

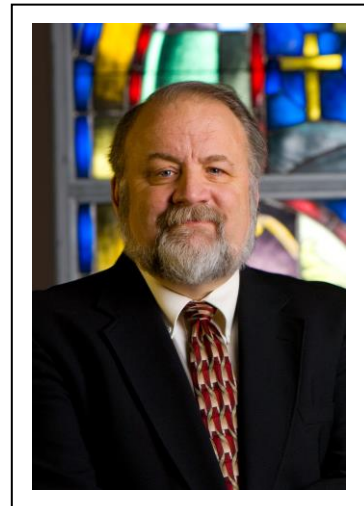
Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?

GARY R. HABERMAS, PHD

Introduction

During the last thirty years, perhaps the most captivating theological topic, at least in North America, is the historical Jesus. Dozens of publications by major scholars have appeared since the mid-1970s, bringing Jesus and his culture to the forefront of contemporary discussions. The apostle Paul has been the subject of numerous additional studies. Almost unavoidably, these two areas make it inevitable that the subject of Jesus' resurrection will be discussed. To the careful observer, these studies are exhibiting some intriguing tendencies.



Since 1975, more than 1400 scholarly publications on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus have appeared. Over the last five years, I have tracked these texts, which were written in German, French, and English. Well over 100 subtopics are addressed in the literature, almost all of which I have examined in detail. Each source appeared from the last quarter of the Twentieth Century to the present, with more being written in the 1990s than in other decades.¹ This contemporary milieu exhibits a number of well-established trends, while others are just becoming recognizable. The interdisciplinary flavor is noteworthy, as well. Most of the critical scholars are theologians or New Testament scholars, while a number of philosophers and historians, among other fields, are also included.

¹ There are no “bookend” dates that necessarily favor this specific demarcation of time. But as I began gathering these sources years ago, the last quarter of the Twentieth Century to the present seemed to be as good a barometer as any for deciphering recent research trends.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

This essay is chiefly concerned with commenting on a few of these most recent scholarly trends regarding the resurrection of Jesus. I will attempt to do four things here, moving from the general to the specific. This will involve 1) beginning with some tendencies of a very broad nature, 2) delineating several key research trends, 3) providing a sample interpretation of these research trends from the works of two representative scholars, and 4) concluding with some comments on what I take to be the single most crucial development in recent thought. Regarding my own critics over the years, one of my interests is to ascertain if we can detect some widespread directions in the contemporary discussions—where are most recent scholars heading on these issues? Of course, the best way to do this is to comb through the literature and attempt to provide an accurate assessment.

Some General Tendencies

After a survey of contemporary scholarly opinions regarding the more general issue of Jesus' Christology, Raymond Brown argues that the most popular view is that of moderate conservatism.² It might be said, with qualification, that similar trends are exhibited in an analysis of the more specific area of recent scholarly positions on Jesus' resurrection. When viewed as a whole, the general consensus is to recognize perhaps a surprising amount of historical data as reported in the New Testament accounts. In particular, Paul's epistles, especially 1 Corinthians 15:1-20, along with other early creedal traditions, are frequently taken almost at face value.

For the purposes of this essay, I will define moderate conservative approaches to the resurrection as those holding that Jesus was actually raised from the dead in some manner, either bodily (and thus extended in space and time), or as some sort of spiritual body (though often undefined). In other words, if what occurred can be described as having happened to Jesus rather than only to his followers, this range of views will be juxtaposed with those more skeptical positions that nothing actually happened to Jesus and can only be described as a personal experience of the disciples. Of course, major differences can be noted within and between these views.

One way to group these general tendencies is by geography and language. For example, on the European Continent, recent German studies on the subject of the death and resurrection of Jesus are far more numerous, generally more theological in scope, and more diverse, than French treatments. This German diversity still includes many moderate and conservative stances. French studies, on the other hand, appear less numerous, more textually-oriented, and tend to reach more conservative conclusions.

² Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 4-15, 102.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

For example, German works of approximately the last 30 years include the more critical stances of Hans Conzelmann,³ Willi Marxsen,⁴ Gerd Lüdemann,⁵ Ingo Broer,⁶ and the early Rudolf Pesch.⁷ But they also encompass more numerous works by Wolfhart Pannenberg,⁸ Jürgen Moltmann,⁹ Martin Hengel,¹⁰ Jacob Kremer,¹¹ Walter Künneth,¹² and Ulrich Wilckens.¹³

Examples of the French writings would be the works of Francis Durrwell,¹⁴ Xavier Léon-Dufour,¹⁵ and Jean-Marie Guillaume.¹⁶ Guillaume is typical of some of the more exegetical

³ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

⁴ Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); *Jesus and Easter: Did God Raise the Historical Jesus from the Dead?* trans. Victor Paul Furnish (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology* trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Lüdemann with Alf Özen, *What Really Happened to Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2004). See also Hansjürgen Verweyen, editor, *Osterglaube ohne Auferstehung? Diskussion mit Gerd Lüdemann* (Freiburg: Herder, 1995) and the lengthy book review by Andreas Lindemann in *Wege zum Menschen*, 46 (November-December 1994), 503-513.

⁶ Ingo Broer, et. al. *Auferstehung Jesu--Auferstehung der Christen: Deutungen des Osterglaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986); Broer and Jürgen Werbick, "Der Herr ist wahrhaft auferstanden" (Lk 24,34): *Biblische und systematische Beiträge zur Entstehung des Osterglaubens*, *Stuttgarter Bibel-Studien* 134 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988).

