

PARALLEL GUIDE 18

Good Friday to Easter Morning

Summary

The Cross cannot be separated from the Resurrection. Here lies the foundation of the Christian Story. This chapter investigates five explanations scholars have put forth to understand the meaning of the account spoken about in the Gospels and by Paul. The chapter continues with an exposition of the Christian claim of Jesus' Resurrection from death: what did the apostles seek to tell us?

Learning Objectives

- Identify some of the scholarly theories about the Resurrection
- Learn the background in Jewish tradition for the idea of resurrection
- Identify the significance of mercy and grace in relationship to the Resurrection

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Why is Easter inseparable from Good Friday?
2. How is the Christian understanding of death and resurrection different from a cyclical understanding of the universe?
3. What would you say to a skeptic who might find Christianity very agreeable but the concept of the Resurrection as intellectually and scientifically unacceptable?

Preparing for Your Seminar

The Resurrection is the key Christian doctrine that many use to separate those who are faithful Christians from those who apostasize. Be prepared to discuss the significance of Easter for you. How is the new life we celebrate at Christmas different from the new life we celebrate at Easter?

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Chapter 18

GOOD FRIDAY TO EASTER MORNING

The Cross

There are few events in the history of the world more certain than the crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate, but the accounts of this event in the Gospels are not without difficulties. Precisely what was or could have been the nature of the examination before the Sanhedrin? What exactly was the relationship between the Judean and Roman authorities? These and related questions (including the exact date of the execution, on which the Synoptics and John appear to contradict each other) have occupied scholars for generations and will no doubt continue to do so. Nevertheless, that the Romans executed Jesus of Nazareth on a political charge is virtually certain. Many others were executed in the same way. Crucifixion was cruel, humiliating, and shameful, but it was not unusual.

Jesus died, so his followers believed, for the sins of the world. His death was also, therefore, the condemnation of the world. “For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed” (Mark 14:21). It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. (Luke 13:33-35)

The Gospels suggest that individuals and communities, Gentile and Jew, disciple and indifferent, establishment and rebel, **all shared the responsibility for bringing Jesus to the cross**. The world they had organized was the world that crucified him. It was this condemned world for which Luke showed Jesus praying, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34), and with which he had so identified himself that on the cross he experienced its sense of desolation and loss. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46) That cry of dereliction so burned itself into the consciousness of those who heard it that they preserved it in the original Aramaic, even when the gospel tradition as a whole was turned into other languages. It seemed to them that the cry expressed the whole alienation of humanity from God and the pathos of God over humanity to which the prophets had testified. Humanity’s alienation and God’s pathos were now bonded in a union so painful it could hardly be borne.

So what? Jesus still died, like any other crucified man.

The Resurrection

What made this execution unique was what followed. According to Jesus’ followers, on the third day God raised Jesus from the dead. This claim we must now examine. The tradition itself is quite simple. Paul states it in a few sentences:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five

hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.
(1 Cor. 15:3-8)

Paul seems in this passage, at least in the first part, to quote from a formula, perhaps one that was known to the Corinthians. He is reminding them that what he is teaching is the common faith of the church, not just something he has invented (1 Cor. 15:11). Yet Paul does not quote his formula without personal knowledge. As a way of reminding ourselves how near we are to firsthand witness, it may be useful to quote another passage from Paul—a passage that brings us very close to Paul’s own experience and those other experiences of which he writes. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes how God called him through Christ. He then speaks of what followed:

I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia; and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!
(Gal. 1:16b-20)

What is interesting about this is that Paul was clearly anxious not to stress his connection with, and hence his dependency on, those “before him in Christ.” (This is obvious even in the short passage. It is even more obvious when we read the passage in its context.) Yet Paul does not deny the truth. He did spend two weeks in Jerusalem with Peter and also saw James the Lord’s brother—and this within a very few years of the Crucifixion! As C. H. Dodd said, presumably Peter and Paul did not spend their time discussing the weather. In light of what they did discuss, the closeness of Paul’s witness to his sources becomes clear. As one grizzled old agnostic is reported to have muttered in a moment of self-doubt: “The trouble with the resurrection is that you can almost prove it!”

