studying of Jesus, examine the Resurrection, and see if we are able to gather some evidence in favor of it having happened miraculously.

## VIII.

### Three Sources for Knowing of the Resurrection

Remembering the distinction Meier made between the real and historical Jesuses, it is to be acknowledged that historical study does not give us the real Jesus. But, remembering the purpose of historical studies is not to give us a Jesus to match our theories, but rather to aid salvation, it is also to be acknowledged that we can construct an historical account which is able to shoot down those theories which do not aid salvation, just as courts can throw out bad evidence. What, then, can we know about Jesus' Resurrection?

When we "look" at an historical event, we look through the eyes of whatever media are available to us. Most historical studies on the subject of Jesus recognize as sources at least parts of the four canonical Gospels, the other canonical books, and a smattering of extra-canonical sources. Perhaps there is a fourth source as well: call it living tradition. When I look back at relatives in my own family line, I look at the canonical sources (birth certificates, clippings from official newspapers, et cetera) and at extra-canonical sources (old Christmas letters, et cetera). But I also look at the essential elements of what we do as a family. I can tell that some of my ancestors were Polish by the swear-words my father uses and by the food my mother cooks. I know that I had a relative in the "tall" Prussian army because of stories my grandfather tells. There seem to be two ways of establishing my ancestry: firstly, I can check the stories against the available written and oral sources, and secondly, I can establish commonalities and differences between the available sources and the living tradition. It seems possible to do this with a family line. I know that I have some Polish roots. I know that I have tall ancestors. The Church is a family line, a living tradition containing the modern elements that give us clues about ancient events. Therefore, after examining more traditional sources, we shall look at the living tradition of the Church as well.

What weight do these accounts carry? Remember that Bultmann, following Kahler's lead, said that we shall never find a Jesus to base our faith upon by historical research. So why are we trying? Our goal is

not to reconstruct Jesus, but to provide an historical account to stand as a rock against Jesuses conjured up to fit personal theories. Our goal is to find immutable assertions of history to stand as bulwarks against the rising tide of the relativistic Jesuses of personal interpretation. We are, remember, bypassing Bultmann's contentless theory of introspection, and saying that there really did exist an historical Jesus outside of ourselves, and there is enough historical evidence to prove that a supernatural God "perforated" the natural order with the Incarnation of the Word, and perforated it again with the Resurrection of that same Word. By looking at the canonical and extra-canonical sources, as well as the living tradition of the Church, we can ascertain that something did indeed happen, something strong enough to evoke two-thousand years of history, martyrdom, and miracles.

## IX.

### The Death and Burial of Jesus

The earliest sources, namely the canonical, clearly indicate a death and burial, both of which are necessary for Resurrection (the latter lest Crossan's dogs come into the picture). All four Gospels agree with the account of Luke in saying that Jesus died: "And crying out in a loud voice, Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit; and when he said these things he died,"xxiii[23] and also with his account insofar as saying that Jesus was buried: "...[Joseph] went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus, and after he had taken him down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and put it in a tomb hewn of rock..."xxiv[24] Using the tools of literary redaction which Meier enumerates, we cannot accept the fuller description of John as historical fact, but we can at least conclude that these two events are corroborated in all the canonical accounts. Nor are the Gospels alone in this corroboration, for throughout the rest of the New Testament Jesus' death is an important element of the Christian confession. In Philippians, for example, we find the ancient hymn of confession which reads:

...and he was found in the likeness of man,  
humiliating his very self,  
he was made obedient unto death,  
even the death of the cross.xxv[25]

Thus, we can conclude that the prerequisites for the Resurrection are agreed upon by the canonical sources.