⁷ Rudolf Pesch, "Zur Entstehung des Glaubens an die Auferstehung Jesu," *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 153 (1973), 219-226; "Materialien und Bemerkungen zu Entstehung und Sinn des Osterglaubens," in Anton Vögtle and Pesch, *Wie kam es zum Osterglauben?* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1975).

⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Die Auferstehung Jesu: Historie und Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 91 (1994), 318-328; *Die Auferstehung Jesu und die Zukunft des Menschen* (München: Minerva-Publikation, 1978); *Jesus—God and Man*, second ed., trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Martin Hengel, "Ist der Osterglaube noch zu retten?" *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 153 (1973), 252-269; *The Atonement*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); "Das Begräbnis Jesu bei Paulus und die leibliche Auferstehung aus dem Grabe" *Auferstehung-Resurrection*, ed. Friedrich Avemarie and Hermann Lichtenberger (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001).

¹¹ Jacob Kremer, *Die Osterevangelien—Geschichten um Geschichte*, second ed. (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981); "Zur Diskussion über 'das leere Grab,'" *Resurrexit: Actes du Symposium International sur la Résurrection de Jésus*, ed. E. Dhanis (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974), 137-159.

¹² Walter Künneth, *Theologie der Auferstehung*, sixth ed. (Giessen: Brunnen, 1982).

¹³ Ulrich Wilckens, *Resurrection: Biblical Testimony to the Resurrection: An Historical Examination and Explanation*, trans. A.M. Stewart (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1977).

¹⁴ Francis X. Durrwell, *La Résurrection de Jésus: Mystère de Salut* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1976).

¹⁵ Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Résurrection de Jésus et Message Pascal* (Paris: Seuil, 1971).

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Guillaume, *Luc Interprète des Anciennes Traditions sur la Résurrection de Jésus, Études Bibliques* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1979).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

French studies, concluding that there are primitive, pre-synoptic traditions behind Gospel accounts such as the women discovering the empty tomb, Peter and John checking their claim, the proclamation in Lk. 24:34 that Jesus appeared to Peter, as well as Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the initial Easter Sunday.¹⁷

As has been the case for decades, British publications on the subject often reach rather independent conclusions from Continental thinkers. There are also a wide range of positions represented here, some of which differ from mainline conclusions, such as the works of Michael Goulder,¹⁸ G.A. Wells,¹⁹ and Duncan Derrett.²⁰ Still, the majority of British writings support what we have called the moderate conservative position. Examples are the publications of Thomas Torrance,²¹ James D.G. Dunn,²² Richard Swinburne,²³ and Oliver O'Donovan.²⁴ Most recently, the writings of N.T. Wright²⁵ have contributed heavily to this outlook.

North American contributions include both the largest number and perhaps the widest range of views on Jesus' resurrection. These extend from the more skeptical ideas of John Dominic Crossan²⁶ and Marcus Borg,²⁷ to the more moderate studies by Reginald Fuller,²⁸

¹⁷ Guillaume, *Luc Interprète des Anciennes Traditions sur la Résurrection de Jésus*, esp. 50-52, 65, 201, 265-274.

¹⁸ Michael Goulder, "Did Jesus of Nazareth Rise from the Dead?" in Stephen Barton and Graham Stanton, eds, *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden* (London: SPCK, 1994); "The Baseless Fabric of a Vision," in D'Costa, ed., *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 48-61; "The Empty Tomb," *Theology*, vol. 79 (1976), 206-214.

¹⁹ G.A. Wells, *A Resurrection Debate* (London: Rationalist Press, 1988); *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1988); *Did Jesus Exist?* (London: Pemberton, 1986).

²⁰ Duncan M. Derrett, *The Anastasis: The Resurrection of Jesus as an Historical Event* (Shipston-on-Stour, England: P. Drinkwater, 1982).

²¹ Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

²² James D.G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1985); *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

²³ Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003); "Evidence for the Resurrection," in Davis, Kendall, and O'Collins, eds., *Resurrection*, 191-212; editor, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

²⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

²⁵ This includes Wright's series, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, published in the U.S. by Fortress Press. See especially his third volume, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

²⁶ John Dominic Crossan, "Empty Tomb and Absent Lord (Mark 16:1-8)," in Kelber, ed., *The Passion in Mark: Studies in Mark 14-16* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 135-152; *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994); *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering what Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998).

²⁷ Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999), Parts 3-4; "Thinking about Easter," *Bible Review*, X:2 (April, 1994), 15, 49.

²⁸ Reginald H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, Revised Ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, Press, 1980); Fuller, Reginald H., Eugene LaVerdiere, John C. Lodge, and Donald Senior, *The Passion*,

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Pheme Perkins,²⁹ and Raymond Brown,³⁰ to the more conservative voices of William Lane Craig³¹ and Stephen Davis.³² My publications would fit the latter category.³³

A rough estimate of the publications in my study of Jesus' resurrection among British, French, and German authors (as well as a number of authors from several other countries³⁴), published during the last 25 or so years, indicates that there is approximately a 3:1 ratio of works that fall into the category that we have dubbed the moderate conservative position, as compared to more skeptical treatments. Of course, this proves nothing concerning whether or not the resurrection actually occurred. But it does provide perhaps a hint—a barometer, albeit quite an unofficial one, on where many of these publications stand.

By far, the majority of publications on the subject of Jesus' death and resurrection have been written by North American authors. Interestingly, my study of these works also indicates an approximate ratio of 3:1 of moderate conservative to skeptical publications, as with the European publications. Here again, this signals the direction of current research.³⁵

Death, and Resurrection of the Lord: A Commentary on the Four Gospels (Mundelein, Ill.: Chicago Studies, 1985); "John 20:19-23," *Interpretation*, 32 (1978), 180-184.

