

IS BELIEF IN GOD SCIENTIFIC—THE RESURRECTION

I. CHRONOLOGICAL SNOBBERY

Modern people often look at the miracles in the Bible, especially the Resurrection, and laugh at how superstitious people were to believe such things. While people of yesterday supposedly attributed anything out of the ordinary to 'God's work,' modern people today believe that science (which has shown that nature operates by 'fixed' laws) has proven that miracles cannot and do not occur, and so laughter and scorn is poured on the Biblical narratives on this basis. However, C.S. Lewis has an important quote that will instantly cure us of our 'chronological snobbery':¹

"There is one thing often said about our ancestors which we must *not* say. We must not say 'They believed in miracles because they did not know the Laws of Nature.' This is nonsense. When St. Joseph discovered that his bride was pregnant, he was 'minded to put her away.' He knew enough biology for that. Otherwise, of course he would not have regarded pregnancy as a proof of infidelity. When he accepted the Christian explanation, he regarded it as a miracle precisely because he knew enough of the Laws of Nature to know that this was a suspension of them. When the disciples saw Christ walking on water, they were frightened: they would not have been frightened unless they had known the laws of Nature and known that this was an exception. Complete ignorance of the laws of Nature would preclude the perception of the miraculous just as rigidly as complete disbelief in the supernatural precludes it, perhaps even more so. For, while the materialist would have at least to explain miracles away, the man wholly ignorant of Nature would simply not notice them."

Lewis' point is well-taken. The Biblical stories are just as in awe over what happened to Jesus as we would be if we saw the same events today. Any rival theory of the Resurrection must be able to explain 1) How the unique doctrine of the Resurrection arose among Christians, 2) Why the stories are the way they are, 3) Why the Resurrection took center stage 4) How the muddled, frightened disciples with their Messiah defeated became the bold proclaimers of faith in Christ and literally conquered the Roman Empire. Here are some general ways people try to avoid the fact of the resurrection:

II. SWOON THEORY ARGUMENT

One attempt to explain this data, sometimes called the "swoon theory", denies Jesus' death. On this theory, Jesus didn't really die at all. Yes, he was crucified—that much is undeniable—but he survived the crucifixion. When he was laid in the tomb he was unconscious, but alive. He then resuscitated, escaped from the tomb, and appeared to the disciples, who mistakenly thought he had been resurrected. This theory thus neatly explains the resurrection appearances without having, implausibly, to deny the crucifixion. Christians dismiss the swoon theory for a number of reasons.

First, people didn't survive crucifixion. Crucifixion was a brutal form of execution, one well-practiced by the Romans. The Romans knew what they were doing; Jesus could not have made it through the crucifixion alive. Second, even if he had made it through the crucifixion alive, Jesus would not have been in a fit state to escape from the tomb. The tomb in which he was laid, according to the Bible, was enclosed by a large boulder, and guarded by Roman soldiers. Even if he had survived crucifixion, Jesus, having been beaten, stabbed, scourged, crucified, and starved, would have been too weak to move the boulder, and wouldn't have got past the guards. Third, even if Jesus had survived the crucifixion and escaped from the tomb, there's no way that he would have been mistaken someone resurrected. The rigors of crucifixion would have left him in an appalling state, yet Jesus' appearance before his disciples was such that they thought he was in a glorified, resurrection body. He moved around, cooked fish, traveled, taught, walked many miles, etc. The swoon theory, therefore cannot seriously be maintained.²

III. CONSPIRACY THEORY ARGUMENT

Another attempt to explain the historical data surrounding Jesus' death and the birth of the church is the "conspiracy theory." According to this theory, there were no appearances of the risen Jesus at all, whether hallucinatory or not; the disciples made it all up. This theory explains away the resurrection appearances as a fiction, and so again neatly solves the historical problem. The conspiracy theory is more a desperate attempt to explain away the evidence than a genuine attempt to explain it. In other words, it does not meet the logical criteria of 'sufficient cause.'

¹ Chronological snobbery refers to the modern man's assumption that his current historical and cultural era are determinative across history as the 'right way' to look at things.

² Adapted from www.existence-of-god.com

First, the disciples' claim would have been easily disproved at the time had it been false. All that would have needed to be done to silence them would have been to produce Jesus' body. This, though, was not done. Paul called out over 500 hundred witnesses (I Cor. 15.6) with whom the sightings could have been verified or denied. There is no reason to call such a vast number of witnesses unless they really could testify affirmatively.

Second, it is again difficult to account for the testimony of those who had not followed Jesus prior to the resurrection on this theory. Why would those who rejected Jesus when he was alive buy into Christianity when he was dead?

Third, the disciples' commitment to the cause counts strongly against the idea that their claims were made up. Jesus' followers faced great persecution for their claims about Jesus, yet, after his death, not one of them retracted those claims. People do sometimes invent lies, and people do sometimes die for lies, I cannot think of a single instance where multiple people, independent of one another, would die for a lie they invented. Before Jesus' death this was not the case; famously, Peter denied Jesus three times. Something transformed the early Christians into fervent witnesses to the resurrection. What could have done that other than a genuine resurrection?³

Fourth, as we will soon see, there was no basis for the disciples to make up the *kind* of story that now exists. They did not construct it from the Old Testament text, the O.T. idea of resurrection, or the current cultural milieu in which they lived. Thus, if they made it up, they did so in the most imaginary and least believable way. There are several other theories, but each of these will be refuted in the proof section below.