## X.

### The Canonical Resurrection

Let us next examine the Resurrection itself from the canonical sources. Like the prerequisites of the death and burial, the Resurrection is an element all four Gospels and Acts share. Shedding details to the bare-bones, let us examine in detail one of the simple Gospel accounts:

After the Sabbath, when dawn began to approach on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to gaze upon the tomb. And behold, the earth was shaken greatly: an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approaching, he turned back the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was shining, and his clothing was as radiant as snow. On account of fear of him, the guards were struck with terror and became like dead men. The angel spoke and said to the women: "Do not be afraid! For I know that you seek the Jesus who was crucified. He is not in this place: he has risen just as he said. Come, look in this place where he was laid. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead, and has gone before you into Galilee where you will see him.' Behold, I have told you these things." So they went quickly from the tomb, and with fear and great joy they ran together to announce this message to his disciples.xxvi[26]

The angel is shared by the synoptics but not John. The empty tomb runs through all four Gospels, as does the discovery in some way by Mary Magdalene and other disciples. We should, therefore, be able to construct a historical event in which Mary and some others go to Jesus' tomb and find it empty. Something, be it an angel or other intermediary, was so compelling that they come back to say that Jesus had risen, a concept which no one seemed to comprehend before this point, and a conclusion these women could not have therefore reached on their own without some sort of mediation.

The miraculous fruits of the Resurrection are more apparent when the disciples actually see the risen Lord. Such accounts are mentioned numerous times by three of the four Gospels and by Acts. In Matthew the disciples go to a mountain as they were summoned, in Luke they encounter him on the road to Emmaus and see him in Jerusalem as well, in Acts the Jerusalem scene is continued, and in John he comes into a room with locked doors and appears near the Sea of Tiberius as well. All of these scenes contain elements which seem to exist for the purpose of proving the appearance was real. Firstly, no one of these appearances is to a single disciple, meaning they have greater veridical strength. Secondly, Jesus often shows some proof (carefully recorded) that he is physically resurrected and present, such as proffering his hands and sides to Thomas in John. Thirdly, Jesus reiterates important messages he has already given earlier. For example, the disciples recognize Jesus in the breaking of the breadxxvii[27], which reminds them to fulfill Jesus' command of celebrating the Eucharist in remembrance of him. Also, at the beginning of Acts, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit, that same Advocate he promised before his death in John's account.xxviii[28] All three elements of the appearances indicate that they were not random events purported to have happened by random disciples, but rather were accepted by the community and contain important reminders but never new agendas.

## XI.

### The Non-Canonical Sources

There are various extra-canonical sources to be considered. Firstly, there are the Christian sources. These are of concern insofar as they usually state that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and never contradict this statement. The first Clementine Epistle, written very early in the second century, is an example. St. Clement of Rome is asserted by some to have been ordained by St. Peter himself, thus showing that his writings would have a greater authority than, for example, any of the Gnostic gospels. In fact, some argued for Clement's Epistle to be included in the canon. What does this writing tell us of the Resurrection?

Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand.xxix[29]

What we have here is an accounting for the authority of the apostolic line. How does that apostolic line gain its validity? According to Clement, it is through the fact that the line extends back to the commissioning of the first apostles, whose authority is backed by the miracles of the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Let it be noted that for Pope Clement of Rome to use the confirmation of the commissioning by means of the Resurrection as proof for the validity of his authority shows that belief in this miracle was firmly entrenched very early on.

What of the non-Christian sources? Tacitus and Josephus are among the earliest commentators on the Christians. Tacitus is interesting only in the fact that he lowers the "probability" of the case for a historical Resurrection by not even mentioning it in his Annals when describing the Christians.xxx[30] The only source that arouses any hope is that of Flavius Josephus, who writes in his Antiquities of the Resurrection:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when

Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.xxxi[31]

This writing fails, however promising it may appear, to bring up the probability of the case. The very first sentence pricks up the ears of anyone who has read any Josephus: "...if it be lawful to call him a man." Does this sound like something the Jewish Josephus would say? It does not match in any way Josephus' other writings. Remember that almost our entire neo-platonic literary tradition is dependent upon the scribes of the Christian monasteries. What does it hurt to add a sentence here and there, after all? Thus, it is safe to conclude two things, firstly that the non-Christian extra-canonical sources do not promote a belief in the Resurrection, and secondly that they do not seem to condemn such a belief either. Being neutral to the Resurrection, these sources therefore leave us where we started.