To discuss the New Testament witness to the Resurrection requires that we discuss the whole of the New Testament, for the Resurrection is assumed or claimed in every part. Nonetheless, we should perhaps say a few words about the special forms of the tradition in the Gospels.

All the Gospels assume the Resurrection. None of them describes it. **There are no eyewitness accounts.** What the Gospels do present is the finding of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene and the other women, and various experiences of the risen Lord, first by Mary Magdalene and the other women, then by Peter and the other disciples. On form-critical grounds and by the criteria of multiple attestation we are bound to take all these elements very seriously, especially the first two. **Yellow highlighting**If the community had invented these traditions, it seems hard to believe that the Twelve would have been given such a secondary role.

As we would expect, there are confusions and uncertainties. Mark and Matthew seem to know of appearances in Galilee. Luke tells of appearances in or near Jerusalem, and

only John tells of both. There are obvious interpretative elements in the narratives, especially in Matthew and John (e.g., Matt. 28:2, 11-15; John 20:11-13). There are individual moments in the various descriptions of the appearance of the risen One that are of great power and vividness: the breaking of bread at the inn on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:28-32), the exchange with Mary Magdalene described by John (John 20:14-16), and

breakfast on the beach (John 21:7, 9-13). How we understand these depends on our presuppositions. For some it will be hard not to believe that we are dealing with the stuff of memory. John in particular, for all his willingness to write interpretatively, also has a disturbing habit of daring his audience to call him a liar—and always at key points. The Resurrection, for him, is one such point: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24; cf. 19:35).

Some “Explanations” of the Tradition

Needless to say, there are and always have been many who were willing to offer explanations of the Resurrection other than that found in the NT. Since you will meet and probably already have met some of these explanations, it may be useful to consider them briefly. They are sometimes presented as “the results of modern knowledge,” so our survey may be useful if only to show that there is nothing new about most of them.

Fraud (Reimarus)

The oldest explanation is the theory of fraud. This view is old enough to be mentioned in the NT itself (Matt. 28:13-15). It received its most elaborate statement in the so-called **Fragments of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768)**, which were published in 1778. Reimarus was an able and witty writer who vigorously asserted the claims of rationalism against the claims of the church. In his study of the narrative of Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea he pointed to virtually all the inconsistencies that were later observed by the Protestant scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).

Reimarus did not accept the church’s claims about the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Reimarus’ view, Jesus went beyond his contemporaries only in demanding a deeper righteousness of his disciples. When he arrived in Jerusalem, he expected to be supported by the people in a messianic uprising. Instead, he was arrested and executed. For Reimarus’ description of what happened next, we can hardly do better than turn to Albert Schweitzer’s elegant summary:

When the first systema [or plan], as Reimarus calls it, was annihilated by the death of Jesus, the disciples brought forward the second, and gathered followers who shared their expectation of a second coming of Jesus the Messiah. In order to get rid of the difficulty of the death of Jesus, they gave it the significance of a spiritual redemption—which had not previously entered their field of vision or that of Jesus himself.

This spiritual interpretation of His death would not have helped them if they had not also invented the resurrection. Immediately after the death of Jesus, indeed, such an idea was far from their thoughts. They were in deadly fear and kept close within doors. “Soon, however, one and another ventures to slip out. They learn that no judicial search is being made for them.” Then they consider what is to be done. They did not take kindly to the idea of returning to their old haunts;

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on their journeyings the companions of the Messiah had forgotten how to work. They had seen that the preaching of the Kingdom of God will keep a man. Even when they had been sent out without wallet or money they had not lacked. The women who are mentioned in Luke viii: 2,3 had made it their business to make good provision for the Messiah and his future ministers.

Why not then continue this mode of life? They would surely find a sufficient number of faithful souls who would join them in directing their hopes toward a second coming of the Messiah, and while awaiting the future glory, would share their possessions with them. So they stole the body of Jesus and hid it, and proclaimed to all the world that he would soon return. They prudently waited, however, for fifty days to make this announcement, in order that the body, if it should be found, might be unrecognizable.

What was much in their favour was the complete disorganization of the Jewish state. Had there been an efficient police administration the disciples would not have been able to plan this fraud and organize their communistic fellowship. But as it was, the new society was not even subjected to any annoyance in consequence of the remarkable death of a married couple who were buried from the apostles' house, and the brotherhood was even allowed to confiscate their property to its own uses.

