

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?¹

By Mark E. Moore

This is the crux of Christianity – not whether Jesus died on a cross but whether he rose from the dead.² Indeed, the whole Christian religion rises or falls on this question.³ Paul put it this way, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile . . . we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor 15:17, 19). Thus, whether or not Jesus rose from the dead is the central question we must answer to determine if faith in Christ is well-founded or a farce.

Four Points of Historic Probability

Because this question is foundational to any kind of Christian faith we must begin with as few assumptions as possible.⁴ It simply would not be fair to import into the discussion at this point the inspiration of Scripture, Jesus’ divine status, or even the veracity of the Apostles’ testimony. We will begin, therefore, with a meager four points of historic probability.⁵

(1) *Jesus of Nazareth was executed by Pontius Pilate by crucifixion.* This is the unanimous testimony not only of the Biblical authors (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter,

¹ The literature on this subject is massive but several works stand out as significant starting points: N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2003) is a colossal masterpiece and the most compelling work to date. Norman Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1989) offers a classic evangelical apologetic. For a shorter version of the same kind of material see David J. MacLeod, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: Myth, Hoax, or History” *Emmaus Journal* 7/2 (1998) 157-99. For a more popular but less sophisticated approach see Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Pub., 1989). Because of the space constraints of this article, most arguments are necessarily brief. The footnotes are designed to guide the reader into more detailed and thorough discussions on any given point.

² Clark Pinnock, “Salvation by Resurrection” *Ex Auditu* 9 (1993)1-11, rightly calls attention to the fact that we are saved by the resurrection, by Jesus’ life, more than by his death.

³ “Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God. In the NT there is no faith that does not start *a priori* with the resurrection of Jesus,” J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Trans. By J. W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 165.

⁴ The resurrection was pivotal for 13 of the 14 evangelistic speeches in the book of Acts. Clearly it was the key issue for the early church when proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah (cf. Acts 1:21-22; 2:23-24, 31-32; 3:14-15, 26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39-41; 13:29-39; 17:30-31; 26:22-23).

⁵ Others have expanded these four items considerably. For example, Gary Habermas, “Affirmative Statements,” in *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?* Ed., Terry Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 19-20 lists 12 items that are generally accepted as historically verifiable. But for the sake of simplicity we will limit our discussion to these four. Cf. W. L. Craig, “Closing Response,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment. A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000) 162-206.

and Hebrews), but of Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.63-64) and Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44).⁶ There is really nothing incredible in this statement -- it aligns with what is known about Jesus' movement as well as the Roman reaction to would-be political rabble-rousers. Habermas notes, "Virtually all scholars today agree that Jesus died by crucifixion and that his body was afterwards buried."⁷ We will not take much space here to argue the obvious, that Jesus was put into a recognizable tomb. Suffice to say (1) Jesus burial in a tomb is mentioned in all four gospels as well as the earliest tradition of Paul (1 Cor 15:4) as well as Acts (13:29). (2) Joseph of Arimathea, a recognized person, is mentioned in all the gospel accounts. If he's merely literary fiction, that is one of the boldest examples of religious deception ever contrived – to call into your court a Sanhedrin member that never existed within a generation of the events! Moreover, if he was a real person, but didn't actually do what the evangelists claimed, his family surely would have sought reparations much worse than a libel suit.

(2) *The tomb was empty.* While some may contest this point⁸, several things stand in its defense (aside from the Biblical text). First, there was never any veneration of the tomb of Jesus. Considering the Jewish practice of honoring prophets' graves, this is inexplicable without an empty tomb. Nor was there any kind of second burial rites for the body of Jesus, a custom of common fare in the first century.⁹ Second, the central doctrine of the early church was the bodily

⁶ For a discussion of these texts as well as other ancient witnesses to Jesus in general, see Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996) 187ff.

⁷ Gary Habermas, "Jesus' Resurrection and Contemporary Criticism: An Apologetic," *Criswell Theological Review* 4/1 (1989) 159-174.

⁸ Two examples of such a denial are John S. Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1994), who contends that Jesus' body was thrown into a common grave, and J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 392-94, who asserts that Jesus' corpse was left out and probably consumed by dogs. Neither, of course, offers solid historical evidence for their claims. For a devastating critique of Spong see Paul Barnett, "The Apostle Paul, the Bishop of Newark, and the Resurrection of Jesus," *Crux* 30 (1994) 2-11.

⁹ We actually know a good bit about the burial customs of the early first century. See T. R. Longstaff, "The Women at the Tomb: Matthew 28:1 Re-Examined" *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981) 277-82; L. Y. Rahmani, "Ancient Jerusalem's Funerary Customs and Tombs," *Biblical Archaeologist* 44, 45 (1981/2) 171-7; 229-35; 43-53; 107-119 and Byron R. McCane, "'Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead': Secondary Burial and Matthew 8:21-22," *Harvard*

resurrection of Jesus. It is inconceivable that the Christian church, which began in the very city of Jesus' execution, could have made any headway had his tomb still been occupied. Now, some will suggest that the Apostles' experience and proclamation was either a hallucination or vision of some sort that did not require the tomb to be empty. However, there is virtually no example of Jews, or anyone else for that matter, talking about a "spiritual" or "mystic" resurrection in the second temple period. *It always referred to the raising of a dead body.* Indeed, people did have visions and dreams, but they were chalked up to angelic visitations (cf. Acts 12:14-15) or some sort of vision, but it would never have been labeled a resurrection.¹⁰ Simply put, the empty tomb is a prerequisite to any kind of belief in or proclamation of Jesus' resurrection. Third, the story of the empty tomb appears to be very early. It is embedded in all four gospels and "the very variation in the different narratives of the empty tomb, which are in one sense embarrassing, argues that these accounts stem from separate and independent traditions."¹¹ Finally, the earliest Christian polemic concerning the resurrection dealt with an empty tomb. That is, Matthew records the story of the guards reporting that the disciples stole the body (Mt 28:11-15). The issue at this point is not whether either side is telling the truth. The issue is "who started it?" This is hardly the kind of tale that Christians would have invented so as to needlessly implicate themselves. No, this story surely started with the chief priests. Now, why might they say such a

Theological Review 83/1 (1990) 31-43. Had Jesus been in a tomb, one would fully expect the disciples to return after a year to collect his bones into an ossuary.