## XII.

### Living Tradition as a Source for the Historical Jesus

Having examined the more traditional sources of canonical and extra-canonical literature, let us examine the concept of living tradition more closely. What is living tradition? The living tradition of the Church consists of the current authoritative dogma and doctrine of the Church. To determine authoritative teaching here, I shall make the move Pope Clement made earlier and attach it to apostolic succession. It is interesting to note that the intended purpose of Strauss' work is to free the Church from the dogmatic discrepancy which arises because of mental development.xxxii[32] Though I would like to reword Strauss, I instead argue that his point has no affect on my argument. Take the example of family lineage. To prove I had a relative in the "tall" Prussian army, I would corroborate my grandfather's story with any available documents. I am not concerned with a truth being developed over time, something I feel is the job of the Church, but merely with pointing out that if the living tradition of the Church teaches the same thing as is seen in the ancient documents, this is very strong evidence for that which is contained in those documents to be true. Why is this so?

The reason living tradition carries its weight starts with the original event of the Resurrection. Since Hermann Samuel Reimarus, a theory that the early Christians invented the "dogmatic" Jesus has been prevalent. How would it benefit the early Christians to do this? All the Gospel accounts are clear on the fact that none of the disciples was arrested with Jesus, and most fled as soon as the trouble began. They all heard about the horrific death he suffered, and yet they came back together again. What drew them together again? Was there an amazing amount of money in preaching a crazy message to the Galilean people? No matter what details may encircle the dogmatic Jesus pieced together after his death, the fact that Jesus died is clear. Without the Resurrection, without the supernatural intervention of God, it is unclear what compelling force led these cowardly men out into the streets to preach, to be ridiculed, and to be martyred in steadfast defiance one by one. Would a Jesus whom they watched get eaten by dogs be a Jesus worth dying for? No inner realization would make me do it. We know the tomb *was* empty. We know Jesus *did* appear in some way to his disciples.

The death, burial, and Resurrection on the third day seem to provide an indisputable kernel of a historical Jesus. But however much can be whittled away from what a non-Christian modern scholar would call the "story" and what the Christian scholar would call doctrine, the fact that Jesus rose, that impetus which compelled cowards to fortitude, yet remains. Thus, the fact remains that the modern Church, which has suffered through two-thousand years of the weathering down of its teaching, and in the eyes of Strauss also suffered the mental development of the original teaching, has steadfastly taught that certain historical events took place. The Church has always taught that Jesus bodily rose from the dead, and stubbornly clung to this tenant come what may. The apostles seem very certain about the teaching that Jesus rose. There does not appear to be any mythological wiggle-room, as sometimes appears to be the case in the birth narratives. Jesus did not have any disciples when he was an infant. Jesus had a band of followers who

were compelled to come back together for some miraculous reason after he died and rose again, just as he said. The living tradition of the Church testifies to this fact.

### XIII.

#### An Application of the Facts

We have looked at three historical sources for the Resurrection of Jesus and have isolated Jesus having died, been buried, and having risen again in some way as being highly probable, given the accounts of the written sources combined with living tradition. What do I mean by highly probable? Returning to Collins' probabilistic argument for God based on fine-tuning, let us examine what he considers probable for his argument. One of his five examples of evidence for fine-tuning in the universe is that if the explosion of the big bang had been greater or lesser by one part in  $10^{60}$ , the universe would have collapsed, or would have expanded too quickly for stars to have formed, and thus life would have been impossible.<sup>xxxiii</sup>[33] He compares the likelihood of one part in  $10^{60}$  to a target to be shot at from halfway across the galaxy which is one square foot in size. Thus, he concludes that it is more probable that the universe was fine-tuned than having randomly "hit" the target.

Looking at the bare-bones event of the Resurrection, our evidence tells us that an event which confirmed for the disciples that Jesus was alive both took place and gave them the courage to become martyrs. There are many theories which could be posited; some have been proposed, and some are still in the minds of today's creative scholars. Maybe Jesus didn't die, but was cut down from the cross, was cared for by the Essenes, and then appeared to his disciples. Maybe Jesus was eaten by dogs and his disciples simultaneously realized the power of his message. Maybe Jesus died on the cross, was laid in a tomb, and physically rose from the dead. Which of these hypotheses is the most probable on the face of things, given human nature? Which would you be willing to die for? It seems that the last explanation is the most probable, the one an apostle would be willing to be crucified upside-down to defend. But wait! What about the *sacrificium intellectus* of Bultmann? Hasn't modern science explained away this hypothesis? Well... No.

