



**JESUS'**  
**RESURRECTION**  
**New Testament Testimonies**

**DAVID P. SCAER**



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



FOR SOME YEARS, PAUL NIELSEN had been attending my weeklong summer seminary extension courses, prompting the graduate office to correspond with him as “Reverend Nielsen.” Although a carpenter by trade, he had a deep love for theology. In 2008, I was invited to deliver the first annual lecture at the Emmaus Conference at Parkland Lutheran Church in Tacoma, Washington. I titled it *The Women Were Right: “On the Third Day He Rose Again from the Dead.”* Subsequently, Paul and his sister, Corrine, both of whom are now deceased, established the David P. Scaer Chair of Biblical and Confessional Theology, the first chair at either seminary to commemorate someone still living. To the memory of Paul and of his sister, Corrine, this book on the resurrection of Jesus is dedicated.

The Emmaus lecture was delivered in three sessions over two days and revolved around the title’s two themes: that the women were the first to discover the empty grave of Jesus and were the first to witness the resurrected Jesus and that Christ’s resurrection on the third day signified the victory of God over Satan. After the initial lecture, I submitted it for publication to Benjamin Mayes at Concordia Publishing House. At the time, Ben was an editor there, though later he became a faculty colleague. He suggested that the manuscript should be expanded.

After I had given the Emmaus Conference lecture, I was given repeated opportunities to address the topic of the resurrection, so that, at the time of final submission, the manuscript totaled six hundred double-spaced pages. For various reasons, this had to be reduced. Over the space of eighteen years, redundancies were inevitable, and to the rescue came Robert Smith. Before his retirement, Bob was a longtime electronic resources librarian at Concordia Theological Seminary and had the know-how to sift out the chaff and keep an eye out for redundant wheat. Bob responded to my having gone off on tangents here and there in the various essays and brought order to the primordial chaos. Equally important, as the manuscript was in the final stretch, he identified lacunae and suggested how to fill the gaps in the dike.

Concordia Publishing House editor Joshua Cook had the theological perception to identify areas that would advance the arguments with significant additions.

This required going back to the drawing board. Although annoying as it is to a parent with a child who gets up after being put to bed, I was forced to address new issues and readdress others that were set in cement. Much of what I have written was done in the shack at our summer home in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, which for a lifetime with my wife, Dorothy, has been my paradise on earth.

# PREFACE



**B**ART EHRMAN IS ARGUABLY THE most popular critical scholar of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> He is affable and approachable, a good fellow, well-met, and has friends on both sides of the aisle dividing faith from unbelief. He was brought up as a Christian and attended the well-known Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, with its Fundamentalist history, and Princeton Theological Seminary, where he studied under the conservative New Testament scholar and text critic Bruce Metzger (1914–2007). Ehrman is a frequent speaker at meetings of scholarly associations and colleges, including Evangelical ones whose faculty and student bodies see Jesus’ resurrection as the foundation of their faith.<sup>2</sup> All that belongs to his past now.

Ehrman identifies himself as “an agnostic with atheistic leanings” on the verge of “converting” to atheism. Should this happen, it would probably have more to do with getting the attention of his readers than involving a change of heart. He enjoys the company of others who hold to the same views that he does, that biblical history may be no more than myths. Yet Ehrman and his like-minded associates still manage to believe that Christ is God and so participate in the services of the church.<sup>3</sup> He believes that a man by the name of Jesus really lived and was crucified by Roman authorities at the instigation of Jewish leaders.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 He calls into question the authenticity of the New Testament documents, particularly the accounts of the burial and resurrection of Jesus.
  - 2 In the Reformed tradition, these schools hold that confessions are man-made documents that are binding on faith. Yet they still often require belief, sometimes in writing, in the deity of Jesus, along with his birth, the vicarious atonement, and resurrection, the one belief on which all the other doctrines depend. Since the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed have precedents in the New Testament from which they developed, they are not best described as man-made documents.
  - 3 Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don’t Know About Them)* (HarperOne, 2009), 276–77.
  - 4 Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (HarperOne, 2012), 5, 92.