¹⁰ Wright, *Resurrection* 695, "Dreams of recently dead people are, and were in the first century, as common as grief itself. Such dreams might be taken to indicate that the dead person had passed into a post-mortem state, and was, in that sense, 'alive'. But that was never, for either pagans or Jews, what the language of 'resurrection' denoted."

¹¹ R. Stein, "Was the Tomb Really Empty?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977) 23-29. He also argues that the presence of Semitisms (e.g. "on the first day of the week" [Mk 16:2]; "angel of the Lord" [Mt 28:2]; "Miriam" [Mt 28:1]; "[answering] said" [Mt 28:5]; "bowed their faces to the ground" [Lk24:5]) suggests the early origin of this testimony.

thing? Without an empty tomb, who in their right mind would accuse the disciples of stealing the body?!

¹²

(3) *The Apostles believed Jesus had appeared to them in a tangible body.* They may, in fact, have been mistaken, but they were certainly convinced Jesus appeared to them physically (cf. Mt 28:9; Lk 24:39-43; Jn 20:27) and thus they were transformed by their experience. Two points must be made here. First, they believed the resurrection was physical.¹³ We mentioned this in the previous paragraph but it requires a full defense here. Wright traces every major use of resurrection in Hebrew, Greek, and Roman literature.¹⁴ He deals a death blow to the classic rationalistic argument that apostles preached a mystic or “spiritual” resurrection, not a physical one. “In so far as Homer has anything to say about resurrection, he is quite blunt: it doesn’t happen.”¹⁵ Aeschylus is even more vivid, “Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection.”¹⁶ Both Homer and Plato (the Old and New Testaments of Greek philosophy) spoke disparagingly of resurrection. The references could be multiplied but this is sufficient to make the point: The Greeks and Romans not only did not believe in resurrection but eschewed the idea since death was their release from the prison of the body (cf. Origen, *Contra*

¹² For a fuller argument in favor of the historicity of the empty tomb see W. L. Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985) 39-67 and R. E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

¹³ Norman L. Geisler, “The Significance of Christ’s Physical Resurrection,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (1989) 148-70 & Stephen Davis, “Was Jesus Raised Bodily?” *Christian Scholars Review* 14/2 (1985) 140-52.

¹⁴ Wright, *Resurrection*, 32-206. See also John F. A. Sawyer, “Hebrew Words for the Resurrection [sic] of the Dead” *Vetus Testamentum* 23 (1973) 218-34 and D. J. Harrington, “Afterlife Expectations in Pseudo-Philo, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch,” in *Resurrection in the New Testament*, Ed. R. Bieringer, V. Koperski & B. Lataire (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2002) 21-34.

¹⁵ Wright, *Resurrection* 32; cf. Homer, *Illiad* 24.549-51, 756.

¹⁶ Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 647f. See also Heroditus 3.62.3f; Euripides, *Madn. Hercl.* 719; Herod. *Mim.* 1.41-44; Pindar *Pyth.* 3.1-60; *Aenid* 6.127-31; Pliny (the Elder) *NH* 7.55.190 (references are from N.T. Wright, *Resurrection* 33, fn. 6-9).

Celsus 5.14).¹⁷ Christians preached resurrection as their central doctrine in a world that emphatically stated that such a thing could not happen (Acts 17:32; 1 Cor 1:18).

The Jews told a different story. While not all Jews believed in resurrection, those that did always viewed it as physical, always eschatological, and always corporate. Consequently, one can say that the Christian view of resurrection could *only have developed in a Jewish context but was radically transformed by the church*.¹⁸ They proclaimed this wild-haired idea that a single individual in space and time was rescued from the grave in a transformed body. This leads to two important and inevitable conclusions: (1) When the disciples spoke of resurrection, their context was also bodily, physical resurrection. (2) The early church, spoke of resurrection in Jewish terms, but also radically altered it in at least six ways: The Christian view of resurrection differs from any first century Jewish view in several significant ways: (a) It was individual (i.e. Jesus) not merely corporate (i.e. national); (b) It was within current space and time, not eschatological (cf. Jn 11:24); (c) the body was transformed, not merely resuscitated; (d) this belief that had been peripheral to Judaism became central to the church; (e) it was two-stage not one, with Jesus prefiguring our eschatological resurrection; (f) it was apologetically applied to the Messiah which had never been done before. This radical new theology of resurrection requires explanation. One doesn't just rewrite the creed without powerful grounds for doing so.

Second, whatever experience the disciples thought they had *transformed* them. Peter went from a coward in the courtyard (Mt 26:69-75) to a bold preacher in the portico of Solomon

¹⁷ “Resurrection in the flesh appeared a startling, distasteful idea, at odds with everything that passed for wisdom among the educated. . . . ‘I wasn’t, I was, I am not, I don’t care’: this epitaph was so well known that it was often reduced on tombstones to its initial letters, in Latin as well as Greek” in Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven, Yale, 1984) 84.