(Schweitzer 1968, 21)

This was Reimarus' view—a remarkable blend of ingenuity and silliness. Its weaknesses are obvious. We are to suppose the disciples were willing to face persecution and death and yet were able to initiate two thousand years of faith because they were too lazy to get an honest job! One thing should be noted about the theory of theft. The fact that an interpretative story denying it appears in the NT itself is remarkable evidence of the early date of the theory (Matt. 28:11-15). The early date in turn provides evidence that the claim that Jesus' tomb was empty was also very early. In any dispute, what the disputants agree about is likely to be correct. Unless even the opponents of Christianity had admitted, or at least had been unable to deny, the emptiness of the tomb, there would have been no point at all in their creating a theory of fraud.

Resuscitation (Paulus)

Another theory about the Resurrection is that of resuscitation. This involves the idea that Jesus did not really die on the cross, but fell into a coma from which he later revived. It was the suggestion of another early rationalist, Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus, whose *Life of Jesus on the Basis of a Purely Historical Account of Early Christianity* was published in two volumes in 1828.

According to Paulus, all the accounts of raisings from the dead in the Gospels should be regarded as examples of "deliverance from premature burial." In Judea people were normally interred only a few hours after death, so such premature burial easily could have happened. Presentiments of it in the cases of Jairus' daughter, of the son of the widow of Nain, and of Lazarus had enabled Jesus to save their lives. Alas, according to Paulus, Jewish love of miracle "caused everything to be ascribed immediately to the Deity, and secondary causes to be overlooked; consequently no

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thought was given to the question of how to prevent these horrible cases of premature burial from taking place!"

Paulus does not explain why Jesus did not draw people's attention to the dreadful consequences of their practice. He apparently allowed everyone, including his own followers, to go on believing in a miracle.

In presenting Paulus' interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, again we cannot improve upon Schweitzer's summary: In the case of Jesus, as in that of the others, the vital spark would have been gradually extinguished, had not Providence mysteriously effected on behalf of its favorite that which in the case of others was sometimes effected in more obvious ways by human skill and care. The lance thrust, which we are to think of rather as a mere surface wound, served the purpose of a phlebotomy. The cool grave and the aromatic unguents continued the process of resuscitation, until finally the storm and the earthquake aroused Jesus to full consciousness. Fortunately the earthquake had also the effect of rolling away the stone from the mouth of the grave. The Lord stripped off the grave clothes and put on a gardener's dress which He managed to procure. That was what made Mary, as we are told in John xx. 15, take him for the gardener. Through the women, He sends a message to His disciples bidding them meet him in Galilee, and himself sets out to go thither. At Emmaus, as the dusk was falling, He met two of His followers, who at first failed to recognize Him because His countenance was so disfigured by His sufferings. But His manner of giving

thanks at the breaking of bread, and the nail prints in His uplifted hands, revealed to them who He was. From them He learns where His disciples are, returns to Jerusalem, and appears unexpectedly among them. This is the explanation of the apparent contradiction between the message pointing to Galilee and the appearances in Jerusalem. (Schweitzer 1968, 54)

This fantasy, if less ingenious than Reimarus', is **scarcely less silly**. We are now to believe that a disfigured and broken wreck inspired his disciples to see him as victor over death and created the faith of the church. And this is to say nothing of the absurdity of the details—the spear thrust that happened to act as a blood-letting, the gardener's dress he managed to procure, the earthquake that happened to roll away the stone.

Myth (Strauss)

David Friedrich Strauss, whose *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* appeared in 1835-36, regarded attempts to rationalize the accounts of Jesus' miracles and resurrection as absurd. His account is still worth reading for the skill with which he demonstrates the total impossibility of the naturalistic explanations of the narratives. But Strauss, too, refused to believe in the supernatural. What, then, was his explanation?

The narratives were myth (Strauss 1973, especially 735-744). Strauss was not using the word "myth" in the sense in which Bultmann used it, to speak of ways of describing

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realities that are beyond the scope of factual description, but rather **in its more usual sense**. Strauss meant by myth a traditional story dealing with supernatural and heroic beings and events and imparting a primitive view of the world.

