Reading Contemporary Responses to the Resurrection: Metaphorical, Historical, and Naturalistic

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For the contemporary Christian, as it was for the early believer, the Resurrection of Christ is foundational for religious belief. Paul states the centrality of the Resurrection to the Christian faith in 1 Corinthians 15:14-17: “[I]f Christ has not been raised, then empty is our preaching; empty too your faith...and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins.” The doctrine of the Resurrection remains central to Christian faith.

For many centuries, the resurrection was either believed literally or not at all. Beginning with the Enlightenment, however, different sets of questions arose as some were skeptical about the actual possibility of an occurrence of Resurrection; while others, accepting its possibility, questioned whether the Resurrection should be understood as a spiritual or miraculous event. By the nineteenth century, controversy developed over whether there was a historical basis for belief in the Resurrection. Over the last forty years, there has been a revived interest in the historical Jesus along with significant attention directed to the subject of the historical evidence for his Resurrection. One survey reported that since 1975, there have been more than 1400 scholarly publications on the death, burial, and Resurrection of Jesus. This literature provides the basis for this paper, which will examine several trends in contemporary scholarship on the Resurrection. I will begin with an identification of some of the traditional approaches to the subject of the Resurrection which have largely been put aside. This earlier commentary either did not consider the Resurrection a possible event in history, or otherwise dismissed the historical aspects of the Resurrection as largely irrelevant to the matter of Christian faith. I will follow this with a brief survey of the range of contemporary writings on the subject of the Resurrection. A key concern of this paper is to suggest that these contemporary discussions treat the Resurrection in either a metaphorical, historical or naturalistic manner. Finally, I conclude with evaluations of the persuasiveness of and critical reactions to these understandings of the Resurrection.

Traditionalist Approaches: Skeptic vs. Believer

Scholars who have traditionally rejected the possibility of the Resurrection of Christ often have done so on the philosophical ground that the concept of a resurrection from the dead is simply inconsistent with our experience and scientific understanding of the natural world; to put it crudely, the radical skeptic maintains that belief in the Resurrection is absurd. A more nuanced argument has been made by others, including Anthony Flew, who,

in a debate on whether Jesus rose from the dead, argued the impossibility of establishing the occurrence of a miracle, such as the Resurrection, which can serve as the foundation for a system of religion. Flew also argued that evidence drawn from scripture was inadequate to establish the Resurrection of Christ, defined as his rising from the dead in a thoroughly literal and physical way.

A contrasting traditional approach to the Resurrection takes it to be a matter of Christian faith for which neither the critical reading of the Resurrection narratives nor any historical account of this miraculous event has any real significance for the believer. From this point of view, belief in the Resurrection is simply a matter of unconstrained faith in the living Jesus which the believing Christian encounters in his or her life of faith. Richard Niebuhr described this approach as follows: “The only true miracle is inward faith founded on the living personality of Jesus. This living personality of Jesus, however, though existing behind the biblical picture of the Lord, is not dependent on it, and therefore cannot be approached by historical criticism.” This discussion will proceed to consider a spectrum of contemporary thought that goes beyond such an uncritical profession of faith to develop further basis for understanding the reality of Christ’s Resurrection.

Contemporary Writing on the Resurrection

The division among contemporary writers on the Resurrection has taken on a somewhat different character. While for some, resurrection, understood as a rising from the dead, is understood literally as the raising of a physical substance that is objectively and historically verifiable, others understand the Resurrection as an encounter with a primarily spiritual being. As will be set out in this paper, the disciples and others, including St. Paul, who claimed to have encountered the risen Christ, maintained that they experienced some form of the physical presence of Christ, not a purely spiritual being. Those defending the factual reality of the Resurrection thus maintain that either Christ was raised from the dead in physical, bodily form (possibly some transformed physical form), or in a form of spiritual body. These approaches focus on what happened to Jesus, whether he was raised from the dead in either a physical or spiritual form. The contrasting naturalistic approach focuses on what possibly happened to Jesus’ followers, whether they were transformed by visions or hallucinations of Jesus. Such a naturalistic approach can be contrasted to a third way of understanding the meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus. This third way, which involves an acceptance of what the Resurrection stands for and what Jesus taught in his message of love and justice, can be considered as a metaphorical approach to the Resurrection.

Gary Habermas, a scholar who has published extensively on the subject of the Resurrection, has identified six major trends or developments in contemporary scholarship on the Resurrection. (1) There is an increase in naturalistic explanations of the historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus, to a large extent focusing on the internal states of mind of disciples or witnesses, particularly on the possibility of visions or hallucinations. (2) A number of researchers have addressed the subject of the empty tomb with some accepting the historicity of the event, others arguing that it is a likely later fictional claim made to bolster assertions about the Resurrection. (3) For many contemporary scholars, Paul is cited as the most credible witness for the Resurrection of Jesus and his Epistle to the Corinthians is viewed as the strongest evidence for the historicity of the event predating the narra-

