

Risen Indeed?

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Excerpt from pages 180 - 185

Let me now mention six powerful arguments that seem to me strongly to support the claim that belief in a real resurrection of Jesus is rational, some of which I have already mentioned in earlier chapters. Again, I do not suppose that these arguments will convince naturalists, but for supernaturalists (especially those with broadly Christian assumptions) they are, I believe, more than sufficient to establish that belief in the resurrection is rational.

1. Virtually all scholars who write about the resurrection of Jesus, whether they believe it happened (in some sense or other) or not, agree that (a) while early first-century Jews expected a messiah, the idea of a dying and rising messiah was new to them; (b) Jesus of Nazareth died and was buried; (c) the disciples of Jesus were consequently discouraged and dejected; (d) soon after the burial of Jesus, his tomb was claimed to be empty, and some of the disciples had experiences that they took to be encounters with the risen Jesus; (e) these experiences caused them to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead; and (f) they started a movement that grew and thrived and that was based on the idea that Jesus had been raised from the dead. My point here is that no one who denies that Jesus was raised from the dead or who offers reductive theories of the resurrection has yet been able to account adequately for these widely accepted facts. Though many have tried, no one who rejects beliefs in the resurrection of Jesus has been able to tell a convincing story of what occurred in the days following his crucifixion. As noted previously, the nineteenth-century rationalistic explanations of such individuals as Reimarus and Strauss collapse of their own weight once spelled out, and skeptical twentieth-century accounts are all subject to compelling criticism—including the accounts of such critics as Hugh Schonfield and the accounts of believers who propose reductive theories of Jesus' resurrection like that of Willi Marxsen.¹ The only theories that seem able to account for the accepted facts are those that affirm that Jesus was genuinely raised.²

2. Despite the frequently noted discrepancies in the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, at important points the biblical texts speak with one voice. All of them

¹ For Schonfield's account, see *The Passover Plot* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966).

² As Hugo Staudinger puts it, "The credibility of sources on the resurrection of Jesus is impressively confirmed, not least by the fact that, up to the present day, not one single person has succeeded in giving a convincing interpretation of the sources without accepting the resurrection as a historical event" (*The Trustworthiness of the Gospels*, trans. Robin T. Hammond [Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981], P. 92)

affirm that Jesus was dead, that he was buried in a tomb near Jerusalem supplied by a man named Joseph of Arimathea, that early on the day after the Sabbath certain women in the company of Jesus (among them Mary Magdalene) went to the tomb, that they found the tomb mysteriously empty, that they met an angel or angels, that the women were either told or else discovered that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that Jesus subsequently appeared a number of times to certain of the women and certain of the disciples. There seem to be no resurrection texts that question any of these items. Furthermore, even the discrepancies themselves testify in a left-handed way to the accuracy of the essential story: if the resurrection of Jesus were a story invented by the later Christian church, or by certain members of it, no discrepancies would have been allowed. The Biblical accounts do not bear the earmarks of a lie or conspiracy.

3. The deliberate-lie thesis does not square with the radical change that came over the disciples in the days and weeks after the crucifixion. Confused, fearful, discouraged, and disorganized immediately afterward, they soon became bold and courageous revolutionaries who started a religious movement that changed the world order. Their unanimous testimony was that this change was due to their belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Their behavior was not consistent with the behavior of people who have intentionally perpetrated a fraud; they seem to have been people of integrity rather than deceivers. Furthermore, the thesis that a few of the earliest believers perpetrated a fraud on the rest of them is implausible because there is not one bit of evidence to support it. No such secret ever “leaked out,” nor is there any evidence of an inner-circle controversy among the early Christians concerning the truth of the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead.

As noted above, most and perhaps all of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus were written during a time when eyewitnesses to the events described were still alive and could easily have refuted erroneous claims. The evidence decisively supports the conclusion that all the earliest Christians believed wholeheartedly in the resurrection of Jesus,³ even at the cost (for many of them) of their lives. Now this argument by itself does not rule out the possibility that earliest belief in the resurrection was a sincere and strongly held belief in an illusion (which could conceivably account for the change in the disciples). But this possibility does not seem in any sense plausible given the cumulative weight of all six of the points being made here.