Naturalism is not in style quite like it was fifty years ago. The naturalist's arguments goes something like this:

1. If there is a reason for believing in the supernatural, then the purpose will be to explain the immaterial aspects of nature.
2. There shall shortly be no more immaterial aspects of nature left to explain.
3. Therefore, there is no reason for believing in the supernatural.

The noted atheist and Nobel-winning physicist Steven Weinberg, in an essay on the possibility of a designer, admits that no matter how much modern science discovers about the question, there will always be a question of why: why this theory instead of another? Science has no way of proving itself as an end-all. "So there seems to be an irreducible mystery that science will not eliminate," Weinberg concludes<sup>xxxiv</sup>[34] Many philosophers are not ready to even limit the eternal mystery to the question of "why." Many hold that the immaterial aspects of the human mind, something which has thwarted human rationality to this point, will never be explained, no matter how much of the world falls under the dominion of natural order. The question of the supernatural has not been closed in the scientific world. Therefore, the action of the supernatural is not just a mythological solution given to those events we cannot scientifically explain, but instead was and remains, and shall always be compatible with the probability of an event having happened, whether it be the sun having danced in the sky for hundreds of thousands at Fatima, or the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

### XIV.

## The Argument for the Supernatural

Let us then include the bodily Resurrection in our realm of probable hypotheses, and thence proceed with our theory. An event took place that gave the disciples the courage to die for their faith. They called it bodily Resurrection, and described it in detail. There are two possible hypotheses: Either the disciples were mistaken, or the disciples were not mistaken. Our theory assumes a principle under which the facts are evidence for the hypothesis under which the facts have the highest probability. Is it more probable that the disciples died for what they truly saw, touched, talked, and with whom they ate, or is it more probable that they died for their faith because they were taking hallucinatory drugs or were encouraged by a Jesus was taken down on the sneak and who survived the cross. Put this way, the hypothesis under which the disciples were not mistaken is more probable. At the same time, even taking the naturalistic possibilities, one finds them unrealistic; and, if limited to these, one would be driven to skepticism. So here is the argument laid out:

1. The disciples being correct in their belief that Jesus bodily rose from the dead is not improbable under a supernaturalistic point of view.
2. The disciples being incorrect in their belief that Jesus bodily rose from the dead is very improbable under a naturalistic point of view.
3. Therefore, from premises (1) and (2) and the principle of confirmation, it follows that the historical data provides strong evidence to favor the disciples' being correct about their supernaturalistic explanation of the Resurrection over the some modern scholars' being correct about their naturalistic explanation of the Resurrection.xxxv[35]

Given this argument, what are the implications for the historian?

### XV.

#### Implications for Historical Studies

Probability is in many ways the greatest asset history has. Harvey says of the student of history: “[his] assent, so to speak, possesses a texture. He does not traffic in mere claims but in qualified claims ranging from tentativity to certitude.”xxxvi[36] As Meier said earlier, the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus. We will never believe in the Jesus of history; few men are willing to die for the sake a faith that is *probably* true. Our faith, then, must rest in the real Jesus. However, as far as that which is ascertained through probability (the historical Jesus) is concerned, the historian is in some sense a slave to the rules. The rules state that one’s assent should lie where probability puts it. Harvey admits that man comes in with his own preconceptions, but puts forward “modern logic” as being able to rob “the usual models of historical understanding of their seductive power.”xxxvii[37] Thus, the true historian should take into account the warrants, make use of modern logic, and honestly putt forward as history only that which thence follows.