²⁹ Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984); "I have Seen the Lord (John 20:18): Women Witnesses to the Resurrection," *Interpretation*, 46 (1992), 31-41; "Reconciling the Resurrection," *Commonweal*, (April 5, 1985), 202-205.

³⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (N.Y.: Paulist, 1973); *A Risen Christ in Eastertime: Essays on the Gospel Narratives of the Resurrection* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991); *The Death of the Messiah*, two vols, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1994).

³¹ William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, N.Y. Mellen, 1989); *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus During the Deist Controversy* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1985).

³² Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, eds., *The Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford, 1997), 191-212; editor, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

³³ Some examples include Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Resurrected? An Atheist and Theist Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989), 167-177; "The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus' Resurrection," *Trinity Journal*, new series, 22 (2001), 179-196.

³⁴ Gerald O'Collins might be mentioned here: *What Are They Saying About the Resurrection?* (New York: Paulist, 1978); *Interpreting the Resurrection* (Mahweh, N.J.: Paulist, 1988); *Jesus Risen: The Resurrection—What Actually Happened and What Does it Mean?* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1988); *Easter Faith* (N.Y.: Paulist, 2003).

³⁵ These percentages reflect only those publications that answer this specific question, where I have conducted a detailed investigation.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Some Specific Research Trends

I will note six particular areas of research that demarcate some of the most important trends in resurrection research today. In particular, I will feature areas that include some fairly surprising developments.

First, after a hiatus since their heyday in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, recent trends indicate a limited surge of naturalistic explanations to the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Almost a dozen different alternative theses have emerged, either argued or suggested by more than forty different scholars, with some critics endorsing more than one theory. In place of the resurrection, both internal states of mind (such as subjective visions or hallucinations³⁶) as well as objective phenomena (like illusions³⁷) have been proposed.³⁸ The vast majority of scholars, however, still reject such proposals.

A second research area concerns those scholars who address the subject of the empty tomb. It has been said that the majority of contemporary researchers accepts the historicity of this event.³⁹ But is there any way to be more specific? From the study mentioned above, I have compiled 23 arguments for the empty tomb and 14 considerations against it, as cited by recent critical scholars. Generally, the listings are what might be expected, dividing along theological "party lines." To be sure, such a large number of arguments, both pro and con, includes very specific differentiation, including some overlap.

Of these scholars, approximately 75% favor one or more of these arguments for the empty tomb, while approximately 25% think that one or more arguments oppose it. Thus, while far from being unanimously held by critical scholars, it may surprise some that those who embrace the empty tomb as a historical fact still comprise a fairly strong majority.

By far the most popular argument favoring the Gospel testimony on this subject is that, in all four texts, women are listed as the initial witnesses. Contrary to often repeated statements,⁴⁰ First Century Jewish women were able to testify in some legal matters. But given the general reluctance in the Mediterranean world at that time to accept female

³⁶ Such as the hypotheses of Lüdemann or Goulder above.

³⁷ Goulder also raises this question.

³⁸ I have categorized these natural hypotheses, naming two alternative proposals (the illumination and illusion options) that have so far eluded any recognized designations. For details see Habermas, "The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus' Resurrection," 179-196.

³⁹ For example, Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 373-374; cf. Kremer, *Die Osterevangelien--Geschichten um Geschichte*, 49-50.

⁴⁰ Michael Goulder avers: "Only male witnesses are valid in Jewish jurisprudence" ("The Empty Tomb," *Theology*, 79 [1976], 211).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

testimony in crucial matters, most of those scholars who comment on the subject hold that the Gospels probably would not have dubbed them as the chief witnesses unless they actually did attest to this event.⁴¹

Third, without question, the most critically-respected witness for Jesus' resurrection is the apostle Paul. As Norman Perrin states, "Paul is the one witness we have whom we can interrogate."⁴² And 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 is taken to be the strongest evidence for the historicity of this event. Howard Clark Kee boldly asserts that Paul's testimony here "can be critically examined . . . just as one would evaluate evidence in a modern court or academic setting."⁴³ For several strong reasons,⁴⁴ most scholars who address the issue think that this testimony predates any New Testament book. Murphy-O'Connor reports that a literary analysis has produced "complete agreement" among critical scholars that "Paul introduces a quotation in v. 3b. ..."⁴⁵

Paul probably received this report from Peter and James while visiting Jerusalem within a few years of his conversion.⁴⁶ The vast majority of critical scholars who answer the question place Paul's reception of this material in the mid-30s AD.⁴⁷ Even more skeptical

⁴¹ For the circumstances under which Jewish women could testify, including the conclusion that this Gospel report nonetheless provides evidence for the empty tomb, especially Carolyn Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What are they Doing There?" *Ex Auditu*, 9 (1993), 97-107.

⁴² Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 83.

⁴³ Howard Clark Kee, *What can We Know about Jesus?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-2.