¹⁸ See Wright, *Resurrection* 85-206.

(Acts 2:14-41; Gal 2:7-9).¹⁹ James, the half-brother of Jesus, went from being a critic (Mk 3:21, 31-35; Jn 7:1-9)²⁰ to an Apostle and key leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9). Thomas went from skeptic to worshipper (Jn 20:24-28), with a declaration of Jesus' deity which is arguably the most extraordinary thing ever spoken by a monotheistic Jew to another human being: "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28).²¹ Perhaps the conversion of St. Paul is the most historically documented case. Luke records his conversion three times (Acts 9, 22, 26) as does Paul, himself (Gal 1:11-17; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8-11). He was formerly a chief persecutor of the Way (Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; Gal 1:13; 1 Tim 1:13), and become one of its key proponents. In short, something extraordinary had to have happened to these men to cause them to react the way they did.²²

(4) *The Christian church was founded.* Its existence and form must be accounted for. The bald fact is, whenever Messianic leaders died, either a family member took over or the movement fizzled out.²³ Here we have a Messianic leader who is caught and crucified – the most

¹⁹ The historical reliability of these incidents is virtually beyond question. Peter's denial is found in all four gospels and is hardly the kind of thing the early church would have invented against one of their pillars. Even if one questions some of the details, the incidents as a whole are unassailable.

²⁰ Again, even if one wants to question the details of the text, we have two different incidents recorded from two separate traditions, both of which would have been an embarrassment to the Jesus movement, particularly within a patron/client context which prizes family loyalty. These stories surely reflect accurately the antipathy between Jesus and his brothers.

²¹ Perhaps this story sounds incredible to some. Two things should be kept in mind. First, Thomas reacted no differently than all the rest of the disciples prior to encountering Jesus raised. Hence, if this story is not a historical account of Thomas then it is a paradigmatic representation of all the disciples' reaction to Jesus. That would hardly lessen the argument we are making here. Second, if Thomas did not literally say the words, "My Lord and my God," then another kosher Jew penned them and put them in his mouth. Again, this hardly lessens the point. Furthermore, this testimony of Thomas became standard fare of early Christian hymns (cf. Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20). Even if one argues such a high Christology is later than Thomas, it can't be more than 10-15 years down the road before it was embedded in these hymns.

²² Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 142 identified this as "one of the indisputable facts of history" and "a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree." See also J. D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1985), 75.

²³ This happened in the Maccabean revolt as well as the revolt in the middle of the first century, ending with Eleazar at Masada. N.T. Wright, *Resurrection* 560, calls attention to the fact that James, who had considerable clout in the Christian community (Gal 1:19; Acts 15:13-21; 12:17; 21:18), was never called upon to take over Jesus' Messianic leadership role. Why? Because Jesus was still a functioning king for Christians. The point is established further by

ignominious punishment available (cf. Deut. 21:23). This virtually destroyed all hope that Jesus was any kind of Messiah they could have imagined (cf. Lk 24:21). They would not only be disappointed but would certainly feel disillusioned and deceived. Yet fifty days later the church explodes, precisely in the city which would know and despise these events (cf. 1 Cor 1:18, 23-24). Moreover the dreaded cross became the centerpiece of the entire movement, not only its preaching but its praxis. Specifically, we need to explain the celebration of the Eucharist, a ritual eating of Jesus' flesh and blood. Under what set of circumstances would a group of Jews in the early to mid-first century "invent" such a thing. Is it conceivable that a failed Messiah would be remembered with anything but disdain? Even so, who would memorialize him with a meal so offensive because of its cannibalistic symbolism? Likewise, baptism into the death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:4-5) has to have some reasonable genesis. Not only does the form of this entry rite assume a belief in resurrection, but this particular rite replaced circumcision (Col 2:11-12), one of the cherished marks of a Judaism (along with Sabbath and purity laws, which were also abolished for Gentile Christians). It would be difficult to overstate the significance of such a transition. It would be akin to one of our churches replacing the elements of the Lord's supper with beer and beef-Jerky or setting on top of the cross in the front of our church an image of the Buddah. A firestorm is predictable, and actually recorded in Acts 15. Furthermore, what would cause a group of Jews to alter the deeply cherished and tenacious practice of Sabbath to include a Sunday worship service? For a people steeped in tradition stretching 1,500 years, such a change could only be effected by a spiritual tsunami.²⁴ Something massive, world-transforming, life-altering transpired. What could account for such things?

Accounting for the Evidence

the fact that James was called upon to quell Christians' belief in his brother as Messiah (which, of course, backfired) (Hegesippus 2.23.10 & 13f; cf. Josephus *Ant.* 20.200).

²⁴ Both Ignatius *Magn.* 9.1 and Justin Martyr *Apol.* 67 bring up this very point.

Without assuming the inspiration of the Bible or the deity of Christ, without resorting to “God told me” or “I feel it in my heart,” we have laid out four historic probabilities that must be accounted for: (1) Jesus died by crucifixion, (2) the tomb was empty, (3) the disciples really believed they encountered Jesus in a resurrected body, and (4) the church grew, centering both its proclamation and practice on the resurrection. Now, how does one account for such things? Several proposals have been offered through the years. The first four have been thoroughly rejected in the academic community and will be dealt with in the cursory fashion they deserve.²⁵ The last theory continues to be advanced in a variety of forms and forums and deserves a bit more attention.