Were the disciples mistaken about what they saw? Did Thomas put his hands upon the marks of Jesus injury? The bodily Resurrection is what the disciples claimed took place. They provide evidence as best they can, marking down carefully the fact that Jesus ate and that he proffered his hands to Thomas. The Church has clung to a larger story of the Resurrection, as is seen in the multiple appearances in the Gospels, and the varying extra-canonical sources. Some of these sources contradict other sources. Many offer more details that the simple fact Jesus rose from the dead, but all of them assert that same simple fact. Some type of Resurrection happened. All the sources say it was more than a spiritual resurrection, it was a bodily Resurrection. This is the historical origin; this is that little kernel which the historical-critical method should pull out of the account. It is bad method to dismiss the whole account without a solid redaction. Let the historian take note: the supernatural is not an automatic disqualification for redaction, nor does it indicate an immediate need for re-interpretation. By doing either of these things the historian departs from

solid criticism and writes a novel, merely one more of the many creative lives-of-Jesus which sell so well on today's market.

## XVI.

### Conclusion

Harvey offers a challenge to those who believe but at the same time use as evidence things which are unacceptable to those against whom they argue. He gives the example of a lawyer who may have full confidence in his client's innocence. Harvey notes that this is not enough to exonerate his client. Instead, the lawyer must prove his clients innocence with logic, according to the rules of the court. What is acceptable in the court of modern biblical criticism? According to Harvey it is dispassionate logic. "Just as it is comic for a philosopher to be passionately interested in the outcome of his speculations, so it leads to fanaticism for a historian to attach ultimate concern to the results of historical inquiry."xxxviii[38] Herein I have used the tools acceptable to both the historian and to the believer, and have provided a rational account for the probability of the supernatural status of the Resurrection. It is now up to the historian to mark as history that to which the probability lies. We may never recover the real event, but we certainly can assent to the historical possibility of Jesus bodily rising from the dead.

In the quest for the historical Jesus, Bultmann fell at the end of the No-quest. In reality, it would be appropriate to say that he was against biblical criticism; he thought it was a worthless enterprise which did not produce results useful to the Christian. I think that one of the reasons it was so useless an enterprise for Bultmann was the fact that he recognized the true fact that man's fulfillment is not of the natural order. Because he felt that the natural order was closed, it became fatuous to look back at a man who lived two-thousand years ago. Our ultimate fulfillment was to be found within, in that timeless statement of Jesus Christ, not in a man who lived two thousand years ago. I also think that once the supernatural is accepted into the natural order, only then does the God-man who lived two thousand years ago become important. I think that the New Quest only has its value in overcoming Bultmann, recognizing elements of the supernatural into history, and from thence deriving value in the historical Jesus.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bultmann, Rudolph. Jesus Christ and Mythology. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1958.

Clement of Rome, Pope St. Letter of Clement to the Corinthians. 14 May, 2003  
<http://www.newadvent.org>

Collins, Robin. *A Scientific Argument for the Existence of God: The Fine-Tuning Design Argument. Reason for the Hope Within*. Ed. Micael J. Murray. Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.

Crossan, John Dominic. Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography. Harper: San Francisco, 1994.

Harvey, Van Austin. The Historian and the Believer. The Macmillan Company: New York, 1966.

Fitzmyer, Rev. Joseph A. *The Biblical Commission's Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*. 4 Feb, 2003. [http://clawww.lmu.edu/~fjust/Docs/PBC\\_HistTruthFitzmyer.htm#PBCText](http://clawww.lmu.edu/~fjust/Docs/PBC_HistTruthFitzmyer.htm#PBCText)

Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews Ed. William Whiston, A.M. 14 May, 2003.  
<http://www.perseus.org>

Hodgson, Peter C. Introduction. The Life of Jesus Critically Examined. By David Friedrich Strauss. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1972.

Kahler, Martin. The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ. Trans. Carl E. Braaten. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1964.

Meier, Rev. John P. A Marginal Jew. Doubleday: New York, 1991.

Nova Vulgata: Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio. Liberia Editrice Vaticana: Citta del Vaticano, 1998.

Pontifical Biblical Commission. *Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels*. Trans. Rev. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. 1964. 4 Feb, 2003.  
[http://clawwww.lmu.edu/~fjust/Docs/PBC\\_HistTruthFitzmyer.htm#PBCText](http://clawwww.lmu.edu/~fjust/Docs/PBC_HistTruthFitzmyer.htm#PBCText)

Schweitzer, Albert. The Quest for the Historical Jesus. Ed. John Bowden. Fortress Press: 2000, Minneapolis.