⁴⁴ For example, Paul precedes the text by using the equivalent Greek for the technical rabbinic terms "delivered" and "received," which traditionally were the way that oral tradition was passed along (see also 1 Corinthians 11:23). Further, the report appears in a stylized, parallel form. The presence of several non-Pauline terms, sentence structure, and diction all additionally point to a source prior to Paul. Also noted are the proper names of Cephas and James (including the Aramaic name Cephas

[cf. Luke 24:34]), the possibility of an Aramaic original, other Semitisms like the threefold "kai oti" (like Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew narration), and the two references to the Scriptures being fulfilled. See Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*, from the German, no translator provided (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 97-99; John Kloppenborg, "An Analysis of the Pre-Pauline Formula in 1 Cor 15:3b-5 in Light of Some Recent Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 40 (1978), 351, 360; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Tradition and Redaction in 1 Cor 15:3-7," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 43 (1981), 582. ⁴⁵ Murphy-O'Connor, "Tradition and Redaction in 1 Cor 15:3-7," 582. Fuller agrees: "It is almost universally agreed today that Paul is here citing tradition." (*The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 10).

⁴⁶ I have outlined the case elsewhere, for instance, in Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chap. 1; "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus" in *In Defense of Miracles*, R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 262-275.

⁴⁷ For just a few of these scholars, see Hans Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte*, second ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Rupert, 1962), 96; Francis X. Durrwell, *La Résurrection de Jésus: Mystère de Salut*, 22; Reginald Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 142, 161; C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint, 1980), 16; Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

scholars generally agree.⁴⁸ German theologian Walter Kasper even asserts that, “We have here therefore an ancient text, perhaps in use by the end of 30 AD. ...”⁴⁹ Ulrich Wilckens declares that the material “indubitably goes back to the oldest phase of all in the history of primitive Christianity.”⁵⁰

Fourth, while this pre-Pauline creed provides crucial material, it is not the only instance. For example, many scholars think that the Book of Acts contains many early confessions, embedded in the sermons.⁵¹ These creeds are indicated by brief, theologically unadorned wording that differs from the author’s normal language. Although this is more difficult to determine, it appears that most critical scholars think that at least some reflection of the earliest Christian preaching is encased in this material. This can be determined not only by the many authors who affirm it,⁵² but also because it is difficult to find many who

(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 65-66; Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 90; Raymond Brown, *Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection*, 81, 92; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Jesus of Nazareth—Christ of Faith*, trans. Siegfried S. Shatzmann (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1993), 8; Helmut Merklein, “Die Auferweckung Jesu und die Anfänge der Christologie (Messias bzw. Sohn Gottes und Menschensohn),” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche*, 72 (1981), 2; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 3: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 139; Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 70; Leander E. Keck, *Who is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 2000), 139; C.E.B. Cranfield, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” *Expository Times*, 101 (1990), 169. O’Collins thinks that no scholars date Paul’s reception of this creed later than the 40s A.D., which still would leave intact the major conclusions here (O’Collins, *What Are They Saying?* 112).

⁴⁸ Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 254; Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 38; Robert Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), cf. 18, 24; Michael Goulder, “The Baseless Fabric of a Vision,” in D’Costa, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 48; Jack Kent, *The Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth* (London: Open Gate, 1999), 16-17; A.J.M. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 111, 274, note 265; Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986), 118; cf. 110-112, 135; Michael Grant, *Saint Paul* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1976), 104; G.A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 30.

⁴⁹ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, new ed., trans. V. Green (Mahweh, N.J.: Paulist, 1976), 125.

⁵⁰ Wilckens, *Resurrection*, 2.

⁵¹ For the sermon segments that may contain this traditional material, see Acts 1:21-22; 2:22-36; 3:13-16; 4:8-10; 5:29-32; 10:39-43; 13:28-31; 17:1-3; 17:30-31.

⁵² For just some of the critical scholars who find early traditional material in Acts, see Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), esp. 79-80, 164-165; Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 47-49, 112-115; Merklein, “Die Auferweckung Jesu und die Anfänge der Christologie (Messias bzw. Sohn Gottes und Menschensohn),” 2; O’Collins, *Interpreting the Resurrection*, 48-52; John E. Alsup, *The Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories of the Gospel Tradition: A History-of-Tradition Analysis with Text-Synopsis*, Calwer Theologische Monographien 5 (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1975), 64-65, 81-85; Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, 17-31; Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, 112-113, 164; Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 44-45; Perkins, *Resurrection*, 90, 228-231; Durrwell, *La Résurrection de Jésus: Mystère de Salut*, 22; M. Gourgès, *À La Droite de Dieu: Résurrection de Jésus et Actualisation du Psaume 110:1 dans in Nouveau Testament* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie Editeurs, 1978), especially 169-178.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

clearly reject any such early reports among the Acts sermons. The death and resurrection appearances of Jesus are always found at the center of these traditions. Gerald O'Collins holds that this sermon content "incorporates resurrection formulae which stem from the thirties."⁵³ John Drane adds: "The earliest evidence we have for the resurrection almost certainly goes back to the time immediately after the resurrection event is alleged to have taken place. This is the evidence contained in the early sermons in the Acts of the Apostles."⁵⁴

9

Some contemporary critical scholars continue to underplay and even disparage the notion that Jesus was raised bodily. But a fifth, seemingly little recognized and even surprising factor in the recent research, is that many recent scholars have been balancing the two aspects of Paul's phrase "spiritual body," with perhaps even a majority favoring the position that, according to the New Testament writers, Jesus appeared in a transformed body. Lüdemann even proclaims: "I do not question the physical nature of Jesus' appearance from heaven. ... Paul ... asserts that Christians will receive a transformed physical body like the one that the heavenly man Christ has (cf. 1 Cor 15:35-49)."⁵⁵ Wright agrees: "there can be no question: Paul is a firm believer in bodily resurrection. He stands with his fellow Jews against the massed ranks of pagans; with his fellow Pharisees against other Jews."⁵⁶ Many other scholars have spoken in support of a bodily notion of Jesus' resurrection.⁵⁷

⁵³ Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 109-110.