1. Jesus’ body was stolen by the disciples. This, of course, was the first theory to counter the claim that Jesus was raised (Mt 28:11-15). But had the guards really fallen asleep (unlikely given Roman discipline in such matters), how could they have known who stole the body? And had the disciples done so, why were they not caught and punished (particularly since there was no requirement of proof beyond reasonable doubt)? Moreover, what motivation did they have? Since Jesus had been honorably buried by a wealthy nobleman, these peasant fishermen could hardly have improved his final resting place. In fact, all they could have hoped for was to desecrate it and themselves in the process. What’s worse, they had no worldview which would have allowed them to think in terms of an individual resurrection in current space and time. Moreover, since the Messiah was never connected to resurrection in the O.T. or Jewish

²⁵ Several major thinkers have commented on the demise of these older naturalistic theories: “After the demise of German liberalism, usually dated shortly after the termination of World War I, the next few decades of the twentieth century witnessed a decreasing interest in naturalistic alternative theories to Jesus’ resurrection,” Gary Habermas, “The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus’ Resurrection,” *Trinity Journal* 22NS (2001) 182. “Today we rightly turn up our nose at this . . . these explanations . . . have now gone out of currency,” Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. 4, part 1 of *Church Dogmatics* (12 vols.; ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 340. “No longer respectable are the crude theories. . . . Occasionally some new mutation of the ‘plot’ approach will briefly capture the public fancy, but serious scholars pay little attention to these fictional reconstructions,” Raymond Brown, “The Resurrection and Biblical Criticism,” *Commonweal* 87 (Nov. 24, 1967): 233.

theology, there is really no reason for such an imaginative leap.²⁶ If the record holds true, they were terrified, not clever. Finally, the unanimous confession of the Apostles as well as their persecution and martyrdom (without a single defection) is simply incredulous without a real belief in the resurrection. It does seem unreasonable (not to mention unkind) to impugn the moral integrity of these men who preached faith, hope, and love. The idea that they stole the body and made up a story has been thoroughly debunked and, in fact, was never convincing, even when first espoused.

2. The women went to the wrong tomb.²⁷ The idea is simply that the women, flustered by recent events, got their directions wrong and went to an empty tomb. After all, the gardener (not an angel) said, “He is not here . . .” Even if we discount the biblical evidence of a private tomb, the guards, and the seal, as well as its proximity to the site of execution, all of which would clearly identify the tomb, we still have several problems. (a) Why did Peter and John also go to the wrong tomb? (b) Why did the Sanhedrin, or specifically Joseph of Arimathea, not point out the correct location when the church began to grow? (c) How do we account for the supposed appearances? An empty tomb, by itself, proves nothing but a bit of foul play. By itself, the empty tomb never would have led the disciples to the conclusion that Jesus had been resurrected (cf. Lk 24:9-12; Jn 20:1-9).²⁸ Besides, this now defunct theory never accounted for more than two of the four historical points that require explanation.

²⁶ Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1982) argues, *as a Jewish scholar* that Jesus did, in fact, raise from the dead but that he was not the Messiah after all. His reasoning is that resurrection is not connected to Messiahship in the O.T. but establishing a kingdom is. This, according to Lapide, Jesus failed to do.

²⁷ This theory was first espoused by the influential work of Kirsopp Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (New York, Putnam's, 1907).

²⁸ John came to believe, not based on the empty tomb, but the presence of the grave clothes for no grave robber would have left these behind (for at least two obvious reasons).

3. Jesus never really died but only swooned.²⁹ When he revived he went to the disciples and the mistake was written up as theology.³⁰ It is unthinkable that Roman centurions failed to execute Jesus properly (something at which they had become quite efficient). It is unthinkable that a cool tomb, thick wrappings drenched in spices (75 lbs according to Jn 19:39), and 72 hours of unattended shock would have resulted in a salubrious resuscitation. And it is unthinkable that the battered and beleaguered Jesus could have thrown back the stone, walked into town and convinced the troops he was a living Lord.

4. The disciples did not encounter the risen Christ, but merely hallucinated.

Hallucinations are induced either by drugs, mental illness, or traumatic expectation, none of which would seem to apply to the disciples. Even if one or two of them had a breakdown or perhaps consoled themselves with especially strong “vinegar” it is simply not possible for the whole group to experience the same psychological phenomenon. The two on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13), the group of women at the tomb (Mk 16:1), the Apostolic band in the upper room (Jn 20:19-28), the seven in the fishing boat (Jn 21:1-3) and the meeting on Matthew’s mountain (Mt 28:16-18) all necessitate simultaneous hallucinations over an extended period of time to a broad

²⁹ This theory was demolished over one hundred years ago by David Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus* (2 Vols.; Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1879) 1:408-12. At the turn of the century, there was no one who took it seriously according to Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (Trans. W. Montgoverly from the 1906 German version; New York: Macmillan, 1968) 56-57.

³⁰ The most popular version of this is Schonfield’s *Passover Plot* (New York : B. Geis Associates; distributed by Random House, 1966), which concocts an elaborate plot whereby Jesus would purposely fulfill O.T. prophecy (of which there is precious little concerning the resurrection) by having Joseph of Arimathea slip him a drug with the vinegar on the cross. The scheme was spoiled when the soldier thrust the spear into Jesus’ side. Joseph went ahead and stole away Jesus’ body and the young gardener was thereby mistaken for Jesus on several occasions; Joseph never bothered to correct the disciples. More recently Barbara Thiering created her own fictionalized swoon theory in which Jesus was crucified at Qumran with Judas Iscariot and Simon Magus. After surviving, Jesus went on to marry Mary Magdalene as well as Lydia of Philippi. See *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992). N. T. Wright, *Who was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 22-23, aptly comments “It is safe to say that no serious scholar has given this elaborate and fantastic theory any credence whatsoever. . . . The only scholar who takes Thiering’s theory with any seriousness is Thiering herself.” The Qu’ran espouses a similar view that Jesus did not die on the cross but only appeared to (4.157-58). This cryptic saying is open to various interpretations but one likely explanation, according to Islam, is that someone else died in Jesus’ place. (Now there is a paradox).