Although his scholarship has led him to say that he is no longer a Christian, his upbringing, college, and postgraduate studies have provided him with a rarely matched knowledge of the New Testament. He regularly publishes with HarperOne and receives kudos from *The New York Times*. For those who cannot get enough of Ehrman from his more than twenty books, he has a blog on which he posts a thousand words five or six times a week.<sup>5</sup> Ehrman has become a household word for New Testament aficionados, and he enjoys the attention, whatever the source. His writings provide an easy-to-read, accessible antithesis to traditional Christian thinking about the resurrection, though he is hardly alone.

As radical as Ehrman wants to appear, he has taken the first necessary step toward the Christianity that emerged in the Nicene Creed. He believes Jesus existed, which must be affirmed before saying that this Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Without the conviction that Jesus really lived, everything else that is said about him is meaningless. The publication of the fictional *Da Vinci Code*,<sup>6</sup> another *New York Times* bestseller, gave Ehrman the opportunity to add fuel to the fire of what we can know about Jesus and his resurrection by authoring his *Truth and Fiction in The DaVinci Code*.<sup>7</sup>

Ehrman has come to the logical conclusion that his denial of the resurrection leads to dismissing what the Nicene Creed says about Jesus as God.<sup>8</sup> Without the New Testament witnesses, arguments for the resurrection are compromised. What is not dead cannot be resurrected. This is hardly a spectacular conclusion. Paul knew that without the resurrection of Jesus, Christianity did not have a leg to stand on (1 Cor. 15:17). Ehrman's fame continues, but being more prolific than original in his thinking, like others before him, he will fade from the scene, and in the next generation, another scholar will capture the limelight.

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5 Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels* (HarperOne, 2017), 298; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Bart Ehrman Blog*, <https://ehrmanblog.org/>.

6 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday, 2003).

7 Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know About Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

8 Ehrman is up-front about his unbelief and makes it a topic of discussion in some of his books. For example, see "Is Faith Possible?" the final chapter in his *Jesus, Interrupted* (269–83). He claims he left the faith not because the events reported in the Bible were beyond proof, but because belief in God is incompatible with suffering in the world. Some might respond that these are not either-or choices.

# INTRODUCTION



IN HIS EXPANSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY, BART Ehrman falls in line with the assumption of the majority of scholars to advance his case that Christianity emerged from the second century onward. This is a fabrication. The resurrection as a historical event goes to the heart of the Christian religion and how God is to be understood. Avoiding discussion of the authenticity of the reports of the resurrection of Jesus reveals a disregard for Christianity as a religion rooted in the history of the Old Testament. God's participation in that history continued and was made permanent in the incarnation in which he became man.

Historical critique is not only possible but also necessary at the juncture where God became man in the incarnation. The incarnation became and still remains accessible for us and future generations in the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection belongs not only to that section of dogmatics known as Christology but also to the doctrine of God.

God is inherently Creator, and his participation in creation continues by redeeming it. By the resurrection, he raises the creation beyond its perfection in Genesis so that Christ can be all in all (Col. 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:28). Resurrection is the linchpin that holds together all that we believe about God. It permeates everything we hold to be true. Remove the resurrection from the Creed, and the entire Christian enterprise collapses.

The participation in church life by scholars who do not see the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event is puzzling.<sup>1</sup> At best, what remains without the resurrection is a Christianity defined by high moral codes, a religion compatible with Judaism, Islam, or Confucianism. With prominent, influential New Testament

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1 Robert M. Price, "Jesus at the Vanishing Point," in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (IVP Academic, 2009), 57. Price is another New Testament scholar who denies the resurrection. He presents himself as a regular churchgoer: "I have never come to disdain Christianity. Indeed, I was for the past dozen years pastor of a Baptist church and am now a happy Episcopalian. I rejoice to take the Eucharist every week and to sing the great hymns of faith. For me the Christ of faith has all the more importance since I think it most probable that there was never any other" (56).

scholars uncertain about what can be known about Jesus and even whether Jesus existed at all, his resurrection has shifted to center stage, displacing traditional differences that Christians may have had with one another, such as in the understanding of the doctrines of justification or the sacraments.