Strauss conceded that, by examining the gospel stories of the Resurrection, we can see different strata of tradition—an older one with appearances in Galilee, and a later one with appearances in Jerusalem. But both strata were mythical. Any attempt to explain them in any other way forces us to take some part of them at less than face value. Either we must assert that the Resurrection was not real (fraud) or that the death was not real (resuscitation). The only way to deal with them is to recognize that they are myth. Strauss regarded it as self-evident that the ascension story was myth.

The British literary critic C. S. Lewis summed up the problem with Strauss' view in one sentence: "They don't sound like myth." To anyone who is used to handling myth, as Lewis was, that certainly seems to be the case. Myths generally have to do with gods and heroes in little known lands. They do not name civil servants and comparatively detailed geographical places. They do not center around rather ordinary characters with names like Mary and Peter. There is too much plain, and even homely, historical detail in the Gospels for us to regard them as in any normal sense myth, and that is true of the resurrection stories, too.

A Spiritual Resurrection (Weisse)

Christian Weisse (not to be confused with Johannes Weiss) published his *Critical and Philosophical Study of the Gospel History* in Leipzig in 1838. Weisse accepted the presence of mythical elements in the tradition but acknowledged that myth had clearly attached itself to historical fact.

What was the historical fact? It was not, Weisse believed, the empty tomb. This entered the story only later to counteract a Jewish account, repeated to discredit Christian belief in the Resurrection, that the disciples had stolen the body. Weisse seems to have missed a contradiction here: that unless you already have someone claiming an empty tomb, you have no need to produce a "grave-robbing" theory. It would have been quite simple and much more obvious for the opponents of the Christian faith simply to dismiss what the Christians were saying about the Resurrection as nonsense and not bring the grave into it at all, unless, as we have said, there was known to be a problem about the grave.

What historical fact, then, contributed to the myth of the Resurrection?

According to Weisse:

The historical fact is only the existence of a belief—not the belief of the later Christian church in the myth of the bodily resurrection of the Lord—but the personal belief of the apostles and their companions in the miraculous presence of the risen Christ in the visions and appearances which they experienced

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The question whether those extraordinary phenomena which, soon after the death of the Lord, actually and undeniably took place within the community of his disciples, rest upon fact or illusion—that is, whether in them the departed spirit of the Lord, of whose presence the disciples supposed themselves to be conscious, was really present, **or whether the phenomena were produced by natural causes of a different kind, spiritual and psychical, is a question which cannot be answered without going beyond the confines of purely historical criticism**

We can, however, be sure that the resurrection of Jesus is a fact that belongs to the domain of the spiritual and psychic life, and which is not related to outward corporeal existence in such a way that the body which was laid in the grave could have shared therein.

(Weisse cited in Schweitzer 1968, 130)

We have come a long way from the superficial rationalism of Reimarus and Strauss. Weisse did not dismiss the apostles as either charlatans or fools; he did not seek to avoid the historical core in the tradition. While he was unwilling to allow the supernatural into the realm of the physical, he did allow for levels of reality other than the physical, and he took seriously both the text of the NT and the integrity of those to whom it bore witness.

Weisse does allow that the disciples may simply have suffered from hallucinations. The gospel stories offer little basis for such a theory. **Hallucinations require preconditions, notably some kind of expectation or anticipation.** The Gospels, for better or worse, suggest precisely the opposite. The disciples appear to have given up all hope and indeed to have required a good deal of convincing (Matt. 28:17b; Mark 16:11; Luke 24:16, 19-24, 36-38; John 20:24-25).

“Jesus Has Risen in the *Kerygma*” (Bultmann)

As in his treatment of the gospel tradition in general, so in dealing with the Resurrection Bultmann distinguished event (*Historie*) from interpretation of the event (*Geschichte*). For Bultmann the story of Jesus’ Resurrection was the disciples’ way of explaining the meaning of the cross.

“Obviously [the resurrection] is not an event of past history with a self-evident meaning,” he says. It must rather “be understood simply as an attempt to convey the meaning of the cross” (Bultmann in Bartsch 1953, 38).