array of personality types, none of whom expected that sort of thing to happen. Even if one asserts these stories have been redacted for theological purposes, the historic thread surely remains – Jesus appeared to groups of people not merely individuals.³¹ Furthermore, had Jesus only appeared to individuals, the group of disciples never would have been convinced. After all, if ten apostles could not convince Thomas, what chance would, say, Peter, have had in convincing the ten? The biggest problem is yet before us – this theory still leaves Jesus in the tomb. Had the tomb been occupied and the disciples had visions of sorts, they would actually have had a ready answer from within their Jewish heritage: Jesus’ angel came to communicate across the grave (cf. Acts 12:14-15). But this never would have been seen as a resurrection.

5. The original appearances were visionary and only later were they recorded as physical events.³² This is the naturalistic theory in current vogue but it is merely a more sophisticated elaboration of the hallucination theories.³³ While it takes a dazzling array of shapes its basic contours are based on three suppositions which will be taken up in turn.

*First, what the disciples saw was a vision, illumination, or illusion.*³⁴ We have placed this theory right after the hallucination theory because most of the weaknesses of the former are

³¹ The stories of individual appearances (Mary Magdalene, Jn 20:11-18; Peter, Lk 24:34; and Paul, Acts 9:1-6), are fewer and less prominent than the group appearances.

³² For influential proponents of this theory see Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection* (trans. John Bowden: Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) and Willi Marxen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (trans. Margaret Kolh; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

³³ Habermas, “Naturalistic Responses,” 179-196, has tracked more than 1,200 publications between 1975-2001 and found that the great majority of them resort to some kind of naturalistic explanation of a visionary experience or internal state of the disciples. His categories and summary of a broad swath of scholarship is extremely enlightening. For a survey up to 1971 see Sean Freyne, “Some Recent Writing on the Resurrection,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 38 (1971) 144-63.

³⁴ This theory differs from the *hallucination* theory above in that it does not suggest a mental breakdown. But we should further differentiate between several sub-categories of this theory. (1) Some argue that what the disciples saw was a *vision* projected by God. (2) Others suggest it was spiritual *illumination* induced by religious ecstasy or enthusiasm. (3) Still others will argue for *illusion*, wherein individuals or groups mistake one natural phenomenon for another (sometimes called “mass hysteria”). Yet, however these theories may try to articulate their subtle differences, this main issue underscores them all: they thought they saw Jesus but they really saw something else. Nothing happened to the body of Jesus, only to the eyes or minds of the disciples. Stephen Davis, “‘Seeing’ the Risen Jesus” in *The Resurrection*, Edited by Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, & Gerald O’Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 126-147 offers an excellent rebuttal to this theory. C. F. D. Moule, “St Paul and

still inherent in the latter. For the sake of space we will simply remind the reader that any theory in which the disciples thought they saw Jesus, but really didn't, has not adequately dealt with the empty tomb nor the fact that such an experience was beyond the purview of any philosophy or theology of the Mediterranean world and hence beyond the disciples expectations. We must not forget these two crippling inadequacies of this "visionary" theory.

Sometimes it is asserted that Peter is the culprit. Based on his vision in Acts 10, it is claimed that he was prone to such visionary experiences, especially induced by his guilt for having betrayed Jesus. Furthermore, he must have had the clout to convince the others that he really saw Jesus. Thus the rumor was off and running. It is, of course, highly doubtful that Peter had the kind of influence required to convince the rest of the group of something none of them had ever imagined.³⁵ Ecstatic experiences such as visions or illusions generally fall within the range of psycho-social possibility. In other words, you have to believe it before you can see it. For example, St. John on the isle of Patmos can see grasshoppers with long hair and the tails of scorpions, but he is not going to see an Apache helicopter or chemical weapons. Likewise, whatever Peter saw almost certainly would have to be within the realm of possibility. As we have demonstrated earlier, nothing in Peter's social world prepared him to experience such a vision.

Dualism: The Pauline Conception of Resurrection" *New Testament Studies* 13 (1966) 106-23 also raises an important point, namely, Paul was a far cry from the Gnostic dualists who would have generated such a story as a spiritual apparition as opposed to a bodily appearance. In short, this is not the sort of thing a concrete Jew such as Saul of Tarsus would have been prone to purporting.

³⁵ It is highly unlikely that Peter could have pulled this off. The following incidents demonstrate that Peter was far from the undisputed leader of the church: (1) When he baptized the first Gentile converts he was called on the carpet for it (Acts 11:1-3). (2) It was James, not Peter who was the key leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13ff). (3) That the disciples argued about who was the greatest clearly indicates Peter had not won the day. In fact, he appears to be in third place (Mt 20:20-28). (4) At the last supper it was John and Judas who sat next to Jesus with Peter being across the table (Jn 13:24). Certainly he was prominent, but by all accounts, *no one believed in the resurrection prior to encountering Jesus*. Furthermore, had Peter's vision been the key to influence the other's faith, one would expect it to be narrated in glowing terms rather than the doubt that pervades Peter (Lk 24:12; Jn 20) and it certainly would not have been preempted by Mary Magdalene! As it is, Peter's first encounter with the risen Christ is barely alluded to in Lk 24:34; Mary Magdalene and the two on the road to Emmaus get far more press.