Placing Jesus' resurrection at the center of the Christian enterprise recoups the place it held on that third day when the Jewish leaders bribed the tomb guards to say that the disciples had stolen the body (Matt. 28:11–15). Only with belief in the resurrection of Jesus firmly in place does the meaning of his deeds and words come into focus and we can begin to recognize who he is as the Son of God.

The outcome of debates among historians dealing with past events are often not that crucial or may be of interest only to professional historians. Whether the first European travelers to North America were Vikings or Irish monks matters little for how we live our lives. Was the US Civil War fought only because of differences over the morality of slavery, or were the rights of the individual states and financial reasons also at issue? Determining causes is complex, and one event can have multiple causes.

Several causes can account for the origin and spread of Christianity, but if one event were to be singled out from the others, it would be the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Discussion of Jesus' resurrection then raises the question of how much we can know about him, including whether Jesus really lived. Some scholars hold that even if the gospels are not reliable sources about the life of Jesus, they at least tell us what first-century Christians believed. Historical criticism in its purest form deals with accessible persons, places, and items or artifacts, and so with this approach, we are left at arm's length from what really happened. The gospels possess a historical objectivity so that we can put our hands on them and compare one with another. Even though such an approach does not take us to the events as they happened, it at least introduces the question of where or from whom the account comes and allows us to ask the next question: to what extent the account reflects the events as they happened, and what was adjusted or added.

Apart from questions about its historical character, the resurrection has existential dimensions in that this is not like other events that matter little if they happened or not. The resurrection has everything to do with what happens in the next life. Even those who are unconvinced about its historical character recognize that, for many people, it is literally a matter of life and death and, unlike other events, cannot be ignored. It is fair to ask why scholars who are convinced that the resurrection is a fabrication devote their lifelong scholarly efforts to convincing others that it did not happen. Their endeavors come close to the logical error of trying to prove a negative. One wonders if they are working to convince themselves that it

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2 See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World* (Simon & Schuster, 2018).

did not happen. A weak, unconvinced faith that the resurrection of Jesus did not happen needs shoring up.

No matter how the resurrection of Jesus is explained and what its implications are for Christians, we must go back to the first question of whether a particular man known in his time and afterward as Jesus of Nazareth, who was reputed to be the son of Mary and Joseph, returned to life after being put to death by crucifixion. Was this man really dead, and if he was, did he really come back to life? If so, to what kind of life did he return? While the resurrection may have been more than a resuscitation of a dead body, it was at least that. The argument in this book is that there is a flesh-and-blood connection between the man who was crucified as Jesus of Nazareth and the one who was raised from the dead. The continuity is personal and real and not just a continuity of influence and memory as some scholars have dreamed.



PART I

**How Did  
We Get Here?**





CHAPTER 1

# CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND ITS DOUBTS



## Theologians Who Deny the Resurrection

As literarily prolific as Bart Ehrman is, he is not as original in his arguments against Christianity and the resurrection as some of his admiring readers may think. Some of his arguments were offered already in the Rationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), Gotthold Lessing (1729–81), and David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), among others. Since then, it has become a matter of which scholar can offer a more novel or radical view. A mark of success has been the sensationalism these views evoke.

Doubts about whether the Scriptures were historically reliable began in the seventeenth century, a time when Lutheran and Reformed Orthodoxy characterized European Protestantism. Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), a Jewish scholar of Spanish parentage living in the Netherlands, is seen as inaugurating critical studies of the Old Testament. His research especially questioned whether Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible. Since then, the Genesis creation account has been fair game among the critics. Soon, Jesus' resurrection found itself on the historical-critical chopping block too.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, quests for the historical Jesus, which began shortly before the age of Rationalism, led to a virtual agnosticism as scholarship “established” that man had no specific knowledge of who Jesus was. Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) collected the essays of prominent biblical scholars to show that they disagreed and that he himself could say no more than that Jesus had died in self-delusion, believing in his dying agony that “the Son of Man” would come to his rescue.<sup>1</sup> In the middle of the twentieth century, the rank liberalism of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930)—which he set forth in *What*

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1 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (Adam & Charles Black, 1910), 370–72.