Strauss, David Friedrich. The Life of Jesus Critically Examined. Ed. Peter C. Hodgson. Trans. George Eliot. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1972.

Swinburne, Richard. Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy. Clarendon Paperbacks: Oxford, 1992.

Tacitus. Annals. 14 May, 2003. <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html>

Weinberg, Steven. *A Designer Universe?* 1999. 14 May, 2003.

[http://www.physlink.com/Education/essay\\_weinberg.cfm](http://www.physlink.com/Education/essay_weinberg.cfm)

---

xxxix[1] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 17.

xl[2] Pp. 21. This is the introduction of his book: "The historical Jesus is not the real Jesus. The real Jesus is not the historical Jesus. I stress this paradox from the start because endless confusion in the 'quest for the historical Jesus' arises from the failure to distinguish these two concepts clearly."

xli[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 24.

xlii[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 25.

xliii[5] *Ibid.*, cf. pp. 199. It seems important that Meier mentions these four modes in which the historical Jesus can be "misused," because many in the Quest have adapted Jesus to their own purposes, making belief in Christ formless, or making Jesus a revolutionary. Hence, Meier is not just pointing out possibilities, but the real problems within the Quest today.

xliv[6] Rev. Joseph A. Fitzmyer. *The Biblical Commission's Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*. Pp. 1.

xlv[7] *Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels*. Trans. Rev. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. Paragraph I.

xlvi[8] Pp. 65.

xlvii[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 108.

xlviii[10] Jesus Christ and Mythology, pp. 17.

xlix[11] Ibid., pp. 79.

l[12] Pp. 144.

li[13] Ibid., pp. 145.

lii[14] Pp. 57.

liii[15] Ibid. Introduction, pp. xx. This quotation concerns the essay *De resurrectione carnis*, which Strauss wrote for the Catholic theological faculty in 1828.

liv[16] Albert Schweitzer. The Quest for the Historical Jesus, pp. 75.

lv[17] Jesus Christ and Mythology, pp. 61.

lvi[18] Ibid., pp. 62.

lvii[19] Richard Swinburne. Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy, pp. 90.

lviii[20] Jesus Christ and Mythology, pp. 15

lix[21] Ibid., pp. 15

lx[22] The argument alluded to here can be found in *A Scientific Argument for the Existence of God*, an article found in Michael J. Murray's collection Reason for the Hope Within.

lxi[23] Lk. 23:46. All Bible translations are my own and come from the Nova Vulgata, which closely follows the results of modern scholarship into the ancient Greek manuscripts.

lxii[24] Lk. 23:52-53.

lxiii[25] Gal. 2:7-8.

lxiv[26] Mat. 28:1-8.

lxv[27] Cf. Lk. 24:30-35

lxvi[28] Cf. Jn. 16:4-33.

lxvii[29] *Letter of Clement to the Corinthians*, Chapter 42. There are other writings of Pope Clement which could be considered as well, such as his second epistle to the Corinthians, but most scholars think it to be spurious.

lxviii[30] This is Tacitus' account of the Christians in the *Annals* (Chapter XV): "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular."

lix[31] Flavius Josephus. Antiquities of the Jews (ed. William Whiston, A.M.), 18(63).

lxx[32] The Life of Jesus Critically Examined, cf. pp. 39.

lxxi[33] *A Scientific Argument for the Existence of God*, cf. pp. 49.

lxxii[34] Steven Weinberg. *A Designer Universe?*

lxxiii[35] This argument follows exactly Collins' argument for a theistic explanation for fine-tuning, as stated earlier.

lxxiv[36] The Historian and the Believer, pp. 62.

lxxv[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 47.

lxxvi[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 124.

Franz Klein was awarded a B.A. with honors in Philosophy, Classical Languages, English and Catholic Studies in 2004 from the University of St. Thomas (Minnesota). He is now preparing for the priesthood at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, and is an S.T.B. candidate at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum).

---

---