⁵⁴ John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 99.

⁵⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, "Closing Response," in *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* Paul Copan and Ronald Tacelli, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 151.

⁵⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 272; cf. 321. In this volume, perhaps Wright's major emphasis is the bodily nature of resurrection in general, and Jesus' resurrection, in particular (see next note). See also N.T. Wright, "Early Traditions and the Origin of Christianity," *Sewanee Theological Review*, 41 (1998), 130-135.

⁵⁷ The best current treatment is Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 32-398. Also exceptional is Robert H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976), esp. chap. 13. Compare Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University, 1995); Stephen Davis (126-147) and William Alston (148-183), both in Davis, Kendall, and O'Collins, eds., *Resurrection*; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ According to the New Testament," *The Month*, second new series, 20 (1987), 408-409; Cranfield, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," 170; Norman Kretzmann, "Resurrection Resurrected," in Eleanore Stump and Thomas Flint, eds., *Hermes and Athens* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1993), 149. For a detailed treatment of this point, see Gary R. Habermas, "Mapping the Recent Trend toward the Bodily Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Light of Other Prominent Critical Positions," in Robert Stewart, editor, *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming, 2006).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Sixth, the vast majority of contemporary theologians argue in some sense that Jesus' resurrection variously evidences, leads to, or otherwise indicates the truth of Christian theology. Some prefer a non-evidential connection between this event and doctrinal truths, while others favor some level of entailment between them.

Even skeptical scholars frequently manifest this connection. Willi Marxsen is an example of the tendency to find significance in Jesus' resurrection. Though he rejects the historicity of this event, he thinks that, "The answer may be that in raising Jesus God acknowledged the one who was crucified; or that God endorsed Jesus in spite of his apparent failure; or something similar." Immediately after this, Marxsen rather amazingly adds: "What happened . . . was that God endorsed Jesus as the person that he was: during his earthly lifetime Jesus pronounced the forgiveness of sins to men in the name of God. He demanded that they commit their lives entirely to God. ... I could easily add a whole catalog of other statements."⁵⁸ Though this is from a much older text, Marxsen closes his later volume on the resurrection on a related point, with "Jesus' invitation to faith" declaring that, in some sense, it might be said that Jesus is still present and active in faith, encouraging us to bring reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace to others.⁵⁹

Also more recently, Marcus Borg delineates five areas of New Testament meaning that follow from Jesus' death and resurrection. For instance, what "may well be the earliest interpretation" is that the rejection caused by Jesus' execution gave way to "God's vindication of Jesus" as provided by the resurrection. Another area is Jesus' sacrifice for sin, the literal truth of which Borg rejects, while holding that this picture is still a powerful metaphor of God's grace.⁶⁰

So a number of contemporary scholars realize that multiple truths follow from the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is difficult to avoid a correlation here. When Jesus' actual resurrection is accepted in some sense, related theological doctrines are often accepted more-or-less directly. Conversely, when the historicity of Jesus' resurrection is rejected, the corresponding theological doctrines are often held in less than literal terms.

So where the event of Jesus' resurrection is rejected, one might also expect to discover the rejection of certain theological concepts, too. For instance, one might reject claims regarding Jesus' self-consciousness, or the exclusivity his teachings, if the historical resurrection has also been discarded. On the other hand, if the resurrection actually occurred, and doctrine follows from the event, this would seem to place Jesus' theology

⁵⁸ Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, 125 (Marxsen's emphasis); cf. 169.

⁵⁹ Marxsen, *Jesus and Easter*, 92.

⁶⁰ Borg in Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 137-142.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

on firmer grounds, as well. In keeping with Borg's remark above, perhaps the earliest New Testament witness is that the doctrine relies on the event.

These six developments indicate some of the most recent trends in resurrection research. We will return below to an additional area that is drawn from several of these trends.

A Comparison of Scholars

11

As an example of these recent trends, I will compare briefly the ideas of two seemingly different scholars, John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright. We will contrast some of their views on Jesus' resurrection, following the specific list of topics that we just provided. This will indicate some of their major differences, but perhaps some unexpected similarities, as well. Such will serve as a sample demarcation from the recent theological scene, as well.

Neither Crossan nor Wright espouse naturalistic theories specifically regarding the resurrection appearances.⁶¹ Wright is much more outspoken in his opposition to these alternatives hypotheses, referring to them as "false trails."⁶² Crossan has also recently agreed that the disciples, in some sense, experienced the risen Jesus and that natural substitutes are unconvincing.⁶³ Here we have an indication of the comment above that postulating natural alternatives is a minority option among recent scholars.

Regarding the empty tomb, there is definitely a contrast between these two scholars. Crossan thinks that the empty tomb narrative in Mark's Gospel was created by the author,⁶⁴ although he concedes that Paul may have implied this event.⁶⁵ On the other

⁶¹ While Crossan is well known for his view that Jesus' dead body was probably buried in a common grave (*Jesus*, 152-158), this is actually an alternative burial account. It does not even address the resurrection appearances, since, conceivably, Jesus could have been buried other than in a traditional tomb and still have been raised from the dead.

⁶² N.T. Wright, "Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem," *Sewanee Theological Review*, 41 (1998), 119.

⁶³ In a recent dialogue, Crossan indicated that he does not think that alternative responses are good explanations for the appearances to the disciples. (See Robert Stewart, ed., *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue*.) Still, it could be pointed out that Crossan's comparison of the resurrection appearances to dreams or visions of a departed loved, however normal, still involves the reliance on a natural scenario instead of the New Testament explanation. (John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context," *Neotestamentica*, 37 [2003], 46-47).