4. The story of the empty tomb has about it the ring of truth.⁴ Let me briefly recall some points I made in Chapter 4. (a) The empty tomb is widely taught in the New Testament—in all four Gospels (note especially that it appears in Matthew’s special source, i.e., in

3 See Bultman, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 42. Virtually every New Testament scholar accepts this point.

4 According to John Frederick Jansen, “Today there is a growing consensus in New Testament scholarship that the tradition of the empty grave is early tradition, not a late addition” (*The Resurrection of Jesus Christ in New Testament Theology* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980], pp. 41-42).

material Matthew did not get from Mark or Q) and is possibly alluded to in both 1 Corinthians 15:4 and Acts 2:27-29.⁵ (b) No story invented by later Christians to bolster their claims about Jesus' resurrection would have revolved so crucially around the testimony of women, whose value as legal witness in the culture of the day was virtually negligible.⁶ (c) Most conclusively, it is impossible to imagine the earliest believers having any success whatsoever in their attempt to convince people that Jesus had been raised from the dead without ungainsayable evidence of an empty tomb. Otherwise, their enemies could have refuted their testimony by simply producing the body, Keller replies to this argument by casting doubt on the early chapters of the book of Acts,⁷ but it should be noted that many able New Testament scholars find the chronology of those chapters reliable.⁸ (d) Contrary to what Keller says, the earliest believers in the resurrection must have believed in an empty tomb, for, as noted above, that is how virtually any Jew in early first-century Palestine would have interpreted the idea of resurrection. Jewish notions of resurrection were highly physical notions, quite unlike Greek concepts of immortality or the twentieth-century idea of "spiritual resurrection."⁹ (e) The story of the guard at the tomb in Matthew's Gospel is often attacked by critics as an apologetic legend told by the later church. It is easy to see, however, that even if this is true (and I do not accept that it is), the telling of the story is senseless unless everyone — Christian and non-Christian alike — agreed that the tomb was empty.

5. For several obvious reasons, the resurrection appearances of Jesus do not seem to be hallucinations. The disciples were not expecting or wishfully believing in a resurrection. The very idea of the resurrection of one individual before the end of the world was religiously novel.¹⁰ On at least three occasions, the resurrected Jesus was not imme-

5 Gerald O' Collins argues that Paul's theory of the resurrection expressed in 1 Corinthians 15 requires an empty tomb (*What Are They Saying about the Resurrection?* [New York: Paulist Press, 1978], pp. 43-44), and the empty-tomb tradition seems strongly supported by Keller's third canon of rationality in historical investigation — "independent testimonies which agree are generally more credible than either one alone or than the two testimonies would be if one were dependent on the other" ("Contemporary Christian Doubts about the Resurrection," p. 41).

6 See O' Collins, *What Are They Saying about the Resurrection?* p. 43.

7 Keller, "Contemporary Christian Doubts about the Resurrection," pp. 49-50

8 See, e.g., Patrick Henry, *New Directions in New Testament Studies* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), pp. 156, 168; and A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 189. For the basic argument here, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?" *Dialog* 4 (1965): 18-35; and Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 126.

9 For examples of the emphasis on bodily resurrection in early Jewish literature, see The Apocalypse of Baruch 50:2; 2 Maccabees 14:46; and 1 Enoch 51:1-2; 62:13-16.

10 See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus — God and Man*, 2d ed. Trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968, 1977), pp. 88-106. See also Habermas, "Knowing That Jesus' Resurrection Occurred," pp. 84-88; and Gerald O'Collins *Jesus Risen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 108. O' Collins skillfully rebuts the idea that one person's hallucinatory experience (e.g., Pe-

diately recognized. Some who saw him doubted (see Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:36ff.; John 20:24-25). Many different people saw the risen Jesus, in different places and in different circumstances. There were none of the usual causes of hallucination present — drugs, hysteria, or deprivation of food, water, or sleep. So the evidence would seem to suggest that the appearances of Jesus caused the Easter faith of the disciples rather than (as is sometimes charged) the other way around.