*Is Christianity?*—took hold in North America as a movement called Modernism. This was followed by Neoorthodoxy, whose lead theologians were Karl Barth (1886–1968), Emil Brunner (1889–1966), and Paul Tillich (1886–1965).

In this kind of intellectual climate, any discussion of whether Jesus was resurrected was moot. The historical structure in the gospels on which the resurrection of Jesus was constructed had been dismantled. Unless Christianity could be redefined without requiring that what the Bible said had actually happened, the faith that had defined Europe since Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century would no longer have a place in European culture. This was a massive shift from when the German-speaking lands began to form themselves into the Holy Roman Empire (around AD 800)—with the implication that among their forebearers were not only the Roman emperors but also the apostles of the church. For these peoples, the resurrection faith belonged to the very legal structure of Europe. In sharp contrast, by the turn of the twentieth century, without a firm commitment to biblical history, the theological task was to put in place a form of Christianity that could circumvent the question of whether Jesus had actually risen from the dead.

In North America, Modernism took the form of the social gospel, as articulated by Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). Its major proponent was Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969), and its lead opponent was The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's own Walter A. Maier (1893–1950). The two great World Wars undercut the possibility that a religion defined by love, as proposed by the liberal theologians, was sustainable. Into the gap came the Neoorthodox theologians, already mentioned above, who removed Christianity from the danger of historical critique.

The Neoorthodox (Rationalist) scholars provided a linguistic understanding, which proposed that Christianity had a place within the confines of the “Word” as it was preached or proclaimed, where such questions of the resurrection of Jesus would be secure from historical critique. They taught that Scriptures set forth the content of preaching, but it was preaching, and not Scripture, that was determinative for faith. Because the traditional dogmatic terms were used, this approach was called Neoorthodoxy, but it intentionally avoided answering whether what the Scriptures reported had really happened. Thus Neoorthodoxy virtually accepted the doubts which had been introduced by the nineteenth-century biblical scholars.

In what follows, there is provided a basic genealogy of recognized scholars from the eighteenth century to the present, each of whom questioned whether Jesus really rose from the dead. By undertaking this brief survey of theologians from the past, we will trace the theological devolution from its origins to discover how we have arrived at a time when the arguments of those such as Ehrman are widely held and accepted.

## EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCHOLARSHIP

### Gotthold Lessing (1729–81)

Gotthold Lessing provided the initiative for the great liberal tradition.<sup>2</sup> He turned to the New Testament and claimed that events the gospels presented as miraculous had natural causes and were inaccessible to historical investigation. He articulated the evolving rationalist principle that all religions were equal in their claims to represent religious truth. Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise* revolved around the belief that Christians, Jews, and Muslims all worship the same God; thus adherents of one of these faiths should live in harmony with the others. Lessing's natural religion became the principle on which Freemasonry was established and was offered as an alternative to supernatural Christian belief derived from the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

### Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

Immanuel Kant added another dimension to the skepticism that had been introduced by Spinoza in the seventeenth century. He posited that what something was in itself, *Ding an sich*, could not be known, but only the impression made on the mind could be known. In doing so, Kant put in place as the foundation for biblical scholarship a philosophical principle that diminished the possibility that the resurrection of Jesus could be approached historically. Those whom the gospels listed as witnesses to the resurrection did not report what had actually happened but merely the impressions that the events of the third day had made upon their minds.

### Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91) and Rationalism

The Rationalists took a moderating approach, believing that the events reported in the Bible had happened but had natural causes and were therefore not miraculous. Johann Salomo Semler, considered the leading eighteenth-century Rationalist theologian and a founder of the historical-critical method, presented an intriguing contradiction: he aligned with contemporaries—that miracles had natural causes—and then defended the historical character of the resurrection.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, with introduction by Henry Chadwick (Stanford University Press, 1956), 14–17. Lessing made the acquaintance of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, a professor of oriental languages in Hamburg. At his death, Reimarus left in the hands of his daughter an enormous work entitled *Apology for the Rational Worshipers of God*, which Lessing published, without attribution, in fragments in his *Contributions to Literature and History*. This document came to be known as the *Fragments*. The fifth fragment, "On the Resurrection Narratives," noted the inconsistencies in the resurrection accounts, which provided Reimarus cause to dismiss them.