The real Easter faith is faith in the word of preaching that brings illumination. If the event of Easter is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the Cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord, since it was this faith which led to the apostolic preaching. The resurrection itself is not an event of past history. The historian can perhaps to some extent account for that faith from the personal intimacy which the disciples had enjoyed with Jesus during his earthly life, and so reduce the resurrection appearances to a series of subjective visions. **But the historical problem is scarcely relevant to Christian belief in the**

The “Resurrection” of Jesus is essentially the continuing power of the crucified Lord to grasp our lives. The disciples believed in the “risen” Jesus much as we believe that any great person who continues to affect us in some sense “lives.” Thus, we say that Bach, or Jane Austen, or Anne Frank, or Martin Luther King all “live.” The difference for Bultmann is that the work of Jesus the Savior was of infinitely greater importance.

Bultmann’s explanation of the Resurrection is useful, for it reminds us of two very important things. First, **Jesus did not, so to speak, “win” by rising from the dead.** When Jesus was nailed to the cross, he prayed for his enemies (Luke 23:34); when he died, then he was already victor (Mark 15:39). “Now the Son of Man has been glorified” (John 13:31). To that extent Bultmann is undoubtedly right. The resurrection story does show us the meaning of the cross.

Second, Bultmann’s explanation reminds us that faith in Jesus is faith that the Crucified and Risen One has power to change my life now! The message of the Resurrection would be useless and rather frightening if it were not for the fact that in it we hear the Risen One call us, faithless and cowardly disciples that we are, “brother” or “sister.” The risen Christ promises us that despite our failure, we shall yet see him and may still try to be faithful (Matt. 28:10; John 20:17).

The problem with Bultmann’s view can be simply stated. Does not an acceptance of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus as something that affects my life now require an objective historical event additional to the cross as its sufficient origin? If the Resurrection of Jesus is only the meaning of the cross, why was it necessary or even proper to speak of it like this?

In a generally sympathetic study of Bultmann published in 1955, the Scottish theologian John Macquarrie criticized the fallacy of Bultmann’s reasoning at this point, holding that Bultmann had not taken the trouble to examine what evidence could be adduced to show that the Resurrection was an objective-historical event:

Can we, in fact, rest everything on the objective-historical event of the cross alone? Would not the cross by itself have meant the defeat of good by evil, so that it could not serve as the origin for saving events? We are reminded of Saint Paul’s argument: “If Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14). And that he believed in an objective-historical resurrection in some sense or other seems clear from his appeal to witnesses (1 Cor. 15:5-8)—though Bultmann dismisses the significance of this appeal in a remarkably arbitrary fashion.

(1955, 186)

Bultmann, we should note, responded to this criticism with marvelous grace, conceding that it was “not only fair and perceptive, but also touches upon points that are really problematic and must be cleared up in future discussion.”

(Macquarrie 1955, vii)

The Problem of Christian Beginnings

The problem with Bultmann’s explanation, according to Macquarrie, is that it does not explain what has to be explained. If that is true of Bultmann’s profoundly important study, it is even more true of the other

“explanations” we have considered.

The problem is not simply one of accounting for an idea. It is a matter of accounting for the very existence of Christianity. We can consider other movements of spirit in human history such as Islam or Marxism. Their *raison d'être*—the essential idea or commitment that caused them to be—is obvious enough. With Islam it is commitment to one God and Mohammed as his prophet. With Marxism it is commitment to the Marxist analysis of history and the emergence of a classless society.

What was the *raison d'être* of Christianity? What separated it from other kinds of Judaism? Was it belief in God? Jews already believed in God. Was it belief in scripture? Jews also believed in the Hebrew Scriptures. At this point the NT did not exist. Was the *raison d'être* of Christianity a belief that we are justified by God's grace? But Judaism believes that we are justified by grace, even though it does not usually express it in these terms. Did the distinction have to do with worship? According to Acts the first Christians worshiped in the Temple and synagogue with other Jews. If it was not these, then what distinguished Christianity from other forms of Judaism? In coming to the NT from the OT we find both continuity and discontinuity. There is continuity because we still listen to people who told the story of God's way with Israel as their story, and who saw themselves as heirs of God's promises through Abraham and Moses. There is discontinuity because those who chose to follow Jesus of Nazareth came to believe that God had not only remained faithful to those promises but had begun to fulfill them. The “last days” for which the prophets had looked were beginning (Acts 1:17). God had begun to restore Israel and the creation. This was the difference between the followers of the Nazarene and other groups, but why did they think that? Why did they continue to believe it, even after the fiasco of Good Friday? The answer was simple. As Paul put it, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20). Note that Paul does not say “Jesus the martyr now lives on in the hearts and teaching of his faithful followers,” or “the soul of Jesus the righteous man is now safe in the hands of God.” Why? Because the resurrection of the dead, not immortality, was the sign for Israel of a new age and of the restoration of God's people (so, classically, Ezek. 37:1-14).