IV. HISTORICAL PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST⁴

A. JESUS' RESURRECTION DIFFERED FROM ANYTHING THEN BELIEVED—Even if we granted that ancient people were much more likely to believe in miracles than we are, belief in Jesus' resurrection the way it is described is next to impossible. The invention of such a belief by nostalgic disciples is similarly impossible. Here's why:

1. Jews of that day had no concept of an individual resurrection. We now root our resurrection in Jesus' but prior to Jesus this was not the case. Some didn't believe in resurrection at all and some believed that all believers would be raised from the dead at the end of history. What we have with Jesus is one person going first in the middle of history, which no person of that time believed was possible.
2. Jews who did believe in resurrection believed that it would either a) reproduce exactly the same body over again or b) produce a luminous body, one shining like a star (Based on Dan. 12.1-2). But the early Christians didn't say any of those things. They described a new kind of physicality which is solid but transformed so that it is now not susceptible to pain, suffering, or death. That picture of resurrection is not in Judaism.
3. Up to that point, 'resurrection' had only been used as a metaphor for return from exile (see Ezek. 37), but early Christians began to associate it with Christian living, baptism, and holiness.
4. Though the Gospels are replete with references to Jesus' fulfilling of Scripture in nearly every other event in His life (crucifixion and Psalm 22, Is. 53), Scriptural warrant is surprisingly absent in the resurrection narratives. Anyone simply imagining or inventing this story would have based it on Daniel 12 or Ezekiel 37, but we see no such re-writing.
5. Resurrection moves from being one doctrine among many to the forefront, the center of everything. As N.T. Wright notes, "Take it [resurrection] away from Paul, say, or I Peter, Revelation, or the great 2nd century church fathers, and you will destroy their whole framework. We have to conclude that something must have happened to bring resurrection from the periphery to the center.
6. Jews, Romans, and Greeks had many viewpoints about what happened after death, but in early Christianity, there is only one—resurrection. Romans and Greeks considered bodily resurrection impossible, not even an option.
7. Although early Christians disagreed about a number of things, they are unanimous in their view of the resurrection and how it works. This unanimity is especially striking when considering how unique their particular take on resurrection was.

³ Ibid.

⁴ I will follow the argument of N.T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, and his appendix in Tony Flew's book, *There is a God*.

- B. THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE NARRATIVE—The place of women in the narrative make it impossible that the story was envisioned, hallucinated, created, or imagined. If you wanted good witnesses to key events in the ancient world, women were not the way to go, and yet Mary Magdalene who was not only a woman but a woman of low reputation, is there as the prime witness in all 4 Gospels! Women could not serve as trial witnesses or in any other official capacities because it was assumed that they were unreliable. Thus, it is inconceivable that all 4 Gospels would have simply made up that part of the story.
- C. WHAT MUST HAVE OCCURRED. Therefore, two things *must* have occurred.
1. The tomb must have been empty. If there had been an empty tomb and no appearances of the risen Christ, everybody in the ancient world would have drawn the obvious conclusion that body snatchers stole the body. In fact, that is what Mary thought at first. But this was not the eventual conclusion. Simply having an empty tomb is insufficient evidence to explain the rise and nature of Christianity in the first century.
 2. Jesus must have bodily appeared to the disciples. It will not do to say that the disciples simply had some kind of experience that they took to be a meeting with Jesus. They knew Jesus had been killed and they understood all about hallucinations, ghosts, and visions since ancient Jewish and Pagan literature is full of such things (see Homer and Virgil). Recently, some have explained it all away with the idea that when those you love die, you often experience them in the room with you, even talking to you, and then they disappear again, which probably happened to the disciples. But they knew about that type of phenomena, meaning that if the tomb had not been empty (which was verifiable b/c of their burial practices), they would have given up that belief no matter how powerful because the body in the tomb would have destroyed it. In addition, hallucinations and inventions are not accurately shared across multiple people in that way. Several people may have a hallucination but it is nearly impossible for them to all be in agreement over what hallucination was had. Likewise, if the story were merely invented (which had never been done in the other Messiah movements of the time), it is inconceivable to imagine every disciple (except John) giving his life for this truth, and it is inconceivable that Resurrection becomes the centerpiece of Christian preaching and practice.
- D. THE FINAL MOVE—If the tomb was empty and if Jesus appeared to His disciples (conclusions which are nearly irrefutable), then by far the best way to explain them, along with the rise of Christianity, is by Resurrection. The best and really only good explanation is that Jesus really was raised from the dead, and the disciples really did meet Him. To quote Wright again:

“The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the ‘meetings or ‘sightings’ of the risen Jesus in order to explain a faith they already had. Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion-experience would have generated such ideas; nobody would have invented it, no matter how guilty or how forgiven they felt, no matter how many hours they pored over the Scriptures. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own.”

V. MAKING IT PERSONAL

If one grants the accuracy of the Resurrection (and after studying the facts, one is bound to do so!), then one must grant that this is now a ‘self-involving’ belief. You cannot simply say, yes Jesus rose from the dead but that means nothing to me personally. No, if Jesus rose, the world is different; He is Lord and Ruler of all things. If Jesus rose, He was vindicated and approved in all His actions and teachings. If Jesus rose, the ‘myth’ of Christianity is a true myth. If Jesus, rose, He did so in victory over sin, death, and hell, and provided a payment for the sins of His people. If Jesus rose, He now stands before us clothed with all authority, power, and majesty, and demands our repentance, our worship, our lives, and our all. Anything less would be sheer treason.