3 Lessing, *Theological Writings*, 14–17.

4 Boris Paschke, "The Contribution of Johann Salomo Semler to the Historical Criticism of the New Testament," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 80 (January/April 2016): 126–28. The more radical Reimarus, the anonymous author of the anonymously

Other eighteenth-century Rationalists claimed that they did not deny the resurrection. Yet they defined it in different ways that did not involve Jesus' body returning to life. For instance, they claimed that Jesus was "alive" in the life of his followers. Clearly, this did not fit what was meant by a resurrection as it had been understood beginning in the first century onward.

Since the Rationalists critiqued the Scriptures based on historical principles, what they intended by them should be subject to evaluation. In denying, or at least ignoring, supernatural intervention in historical events, historians claimed that their approach was objective—at least more objective than dogmatic theologians, who were burdened by the biases of their beliefs. It was not that early historical critics denied the realities in which faith believed and the reality of faith itself, but they claimed that such matters were beyond what could be historically examined and verified.

Since the supernatural realm did not exist (except for the existence of God), the reported miracles must have had natural and not supernatural causes. These theologians saw themselves as neutral observers entering the arena of scholarship without the biases of those who believed in a supernatural world. The world consisted of nothing more than the things with which they came into contact. This was the age of scientific investigation, and explanations could be found for everything.

#### Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834)

Friedrich Schleiermacher, who would become one of the most influential Protestant theologians, hypothesized that Jesus' resurrection was a projection of the faith of his apostles in response to his death. For Schleiermacher, faith, as a consciousness of God, is the source of our knowledge of God and of theology. What was traditionally offered as doctrine but did not contribute to Christian consciousness could be believed, but such doctrines were unnecessary for faith. The faith of the individual or of the community to which the believer belonged was given greater value than the things reported by the gospels, if these things happened at all.

Schleiermacher believed that the gospels do not tell about things Jesus did or the words he said. Instead, they tell us only the beliefs of the communities to whom the writers wrote. By making faith the starting point of theology, Schleiermacher did not have to come to grips with the historical character of Jesus' resurrection, or at least he did not need to give it a theologically determinative role. As counter-intuitive as a historical resurrection was in Schleiermacher's concept of Christian

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published *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples (Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger, 1778)*, flatly denied the resurrection of Jesus.

consciousness, he believed that the resurrection of Jesus marked the beginning of Christian consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Without the resurrection of Jesus as an event in history, the tenets of Christianity are called into question, but Schleiermacher did not see it this way. His belief in Jesus' resurrection did not bring him to believe in original sin, the Trinity, Christ's vicarious satisfaction, and his eternal deity.<sup>6</sup> Despite his belief in Jesus' resurrection, belief in his ascension and return for judgment—and even the resurrection itself—were not seen as “constituent parts of the doctrine of His Person.”<sup>7</sup> These could not be ignored, but they could be redefined. Oddly, belief in Jesus' resurrection was an anomaly in Schleiermacher's theological program that judged the authenticity of Jesus' deeds by gauging whether they contributed to Christian consciousness.

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY SCHOLARSHIP

David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74)

In the nineteenth century, David Friedrich Strauss was considered the most radical theologian for holding that none of the accounts about Jesus were true. He did not go through the gospels, finding the account of one event more probable than that of another, the method of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment Rationalists, but instead dismissed everything in the gospels as fiction. He concluded that the evangelists had made up these stories about Jesus. As a consequence of this radical view, Strauss lost his teaching position at the University of Tübingen and was not allowed to assume the position offered him at the University of Zurich. Somehow the old religion had managed to remain in force, for the time being.

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY SCHOLARSHIP

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

As the twentieth century began, Albert Schweitzer published an anthology of excerpts from books previously published by critical scholars to show that they could not agree among themselves on what could be known about the historical Jesus. With these scholarly essays, he concluded that the person of Jesus was so lost in history that he could not be recovered. Of course, in this sweeping judgment, he allowed an exception for his own view—that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet (a view which still has its proponents, among whom, Bart Ehrman is the

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5 Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart (Harper & Row, 1963), 1:420.

6 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:120.

7 Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 1:418.