An alternative culprit is the Apostle Paul. Those advocating a spiritual resurrection based on Paul, use two arguments. (1) Paul, plagued by guilt on route to Damascus had a visionary encounter with Christ (cf. Gal 1:12-17). His experience is then taken as the paradigm for all other resurrection encounters. (2) Paul himself describes the resurrection body as “spiritual” not physical. Let’s take each argument in turn.

Was Paul’s Damascus road experience merely spiritual? We really have no evidence that Paul’s encounter with Jesus was not physical (physicality may, in fact, be implied by Acts 9:17, 27). There really was a light, Paul really did have scales on his eyes, he really was knocked to the ground, and there really was a voice external to his cranium (at least according to all the reports, Acts 9:7; 22:9; 26:14). So it is mere assumption that Paul did not encounter a real person. More to the point, Paul’s experience was not likely the pattern upon which all other (previous) appearances were based. Why should we assume that Paul’s experience is normative when he describes it himself as abnormal: 1 Corinthians 15:8, “and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born?”³⁶ Why should we assume that Paul’s experience was the template used in (re)writing the gospel accounts of Jesus’ appearances?³⁷ This is an especially difficult question given the Greco-Roman milieu which took such a dim view of resurrection. Why would these documents be rewritten in a way that purposely offended potential converts? Furthermore, why

³⁶ Some may argue that Paul is describing *himself* as abnormal, not the *experience*. This is true, but what made Paul an abnormal Apostle was the *timing* of his experience -- meeting Jesus after the ascension. So the *least* that can be said is that Paul’s experience was abnormally late in the game.

³⁷ The fact is, had the resurrection narratives merely been invented, they would look very different than they presently do. (1) Jesus surely would have had much more to say about resurrection during his ministry (providing proof-texts for Christians) and it would have matched Pauline theology better. As it is, Jesus says very little about it and it looks more Jewish than Christian (cf. Wright, *Resurrection*, 408, 439). (2) The gospel texts are widely divergent. Matthew’s major resurrection appearance is on a mountain ostensibly in Galilee; Luke’s is south of Jerusalem on route to Emmaus; and John’s is in a locked upper room in the city. Could they be more different? And yet the theology of the resurrection (i.e. transformed physical body proving Jesus to be Messiah) is identical. Hence we have a monolithic resurrection theology which differs significantly from its Jewish origin that is placed in very different settings by each of the evangelists. (3) There are virtually no quotations of Scripture in the gospel accounts in order to proof-text an expectation of resurrection. Particularly notable is the absence of Daniel 12. Conclusion: This looks more like historical detail than theologically redacted stories with a similar origin in Paul.

should we assume that Paul was guilt-laden when he says he had a clear conscience (Php 3:6; Acts 23:1)? And why should we assume that Paul was converted by a “spiritual” apparition while on route to stamp out a church whose central doctrine was bodily resurrection (a doctrine which supposedly developed years after Paul’s own conversion!)? What then was Paul stamping out? This is an especially unsatisfying proposal given that the language Paul used for resurrection had never before been used for visions or illumination.^{38, 39}

The other side of this argument is Paul’s description of resurrection as “spiritual” in 1 Corinthians 15:44. When Paul says we will be raised with a spiritual body not a fleshly one, he is not saying that our resurrected bodies will be ethereal! The contrast is between “soul” [ψυχη, *pseuche*] and “spirit” [πνευμα, *pneuma*], not material vs. immaterial.⁴⁰ The resurrected body, according to Paul, is just as tangible, but it is enlivened by a spirit, not merely a soul. The translation of the Jerusalem Bible helps clarify the passage: “When it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit. If the soul has its own embodiment, so does the spirit have its own embodiment.”⁴¹ Elsewhere the Spirit-enlivened body was certainly corporeal (Rom 8:11).

³⁸ Wright, *Resurrection* 681, “The exceptions prove the rule: the position ascribed to Hymenaeus and Philetus in 2 Timothy 2, together with the *Letter to Rheginos* and similar texts, were mere innovation, not a natural growth or development. They used the language of resurrection to denote something to which that word-group had never before referred.” It might also be worth noting in passing that the univocal witness of the early church fathers was a bodily resurrection, not a spiritual apparition.

³⁹ It would also be exceedingly strange for Paul to insert three days into a “spiritual” resurrection (1 Cor 15:4). Why would Jesus’ spirit need three days before being glorified in the heavenly/ethereal realm? At the same time we need to recognize that the third day is a theological motif – it is the time in which God acts (cf. Gen 22:4; 42:18; Exo 15:22; 19:16; Joshua 2:16; 2 Kings 20:5; Jonah 1:17; Esther 4:16; 5:1; Hos 6:2). See Harvey McArthur, “On the Third Day,” *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971) 81-86.

⁴⁰ In fact, if anything, any contrast with “soul” should make the body more corporeal not less. As Wright, *Resurrection* 351 explains, “If Paul had wanted to find a word for ‘non-physical’, *psychikos* (which could literally be translated as ‘soulish’) would itself have been a possible option. . . . *psychikos* would refer to non-physical side, and whatever was being contrasted with it would be seen as more firmly bodily, more substantial.”

⁴¹ It would also be a peculiar thing that the Corinthians, who boasted in their visions and spiritual experiences, would not also claim to have seen the risen Christ, had Paul really meant that his encounter with Jesus was merely visionary. After all, that would provide the very ammunition needed to win the debate about who was the most spiritual (1 Cor 1:12; 14), not to mention countering Paul’s exclusive claims to Apostleship (1 Cor 4).