⁶⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 185, 209.

⁶⁵ Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 550.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

hand, Wright thinks not only that the empty tomb is historical, but that it provides one of the two major pillars for the historical resurrection appearances.⁶⁶

Both Crossan and Wright agree without reservation that Paul is the best early witness to the resurrection appearances. They both hold that Paul was an eyewitness to what he believed was a resurrection appearance of Jesus. Further, they share the view that Paul recorded an account in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 that he had received decades before writing the letter in which it appears, and that the apostle probably learned it during his early visit to Jerusalem, just a short time after Jesus' death.⁶⁷

Both scholars include comparatively little discussion regarding the other early creedal passages in the New Testament that confirm the pre-Pauline report of the death and resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15, but they do at least acknowledge a few texts. Wright has slightly more to say here, but Crossan does not dispute this data.⁶⁸

Perhaps most surprisingly, both Wright and Crossan embrace the claim that the earliest Christian teachings taught that Jesus appeared in a bodily manner. This is the case for several reasons, such as this being the predominant Jewish view at the time. Most of all, this was the clear meaning of the terms. Wright has argued passionately for over five hundred pages that, for pagans, Jews, and Christians in the ancient Mediterranean world up until the second century AD, the terms *αναστασί* (*anastasis*) and *εγειρω* (*egeiro*) and cognates like *εξαναστασί* (*exanastasis*), almost without exception, indicate a resurrection of the body. Interestingly, when the ancient writers who rejected (and even despised) this doctrine utilized these same terms, they spoke only of a bodily afterlife. When writing about the soul or spirit living after death, pagan authors used different words.⁶⁹ Even Paul clearly held that Jesus' body was raised,⁷⁰ agreeing with the other New Testament authors.⁷¹

On all three occasions when Wright and Crossan have dialogued concerning the resurrection, Crossan has noted his essential agreement with Wright's major thesis regarding the meaning of bodily resurrection.⁷² In fact, Crossan notes that he "was

⁶⁶ See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, especially 321, 686-696, 709-710.

⁶⁷ For these points, see John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), 6-8, 341; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 318-319; 378-384.

⁶⁸ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 453-456; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 364, cf. 293-294; Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 341.

⁶⁹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, xvii-xix, 31, 71, 82-83, 200-206.

⁷⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Chapters 5-8, especially 273, 314, 350-374.

⁷¹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Chapters 9-10, especially 424, 476-479.

⁷² Crossan, "Mode and Meaning in Bodily Resurrection Faith," in *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue*, especially endnote 4.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

already thinking along these same lines.”⁷³ Crossan even agrees with Wright that Paul thought that Jesus’ appearance to him was also bodily in nature. Crossan and Reed explain that, “To take seriously Paul’s claim to have seen the risen Jesus, we suggest that his inaugural vision was of Jesus’ body simultaneously wounded and glorified.” Although the Acts accounts claim that Paul saw a luminous vision, Crossan and Reed decided to “bracket that blinded-by-light sequence and imagine instead a vision in which Paul both sees and hears Jesus as the resurrected Christ, the risen Lord.”⁷⁴ As a result, to take seriously the earliest Christian teachings would, at the very least, address the bodily nature of their claims.

Lastly, both Crossan and Wright readily agree that the resurrection of Jesus in some sense indicates that the truth of Christian belief ought to lead to its theological outworkings, including the radical practice of ethics. As Crossan states, “Tom and I agree on one absolutely vital implication of resurrection faith . . . that God’s transfiguration of this world here below has already started . . .” To be sure, Crossan’s chief emphasis is to proceed to the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection in the world today, contending that we must live out the literal implications of this belief in “peace through justice.” Just as Jesus’ appearances inspired the disciples’ proclamation of God’s victory over sin and the powers of Caesar’s empire, we must “promote God’s Great Clean-Up of the earth” and “take back God’s world from the thugs.”⁷⁵

Wright argues that, for both the New Testament authors like Paul and John, as well as for us today, the facticity of Jesus’ resurrection indicates that Christian theology is true, including doctrines such as the sonship of Jesus and his path of eternal life to those who respond to his message.⁷⁶ The resurrection also requires a radical call to discipleship in a torn world, including responses to the political tyranny of both conservatives as well as liberals, addressing violence, hunger, and even death. As Wright says, “Easter is the beginning of God’s new world. ... But Easter is the time for revolution. ...”⁷⁷

So there is at least general agreement between Crossan and Wright regarding most of the individual topics which we have explored above. There is at least some important overlap in each of the six categories, except for the historicity of the empty tomb. The amount of

⁷³ Crossan, “Mode and Meaning in Bodily Resurrection Faith,” endnote 3. Compare Crossan, “The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context,” especially 37-40, 46-49, 55.

⁷⁴ Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 6-10 (their emphasis). We have already seen above that Lüdemann also holds a similar position to that of Wright, Crossan, and Reed.

⁷⁵ Crossan, “Mode and Meaning in Bodily Resurrection Faith,” see especially the Conclusion and the preceding section, “Caesar or Christ?”

⁷⁶ For examples, see Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 244-245, 355-361, 426, 441-444, 450, 578-583.