Consider the Christian movement at the very moment of the Crucifixion. The disciples on the Emmaus road expressed the despondency felt after the death of Jesus: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). Instead, as the sources all make clear, there had been only tragedy: betrayal, denial, and flight on the part of the disciples. The death of Jesus on a Roman cross marked him as a false prophet, rejected by God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

(Mark 15:34 // Matt. 27:46)

Yet within a few hours a movement began that has become massively influential in history. The paradox is well stated in a remarkable little book by Pinchas Lapide, a Jewish writer:

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How was it possible that his disciples, who by no means excelled in intelligence, eloquence, or strength of faith, were able to begin their victorious march of conversion only after the shattering fiasco on Golgotha—a march which put all their successes before Easter completely into the shadow? In other words: How did it nevertheless come about that the adherents of Jesus were able to conquer this most horrible of all disappointments, that Jesus, despite everything, became the Saviour of the church . . . ? The answer of the apostles was brief and unambiguous: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

(1983, 69-70)

The Christian Claim

What exactly did the disciples mean by their claim that God had raised Jesus? They did not mean that a

corpse had been brought back to life, although there were examples of such claims both in Judaism and in paganism. Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24), Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-37), and Apollonius of Tyana were all reported to have raised the dead. The Gospels contain three accounts of Jesus himself raising the dead (Mark 5:21-43 // Matt. 9:18-26 // Luke 8:40-56; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:1-44). Wonderful though these stories were, they were never seen as offering any possibility that the order of the world had been changed. All those who were raised returned to life still subject to sin and death. In time, they died again. By contrast, references to the Resurrection of Jesus make plain that in the disciples' view, he now lived on a new plane of being, no longer subject to death. According to Paul, "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him" (Rom. 6:9). According to an early kerygma in the Book of Acts, he is "exalted at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33; cf. John 20:17). According to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary and "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3).

By proclaiming that God had raised Jesus the disciples did not mean that Jesus had been caught up to God in some wonderful indescribable way and escaped the usual fate of humanity. Such claims were not unknown in Judaism. Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-12) were both reckoned not to have died. There are even hints in later sources of a tradition that Moses did not die, although this theory does not seem to have found much favor. Apart from anything else, such a tradition appears to be in plain contradiction to Deuteronomy 34:5. In any case the writers of the NT have no doubt at all that Jesus did die, and indeed that he died a particularly humiliating death. The death and the Resurrection are commonly mentioned together. According to the same early kerygma, "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Paul usually mentions death and resurrection together: "The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God" (Rom. 6:10). Jesus "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25; possibly Paul quotes an earlier formula). In the disciples' view God has vindicated Jesus through and in spite of the cross. The disciples did not mean that Jesus had won a personal victory, as if he were a kind of superman. This is made obvious by the fact that although expressions like "Jesus died and rose" are not totally unknown in the NT (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:14), they are very rare. The normal way of speaking of Jesus' Resurrection is, in good Jewish fashion, to say that God raised him. This is stated directly: "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus" (Acts 5:30; cf. 3:15; 4:10; 10:40; 13:30, 37; 26:8; Rom. 4:24; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:15; and so on).

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Or it is stated indirectly: "He was raised" (1 Cor. 15:4; cf. Rom. 4:25; 6:9; 7:4; 1 Cor. 15:16, 17; 2 Tim. 2:8; and so on), where the passive verb, again in traditional Jewish usage, reverently masks the act of God. Pinchas Lapide suggests that when the Bible says "on the third day," it does not mean to indicate actual time. It intends that ears that are biblically educated will hear a reference to God's mercy (1983, 92). On the third day Abraham came with Isaac to the Mount of Moriah (Gen. 22:4); on the third day Joseph began to take pity on his brethren (Gen. 42:18); on the third day God appeared in glory upon Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16); on the third day Esther put on her royal robes for the deliverance of her people (Esth. 5:1); after three days in the fish Jonah prayed—and was delivered for the sake of Nineveh as well as for his own sake (Jon. 1:17); on the third day God commanded Ezra to lay up his vision in his heart and promised him redemption (2 Esd. 13:57-14:9). Hosea said, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up" (Hos. 6:2). A rabbinic comment on this says: "The Holy One, Blessed be His Name, never lets the just stay in affliction longer than three days" (Midrash Rabbah, Hos. 6:2). So Jesus was raised by God, also on the third day.