Second, the visionary theory assumes a late development. It would take time for these resurrection stories to develop into their present shape -- for the Jesus of history to evolve into the Christ of faith. But time is precisely what they do not have. As soon as Jesus died the disciples' aspirations died with him.⁴² Within days, or weeks at the most, the disciples would have returned home, gone back to business, and tried to forget the awful nightmare as well as the embarrassment and danger they had caused their families. What they hoped for twenty-four hours before the first Easter was amnesia, not resurrection. Over the course of several months following the crucifixion, they certainly would not be chumming around with the apostolic band reminiscing about how good things used to be. Like dozens of other failed revolutionary movements, they would have attempted to return home and fade into the landscape. So the longer this story takes to develop the more fragile the network of disciples becomes. Again, they probably have days, perhaps weeks, but not months and certainly not years or decades. But that is precisely what is required for such myths to develop.⁴³ Scholars who assert this very thing suggest that it took four to five decades before this myth was fully developed (which within Jewish monotheism is still far too short a time). It simply doesn't work. If you're going to carve an ice-sculpture in the desert you had better get it done quickly for in forty or fifty years, no one will remember the project!

To complicate matters, the Easter faith does not look like a developing project. The earliest account of resurrection we have is 1 Corinthians 15 (c. A.D. 54). Here we find a fully developed theology of Jesus' resurrection. It is not nascent, it is not evolving – there it is with all its Christological implications! What is more striking is that Paul quotes what is likely an even

⁴² Lapidé 85-86.

⁴³ cf. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 188-91, suggests it would take more than two generations for a myth such as the resurrection to develop.

earlier Christological creed in vv. 3b-5.⁴⁴ So by A.D. 54, Paul quoted a hymn that someone else had since written and disseminated widely enough that the Corinthian church would be familiar with it. Moreover, this kind of formulaic confession (“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance”) is not the kind of thing one feels free to tamper with. It would seem fair to assume that Paul passed on verbatim an earlier standard confession. Conservatively we can suggest that this hymn was within fifteen years of the actual resurrection and by then the theological implications of Jesus’ deity had been fully developed (cf. Php 2:5-10; Col 1:15-20). This is a massive problem for any theory that suggests the Easter narratives evolved over long periods of time.

Perhaps just as problematic are those 500 living witnesses still eager to testify to the historicity of Jesus’ bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:6). If Paul is either lying or exaggerating, he is making an outrageous gamble to defend a doctrine he knows is false and once tried to stamp out with violence.

Third, the visionary theory assumes that the gospels accounts are literary developments dependent upon pagan myths of resurrection. Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead as the gospels say, but it was written up that way to match the stories found in Jewish and mythological literature. Is this possible? Well, sure, lots of things are possible. But if the gospels are merely literary productions, they were written by fools who completely missed the most common Hellenistic objections that would be raised.⁴⁵ (1) Mary Magdalene is mentioned (always first) in five of the six resurrection appearances at a time when women were not even allowed as legal

⁴⁴ Cf. Anthony Thiselton, *First Corinthians* in *The New International Greek Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 1186-1204.

⁴⁵ Cf. Russ Dudrey, “What the Writers Should have Done Better: A Case for the Resurrection of Jesus Based on Ancient Criticism of the Resurrection Reports,” *Stone Campbell Journal* 3 (2000) 55-78. The *Gospel of Peter* (esp. 9:35-10:42) is an excellent example of what such a fictitious report would have looked like.

witnesses in court.⁴⁶ (2) There is no actual account of the resurrection itself. (3) Jesus never appears to his enemies.⁴⁷ (4) They bungled the details so badly that it is next to impossible to even harmonize the events. (5) And the greatest guffaw of all is that these authors who started with a Platonic disembodied vision (palatable to Hellenists) inexplicably transformed it into a physical resurrection that would be scoffed off the stage.

Finally, there is a common accusation that these resurrection accounts are dependent on the mythology of the Mediterranean world (notably the stories of Osiris, Adonis, Dionysius, Baal, and Tammuz⁴⁸). On closer inspection the threads of this tapestry unravel. (1) These stories are NOT comparable to the Biblical text except in the most cursory of details.⁴⁹ (2) Even in the two or three stories that do resemble resurrection, the Greeks and Romans knew these were merely tales and criticized their message. Anytime there is literal talk about the resurrection in Greco-Roman literature, one thing is clear: *It doesn't happen!* (cf. ftn 13-15). (3) If there was copying, it actually goes the other way. The rise of resurrection stories in the new genre of Roman novel didn't take place until the second half of the first century. And the use of *anastasis* ("resurrection") to mean an improved state of the soul, rather than the body, was a novel

⁴⁶ Cf. Gerald O'Collins & Daniel Kendall, "Mary Magdalene as Major Witness to Jesus' Resurrection," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987) 631-46. "For rabbinic evidence cf. e.g. mSheb. 4.1; mRosh hash. 1.8; bBab. Kam. 88a. Josephus adds the following to the law of witnesses (Dt. 19:15): 'From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex' (*Ant.* 4.219)" Wright, *Resurrection*, 607, ftn. 55.

⁴⁷ Paul is a possible exception to this rule, but he never surfaced during Jesus' ministry and Jesus' appearance to Paul was clearly in a different category than the gospel accounts (cf. 1 Cor 15:8). Nor is James an enemy of Jesus even if he was antagonistic to his ministry.

⁴⁸ For an adequate critique of each of these supposed connections, see Leon McKenzie, *Pagan Resurrection Myths and the Resurrection of Jesus* (Charlottesville: Bookwrights Press, 1997) or for a shorter version Gary Habermas, "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989) 167-77.