⁷⁷ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), Chapter 6. The quotes are from 54-55.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

agreement on some of the issues, like the value of Paul's eyewitness testimony to a resurrection appearance, his report of an early creed that predates him by a couple of decades, as well as his knowledge of the message taught by the Jerusalem apostles, is rather incredible, especially given the different theological stances of these two scholars. The emerging agreement concerning the essential nature of Jesus' bodily resurrection, especially for Paul and the New Testament authors, is a recent twist that would have been rather difficult to predict just a few years ago. And both scholars argue for the believer's literal presence in righting the world's wrongs, because of Jesus' resurrection.

Still, we must not be so caught up in the areas of agreement that we gloss over the very crucial differences. We have noted the disagreements concerning the empty tomb, along with my suggestion that Crossan essentially holds a natural alternative to the resurrection. So, the most glaring difference concerns whether or not Jesus was actually raised from the dead. While Wright clearly holds that this is an historical event of the past, Crossan's position is much more difficult to decipher. Still, in spite of the wide agreement even in some very crucial areas, Crossan has clearly said that he does not think that the resurrection is an historical event.⁷⁸

For Crossan, at a very early date, the resurrection appearances were held by Paul and the disciples to be actual, bodily events. Though he personally rejects that view, Crossan accepts Jesus' resurrection as a metaphor. Perhaps shedding some further light on his position, Crossan has affirmed what appears to be a crucial distinction. He rejects the literal resurrection of Jesus at least partially because he does not believe in an afterlife, so he has no literal category into which the resurrection may be placed.⁷⁹

The Disciples' Belief that they had Seen the Risen Jesus

From considerations such as the research areas above, perhaps the single most crucial development in recent thought has emerged. With few exceptions, the fact that after Jesus' death his followers had experiences that they thought were appearances of the risen Jesus is arguably one of the two or three most recognized events from the four Gospels, along with Jesus' central proclamation of the Kingdom of God and his death by crucifixion. Few critical scholars reject the notion that, after Jesus' death, the early Christians had real experiences of some sort.

⁷⁸ Crossan, "Mode and Meaning," Part I; "Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context," 46-47.

⁷⁹ Personal discussion with Dom Crossan, March 11, 2006, before the dialogue in which we both participated (*The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue*, Fortress). Still, any misconception here remains my mistake.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Reginald Fuller asserts that, “Even the most skeptical historian has to postulate an ‘x’ in order to account for the New Testament data—namely, the empty tomb, Jesus’ appearances, and the transformation of Jesus’ disciples.”⁸⁰ Fuller concludes by pointing out that this kerygma “requires that the historian postulate some other event” that is not the rise of the disciples’ faith, but “the cause of the Easter faith.” What are the candidates for such a historical explanation? The “irreducible historical minimum behind the Easter narratives” is “a well-based claim of certain disciples to have had visions of Jesus after his death as raised from the dead . . .” However it is explained, this stands behind the disciples’ faith and is required in order to explain what happened to them.⁸¹

Fuller elsewhere refers to the disciples’ belief in the resurrection as “one of the indisputable facts of history.” What caused this belief? That the disciples’ had actual experiences, characterized as appearances or visions of the risen Jesus, no matter how they are explained, is “a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree.”⁸²

An overview of contemporary scholarship indicates that Fuller’s conclusions are well-supported. E.P. Sanders initiates his discussion in *The Historical Figure of Jesus* by outlining the broad parameters of recent research. Beginning with a list of the historical data that critics know, he includes a number of “equally secure facts” that “are almost beyond dispute.” One of these is that, after Jesus’ death, “his disciples . . . saw him.”⁸³ In an epilogue, Sanders reaffirms, “That Jesus’ followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.”⁸⁴

After beginning with a list of “a few assorted facts to which most critical scholars subscribe,” Robert Funk mentions that, “The conviction that Jesus was no longer dead but was risen began as a series of visions. . . .”⁸⁵ Later, after listing and arranging all of the resurrection appearances, Funk states that they cannot be harmonized.⁸⁶ But he takes more seriously the early, pre-Pauline confessions like 1 Corinthians 15:3-7.⁸⁷

John Meier lists “the claim by some of his disciples that he had risen from the dead and appeared to them” as one of the “empirically verifiable historical claims.” Paul, in

⁸⁰ Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 2.

⁸¹ Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 169, 181-182.

⁸² Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 142.

⁸³ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 11; cf. 10-13.

⁸⁴ Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, 280.

⁸⁵ Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 32, 40, as well as the entire context here.

⁸⁶ Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 266-267.

⁸⁷ Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 35-39.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

particular, was an eyewitness to such an appearance, and James, the brother of Jesus, appears in the pre-Pauline list of appearances.⁸⁸

James D.G. Dunn asserts: "It is almost impossible to dispute that at the historical roots of Christianity lie some visionary experiences of the first Christians, who understood them as appearances of Jesus, raised by God from the dead." Then Dunn qualifies the situation: "By 'resurrection' they clearly meant that something had happened to Jesus himself. God had raised him, not merely reassured them. He was alive again. ..."⁸⁹

Wright asks how the disciples could have recovered from the shattering experience of Jesus' death and regrouped afterwards, testifying that they had seen the risen Jesus, while being quite willing to face persecution because of this belief. What was the nature of the experience that dictated these developments?⁹⁰

Bart Ehrman explains that, "Historians, of course, have no difficulty whatsoever speaking about the belief in Jesus' resurrection, since this is a matter of public record. For it is a historical fact that some of Jesus' followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution." This early belief in the resurrection is the historical origination of Christianity.⁹¹

As we have mentioned throughout, there are certainly disagreements about the nature of the experiences. But it is still crucial that the nearly unanimous consent⁹² of critical

⁸⁸ John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3, 252; cf. 70, 139, 235, 243, 252.