Finally, the disciples did not mean that the Resurrection of Jesus was merely an event by itself, unique and unrepeatable. On the contrary, and again in good Jewish fashion, they proclaimed that it was the firstfruit or foretaste of the general resurrection of the dead that was already a part of Pharisaic hope. So Paul called Jesus "the firstborn within a large family" (Rom. 8:29), and according to the Book of Acts, when challenged for preaching Christ's Resurrection, he explicitly appealed to Pharisaic belief (Acts 23:6-10).

What the disciples did claim was that God had raised Jesus from the dead to be at God's right hand in glory as the firstfruit of the promised general resurrection. In terms of scientific history, this is not a historical claim. It asserts that Jesus is now above and beyond history as we understand it, living by the power of an indestructible life. Some of the elements involved in such a claim are accessible to investigation. Like a crater marking the impact of a meteorite, certain "bumps" on history can be identified. On the one side we have crucifixion, despair, and the empty tomb. On the other we have Easter faith—that God had begun to fulfill the promises, that God's people were being restored, that the return from exile had begun, and that they were experiencing a "new creation" (Gal. 6:15). These are observable phenomena, in principle subject to critical, scientific investigation. What went between the bumps—whatever it was that caused the crater—happened "on the third day." Whatever it was, it must have been sufficiently weighty to account for all we have described. Once again, scientific investigation of observable phenomena cannot answer the theological question. But it surely forces us to raise it.

One strength of the disciples' claim is that it will do what is needed. It provides us with something sufficiently weighty to have made the crater. Certainly the first accounts of this Jewish faith experience are not lacking in difficulties. Who would have expected it to be otherwise? Yet those same accounts have a remarkable inner consistency and strength.

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We must begin with the story of the empty tomb, handed down to us by all four evangelists and implicitly by Paul (1 Cor. 15:4). This, together with the theophany (the appearance of God) at the tomb, is peculiarly the women's witness. It is striking that male critics ever since, from the disciples (Luke 24:11) to some recent scholars, have dismissed it. This is unwise. **Precisely because it is exclusively women's witness, the story of the empty tomb is extraordinarily unlikely to be something the church invented. If the church in that patriarchal age had invented the story of the empty tomb and the theophany, then Peter and the others (that is, the males) would have been at the center of it.**

The empty tomb, even if we accept it, in and of itself remained and remains, as Rowan Williams reminds us, "a disputable sign" (1982/1984, 5). If we are in any doubt about that, there is Matthew to tell us that it was disputed, from the beginning

(Matt. 28:11-15).

The women's vision at the tomb is in the form of Jewish theophany. That, presumably, was how it came naturally to them to describe it. The stories of the various other appearances of the Risen One are strikingly not in the form of biblical theophanies. Let it be said at once: these stories abound with incongruities and confusions. **How is it that Mary Magdalene at first does not recognize her best friend?** Who is the other disciple on the way to Emmaus, and why the reluctance to say so? Why does Peter put his clothes on before leaping overboard to swim ashore? Yet beneath and within these confusions and incongruities (which are, to be sure, in many respects the confusions and incongruities of life itself) there are other elements. From the first appearance to Mary Magdalene on Easter day to Paul's experience of what he called the "last of all" the resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15:8), there is sudden insight. In that passionate exchange in the garden between Mary Magdalene and her Lord, preserved in our Gospel in the very Aramaic of the first Easter morning: "Miriam!" "Rabboni!" there is the sudden insight of despair turned into joy. In Paul, this is the sudden insight of the bigot who discovers what he is doing and against whom—and that he is forgiven and commissioned to serve a new cause. All the resurrection appearances are marked by an insight about grace: grace of the victim now victor to those who had denied him (Peter), fled from him (all the men disciples), doubted him (Thomas), despaired of him (Cleopas and his companion), or actively persecuted him (Paul). The only appearances to those who had not obviously made him victim were those to the faithful women. Yet Mary Magdalene, too, was told something new. She was not now to cling to him, but instead to proclaim