⁴⁹ This is a very old and stale argument going back as far as Celsus and should by now be sufficiently debunked (Origin, *Against Celsus*, 2:55-58). Wright, *Resurrection* 36, states clearly, "It can be shown on good historical grounds that these suggested parallels and derivations are figments of the (modern) imagination," which he then thoroughly proves, pp. 32-84. MacLoed 166-69 also offers a pretty decent brief analysis of these stories. See also Peter Bolt, "Mark 16:1-8: The Empty Tomb of a Hero?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 47/1 (1996) 2-38. Although for a favorable approach see Tryggve Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: 'Dying and Rising Gods' in the Ancient Near East* (Lund: Almqvist and Wicksell International, 2001).

innovation of the second century. In other words, it looks more like the mythologists and philosophers copied from the apologists, not visa-versa.

Conclusions

Why then do people yet deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus? Three answers are typically given. *First, the gospel accounts are said to be inconsistent and irreconcilable.* This, however, is an exaggeration that borders on blatant misrepresentation of the facts. No one will deny that the accounts are difficult to harmonize, which is precisely what one would expect of an emotionally charged series of life-changing events. But the differences in the accounts are not what one would call mutually exclusive or irreconcilable. Decent proposals for each of the discrepancies are currently on the table.⁵⁰ Furthermore, if these stories are merely redacted fiction, why all the inconsistencies? Should not the authors, borrowing from each other, have been more adept? One could argue that these discrepancies, in fact, argue in favor of historical authenticity, not against it.

*Second, Jesus should have appeared to his enemies, not just a few friends in private.*⁵¹ Perhaps that would have been nice but it is hardly an argument that engages the historical data. Our modern perceptions of what Jesus *should* have done do not undo what he *actually* did. Moreover, a resurrection would not likely have turned Caiaphas and Annas (who, unlike Saul, had a Sadduceean bent against such things). After all, they were willing to kill both Jesus and Lazarus after his resuscitation (Jn 11:49-50; 12:10; cf. Lk 16:31). Even if one wants to reduce this story to pious fiction, it can hardly be denied that Jesus' power was attributed to Beelzebub (Mt 12:24; Mk 3:22; Lk 11:15). While the details of the story may change, the underlying fact

⁵⁰ See especially C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Expository Times* 101 (1990) 167-72 and John Wenham, *Easter Enigma* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

⁵¹ This too is a very old argument going back to Celsus. Origen offers a novel, albeit unconvincing answer, that Jesus glorified body was too much for unbelievers to safely encounter (Origen, *Contra Celsus* 2.64).

remains, the more power Jesus displayed the more threatening he became and the more the Jewish leaders wanted him out of the way. And in all fairness to Jesus, he did promise an appearance to the Jewish leaders post-mortem but under less amicable circumstances (Mt 26:64).

Third, it is scientifically impossible for one to rise from the dead. Yes, that's why they call it a miracle. Are they really impossible? This presupposition of antisupernaturalism has its roots in two major thinkers, David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).⁵² Their influence looms large over theological inquiry. For example, Bultmann, in the classic rationalistic tradition once said, "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. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world."⁵³

However, both Hume and Kant have come under severe attack for their circularity and inconsistency. Davis says, "I believe I am safe in saying that the vast majority of philosophers today, whether theists or non-theists, are of the opinion that the relevant arguments of Hume and Kant are seriously defective. At the very least, rather devastating critiques of the relevant views of both philosophers have appeared in the past forty years."⁵⁴ This is a whole other topic that would require a whole other set of arguments which are beyond the scope of this present essay.⁵⁵

⁵² See especially David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965).

⁵³ R. Bultmann, "The New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, Ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 5.

⁵⁴ Stephen Davis, "The Question of Miracles, Ascension and Anti-Semitism," in *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?* Ed. Paul Copan & Ronald K. Tacelli (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000). He goes on to list a number of these critiques.

⁵⁵ For a full-length debate on this very issue from both sides by Gary Habermas (evangelical) and Anthony Flew (atheist) see Terry Miethe (Ed.). *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?: The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987). C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) is also a good starting place.

Nonetheless, at least this much can be said: If one comes to believe in the existence of God then his intervention into the world he created is hardly a Herculean leap of faith. In fact, it is somewhat presumptuous for any scientist (let alone a would-be theologian), post-Einstein, to make sweeping decrees about what is possible or impossible in our world, about which we know so little, let alone a universe inhabited by God. If one denies the resurrection s/he should at least be honest enough to admit that it is not because the historical evidence leads to a better suggestion, but because his/her previous anti-supernatural presuppositions forbid him/her to follow the evidence to its ultimate and obvious conclusion.

We conclude, therefore, that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead. It is not that the resurrection is the best of several possible theories; it is the only one that makes sense of all the evidence. But we are not merely saying “we must be right because everyone else is obviously wrong.” Rather, we are clearing the table of all its naturalistic explanations and returning to its original. Our historical investigation has led us back to square one – the Bible is correct in its testimony that Jesus rose from the dead. (1) The existence of the church, especially communion, baptism, and Sunday worship, centers on the positive proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection. (2) We know that many Jews believed in a corporate, eschatological resurrection while the Greeks and Romans thought it impossible and disdained the idea. Christians, therefore, must have grown out of a Jewish milieu. Yet they transformed the Jewish ideas of resurrection into an individual, space-and-time, bodily transformation, as proof of the Messiah. This radical departure differs from anything known in the Mediterranean world but is in exact alignment with the Biblical record of the first Easter events. (3) The Apostles claimed to have seen, heard, and touched Jesus’ resurrected body. Moreover, their transformed lives, their univocal witness, their

martyrdom, and moral integrity support their confession. The impassioned proclamation of the Apostles turns out, after all, to be true: Jesus is alive.