⁸⁹ Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 75 (Dunn's emphasis).

⁹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 109-111.

⁹¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 231.

⁹² In the study referred to above, virtually every critical scholar recognizes this fact, or something very similar. It is very difficult to find denials of it. This is evident even if we listed just some of the more skeptical researchers who hold this, such as Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 37, 50, 66; Borg, "Thinking about Easter," 15; Crossan, "The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context," 46-47; Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 40, 270-271; Michael Goulder, "The Baseless Fabric of a Vision," in D'Costa, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 48; Rudolf Pesch, "Zur Entstehung des Glaubens an die Auferstehung Jesu: Ein neuer Versuch," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie*, 30 (1983), 87; Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 84; Anton Vögtle in Vögtle and Pesch, *Wie kam es zum Osterglauben?* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1975), 85-98; James M. Robinson, "Jesus from Easter to Valentinus (or to the Apostles' Creed)," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101 (1982), 8, 20; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 3-12; Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, 47, 188; Ehrman, *Jesus*, 227-231; Kent, *The Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth*, 16-17; John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 171-177; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 258-266; Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God became Christianity*, 1986), 91; Hans Werner Bartsch, "Inhalt und Funktion des Urchristlichen Osterglaubens," *New Testament Studies*, 26 (1980), 180, 190-194; Norman Perrin, *The*

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

scholars is that, in some sense, the early followers of Jesus thought that they had seen the risen Jesus.

This conclusion does not rest on the critical consensus itself, but on the reasons for the consensus, such as those pointed out above. A variety of paths converge here, including Paul's eyewitness comments regarding his own experience (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8), the pre-Pauline appearance report in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, probably dating from the 30s, Paul's second Jerusalem meeting with the major apostles to ascertain the nature of the Gospel (Gal. 2:1-10), and Paul's knowledge of the other apostles' teachings about Jesus' appearances (1 Cor. 15:9-15, especially 15:11). Further, the early Acts confessions, the conversion of James, the brother of Jesus, the transformed lives that centered on the resurrection, the later Gospel accounts, and, most scholars would agree, the empty tomb. This case is built entirely on critically-ascertained texts, and confirmed by many critical principles such as eyewitness testimony, early reports, multiple attestation, discontinuity, embarrassment, enemy declarations, and coherence.⁹³

These same data indicate that Jesus' followers reported visual experiences, witnessed by both individuals and groups. It is hardly disputed that this is at least the New Testament claim. The vast majority of scholars agree that these persons certainly thought that they had visual experiences of the risen Jesus. As Helmut Koester maintains, "We are on much firmer ground with respect to the appearances of the risen Jesus and their effect." In addition to Paul, "that Jesus appeared to others (Peter, Mary Magdalene, James) cannot very well be questioned."⁹⁴

The point here is that any plausible explanations must account for the disciples' claims, due to the wide variety of factors that argue convincingly for visual experiences. This is also recognized by critical scholars across a wide theological spectrum. As such, both natural and supernatural explanations for these occurrences must be entertained. Most

Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, 80-83; J.K. Elliott, "The First Easter," *History Today*, 29 (1979), 209-220; Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (N.Y.: Scribner, 1977), 176; Hansjürgen Verweyen, "Die Ostererscheinungen in fundamentaltheologischer Sicht," *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie*, 103 (1981), 429; Alsup, *The Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories of the Gospel Tradition*, 274; John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), 51-53, 173; Michael Martin, *The Case against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 83, 90; G.A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 32, 207; James Keller, "Response to Davis," *Faith and Philosophy*, 7 (1990), 7; Traugott Holtz, "Kenntnis von Jesus und Kenntnis Jesu: Eine Skizze zum Verhältnis zwischen historisch-philologischer Erkenntnis und historisch-theologischem Verständnis," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 104 (1979), especially 10; Merklein, "Die Auferweckung Jesu und die Anfänge der Christologie (Messias bzw. Sohn Gottes und Menschensohn)," 2. For a list of more than fifty recent critical scholars who affirm these experiences as historical events, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 50-51, endnote 165.

⁹³ For details on this consensus, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chap. 1.

⁹⁴ Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, 84.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

studies on the resurrection concentrate on cognate issues, often obstructing a path to this matter. What really happened? I certainly cannot argue the options here, but at least the possibilities have been considerably narrowed.

Conclusion

This study attempts to map out some of the theological landscape in recent and current resurrection studies. Several interesting trends have been noted, taken from these contemporary studies.

Most crucially, current scholarship generally recognizes that Jesus' early followers claimed to have had visual experiences that they at least thought were appearances of their risen Master. Fuller's comment may be recalled that, as "one of the indisputable facts of history," both believers as well as unbelievers can accept "[t]hat these experiences did occur."⁹⁵ Continuing, Wright asks: "How, as historians, are we to describe this event . . . History therefore spotlights the question: what happened?"⁹⁶

We cannot entertain the potential options here regarding what really happened, although we have narrowed the field. But due to the strong support from a variety of factors, these early Christian experiences need to be explained viably. I contend that this is the single most crucial development in recent resurrection studies.

Gary R. Habermas is Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Theology at Liberty University. He has authored several books related to this articles' topic including *The Historical Jesus* and *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (with Antony Flew).

An edited version of this article was published in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3.2 (2005), 135-153.

Copyright ©2005 by Dr. Gary R. Habermas. All rights reserved. Retrieved August 24, 2023.
https://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/J_Study_Historical_Jesus_3-2_2005/J_Study_Historical_Jesus_3-2_2005.htm

⁹⁵ Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 142.

⁹⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 110.