him, ascended and victorious, and first of all she was to proclaim him to his “brethren.” The appearances sustained and renewed those who received them. Many of these appearances were in the context of table-fellowship. Jesus’ followers found that, as throughout his ministry he had held, fed, taught, sustained, and renewed them at table, so he continued to do. He also showed them his wounds and so reminded them (as he had reminded them at the Last Supper) that, as they accepted his gift,

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they were accepting it from the one whom they had made their victim, in one way or another.

Just how did these appearances happen? Those who tell us the story seem neither to know nor care. We may explore such questions for ourselves if we wish, but we deceive ourselves if we imagine they were the evangelists’ questions, or the questions of those who first saw the Risen One. Nevertheless, fidelity to the experience they presented does demand that, however reticent we are about the “how” of what happened, we preserve our assertion of its objectivity. The Resurrection was God’s action, not the sophisticated meditation or the impassioned vision or even the delusion of those who experienced it. Whatever their confusions or incongruities, all the witnesses are clear, and if we deny them there, then we simply part company with the New Testament. Lapidé has rightly interpreted the implication of the particular phrase that the New Testament employs to speak of the time of the Resurrection (“on the third day”). It is probably a mistake to assume that no actual indication of a temporal reality lies behind it. “On the third day” points to a moment when something happened, something surprising, new, and not the work of humankind.

One other thing needs to be said. Paul is very clear that the resurrection appearances were over (1 Cor. 15:8), but that does not mean that he believed Christ was no longer present to the church. On the contrary, “if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:10; cf. Matt. 28:20b). To be a Christian is to be sustained by the presence of Christ. It is to hope that we shall know that presence ever more deeply (Rom. 6:1-11). Although the original resurrection appearances (the foundation appearances to the church) have ended, Christ’s self-manifestations to us continue. They are different but not therefore less rich or less full of hope. We are met by the risen Christ not just in particular moments, but in all things, if we are willing to look for him and receive him. We are met by him in the things where he has promised to be, when we gather in his name, or where we celebrate his sacraments; and we are also met by him in the whole order of creation that is his. We should add that he comes to us (as he came in the foundation appearances) in and through those whom, by whatever means and with whatever intention or even (as we imagine) justification, we have made our victims. In them the living Christ calls us, and to Christ in them we must look for the grace, pardon, and renewal that Christ alone offers.

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End of chapter

Everyone?^{back}

Perhaps, but does any of these references say that?

No eyewitness accounts ^{back}

Well there wouldn't be, would there?

Fraud^{back}

In my humble opinion, there's nothing silly about Reimarus' view. In fact if you don't accept the Resurrection as true - and I do so accept it - then I think that fraud is the most reasonable explanation.

Some strange religions, indeed some bad religions, have grown and flourished quite nicely after a very suspicious start. Gold plates and magic spectacles? The performances of my remote cousin Lafayette? If you've got the Formula (see my note on Year 1, Chapter 18) you can start a religion - any religion - and it will grow.

Yes, the original followers of Jesus were upstanding believers, not cynical rogues. I believe that, but the opposite view is far from impossible. It's just that, by definition. no believing Christian of subsequent times would subscribe to it. And is it impossible to believe that, if rogues they were, they could have gone from a crippling fear of death to the realization that they might be on to something good?

And surely getting rid of a body after fifty days would have been distasteful, but otherwise no problem whatever.

But let me say again, I don't believe it.

Scarcely less silly^{back}

Actually a lot sillier. It's hard to imagine Jesus dressing himself, all on his own, without much use of his hands, and then leaving the tomb, walking funny.

Its more usual sense^{back}

Danke schön, Herr Strauss!

Spiritual and psychic^{back}

What means this?

Hallucinations^{back}

Or, thinking of hallucinations, might the disciples have seen someone who looked a lot like Jesus?

Scarcely relevant^{back}

Rubbish!

Win by rising^{back}

But surely He did win?

Mary didn't recognize^{back}

Well, she thought he was dead.