6. There is the problem of the “initial ignition” that got the Christian movement going. People who deny or doubt the real resurrection of Jesus are faced with the daunting task of explaining why or how the church came into existence at all, why its earliest pillars began proclaiming the resurrection — a proclamation that (so scholars agree) brought the church into existence. If Jesus was not genuinely raised from the dead, it seems there would have been no Christian movement at all. Or, at the very least, its preaching would have taken on an entirely different character — Jesus might have been honored with the status of a “martyr-prophet,” for example. Or if that were impossible, given the humiliation involved in crucifixion,¹¹ Jesus might have been remembered in some other way.

The point is, however, that the disciples were prepared neither psychologically nor theologically for the idea of the resurrection of a crucified messiah, and the fact that they arrived at this idea so early and so confidently needs explanation. As O’Collins says, “Contemporary Judaism had no concept of a dying and rising Messiah, nor any notion of one person enjoying a final, glorious resurrection from the dead even though the end of the world had not yet occurred.”¹² The Easter faith of the disciples was something new; it cannot be traced to Jewish or pagan sources. Nor does it seem explicable in terms of the impact that the life and teachings of Jesus had on his followers, since Jesus’ death on the cross tended strongly to negate that impact (see Luke 24:21).¹³

The advantage of belief in a real resurrection of Jesus at this point is that it provides an explanation of the existence of that Easter faith —namely, that the disciples saw the risen Lord, became convinced that he was alive, and interpreted their experience in a theologically novel way (though of course they were helped by a subsequent reexamination of crucial Old Testament texts). C.F.D. Moule makes the point compellingly:

I still find it difficult, if not impossible, to believe that the disciples had, in the scriptures and in the life, teaching and death of Jesus and their circumstances, all that was necessary to create Easter-belief. Granted that they were thrown into an ecsta-

ter’s) might have caused a “chain reaction” among other believers.

11 See O’Collins, *Jesus Risen*, pp. 90-91.

12 O’Collins, *Jesus Risen*, pp. 110-11.

13 See Walter Kunneth, *The Theology of the Resurrection*, trans. J. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 50-63. See also Murray Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 64; and William L. Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), pp. 407-16.

sy of astonishment by what Jesus was and did, something more than this is needed (so it seems to me) to lead to the conclusion that Jesus had been not merely a superlatively great prophet, nor simply a man of the Spirit, nor just Messiah (the latter is an almost impossible conclusion, anyway, after the Crucifixion, without something to suggest it), but that he was alive in a unique and hitherto unexampled way, and *therefore* Son of God in a far more than Messianic sense, and “Lord,” and the climax and coping-stone of the whole edifice of God’s plan of salvation.¹⁴

The challenge, then, for those who deny the real resurrection of Jesus is to explain in a convincing way what actually happened in the days and weeks after the crucifixion. The advantage of belief in a real resurrection of Jesus is that that event provides a plausible explanation of the Christian movement.

If I were a supernaturalist, and if I discovered these six items of evidence about the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead, I would be justified in believing that claim. Thus, unless these arguments are defective, belief in the real resurrection of Jesus is rational from a supernaturalist perspective. Of course, given the extreme intellectual absurdity of belief in a resurrection, I agree that the burden of proof in some sense must be on those who argue that a miracle has occurred. But the evidence in favor of the claim that Jesus was genuinely dead and later genuinely alive is sufficient to render the resurrection belief of Christians rational. This is especially true since those who deny that there was a genuine resurrection seem quite unable to explain what did happen. Further, they seem equally unable to explain why an obscure itinerant rabbi who died a criminal’s scandalous death became so quickly (in the eyes of many) the Christ, the savior of the world, the Son of God.

¹⁴ Moule, in “The Resurrection: A Disagreement,” *Theology* 75 (April 1972): 515.