6 Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason*, 8. [Emphasis original.]
7 Habermas, “Research,” supra note 2.
tives of the Gospels. (4) Some contemporary scholars maintain that the *Acts of the Apostles* contains the most significant material related to the Resurrection which is embedded in sermons and accounts of witness to the Resurrection. These are thought to be the earliest preaching on the Resurrection and its meaning. (5) Some scholars maintain that after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared in a transformed physical body. This accounts for Jesus’ natural activities, such as eating meals with those to whom he appeared, while explaining his not being constrained by natural obstacles such as locked rooms which would otherwise preclude Jesus’ entry. (6) A significant number of contemporary theologians recognize the Resurrection of Jesus in either physical or spiritual form. They maintain that Jesus’ Resurrection establishes the truth of Christianity and establishes the divinity of Christ. As Christopher Bryan in his recent book, *The Resurrection of the Messiah*, wrote: “Quite clearly, the Risen Jesus is in a different category of life: indeed, he now possesses the life of God....Either he is already exalted to God, in that ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’ has already given to him or else he is in the process of being exalted to God.” Some commentators maintain that the resurrected Jesus appeared in a transformed physical form which explains, for example, his reported ability to enter locked rooms.

Paul Molnar, a professor of theology at St. John’s University in New York, has endorsed a general framework for understanding contemporary scholarship on the Resurrection as involving three competing interpretative approaches: radical, liberal, and traditional. The radical view involves a subjective understanding of the Resurrection as the rise of faith in the disciples. Willi Marxsen represents this position in his observation that the activity of Jesus of Nazareth goes on after his death in the lives of his followers so that the Resurrection stories are imaginative ways of expressing Christian faith: “[A]s long as we are stressing the implications for the present of the sentence ‘Jesus is risen,’ the question of how we should think of the ‘rising’ as having originally taken place is no longer of decisive importance.” It becomes a matter of Jesus being with the apostles after the Resurrection, as he is with us now.

The liberal view, which again is subjective, stresses the actual experience of the early disciples through which the idea of the Resurrection itself is created within the faith of the disciples. For example, there is emphasis on the experience related to the appearance stories which explains faith in the Resurrection. Edward Schillebeeckx reflected this view in his suggestion that the belief of the disciples in the Resurrection of Jesus was the result of “a set of resurrection visions disclosing the continuing activity of Jesus [and from] out of these experiences arises the conviction that Jesus is risen.” From this view, it is the experience of Jesus that is significant.

The traditional view is that the Resurrection was a “real” event in the life of Jesus that gave rise to the faith of the disciples. There is then an objective basis for the subjective experience of the disciples. One should avoid the term “real” since those who take the subjective approach maintain that the visions experienced by the disciples were “real” experiences. Nevertheless, some advocates for the objective historical view of the Resurrection as an actual factual event wish to appropriate the term “real” for their account of the Resurrection. The traditional view draws on Paul’s statement in Corinthians and is exemplified by a statement of Larry Hurtado, a professor of theology at the University of Edinburgh, who has written:

> “The reference...to Jesus’ burial (1 Cor. 15:4) functions to indicate a real death and to assert, thus a real resurrection, not merely a postmortem apparition but a new and momentous eschatological

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event...what Paul is anxious to reaffirm as the tradition is that Jesus has been raised from death to glorious eschatological bodily existence (15: 42-49), and that his resurrection is the unique pattern for, and proof of, the future resurrection of believers.”

The traditional view of the Resurrection is that it gives rise to faith rather than faith giving rise to or incorporating belief in the Resurrection of Christ.

Metaphorical Understanding of the Resurrection

The question arises as to whether the Resurrection is to be taken literally or metaphorically. This difference in understanding gains particular significance when one considers the argument that there is no factual basis for belief in the Resurrection, but that it should be recognized as fiction or parable. This latter view is the subject of writings by John Dominic Crossan, an emeritus professor of religious studies at DePaul University and chairperson of the Historical Jesus section of the Society of Biblical Literature.18

On the one hand, Crossan denies that the Resurrection refers to an actual event in history. He also denies that Jesus was raised from the dead by God to an embodied life. Crossan begins by rejecting the historicity of the empty tomb and postulates that Jesus was probably never properly buried, that the corpse of Jesus was placed in a shallow grave in a space reserved for executed criminals, and that his remains were likely ravished by animals.19 According to Crossan, the Gospel narratives do not provide accurate historical information about the burial of Jesus, but instead reflect “the struggle of Jesus’ followers to make sense of both his death and their continuing experience of empowerment by him.”20 The empty tomb generates little discussion compared to the later encounters with Jesus.

On the other hand, Crossan accepts that the disciples and other witnesses experienced apparitions that Crossan sometimes characterizes as visions. To this extent Crossan draws on a physicalist or naturalistic understanding of the Resurrection to be discussed below. Moreover, while Crossan accepts the possibility of an authentic vision by Paul, these are not necessary elements of Crossan’s metaphorical approach to the Resurrection. Crossan compares the experiences of Resurrection appearances by the disciples, Paul, and others to dreams or visions of a departed loved one.21 Crossan has conceded that what Paul experienced when Jesus appeared to him was experienced as bodily in nature: “To take seriously Paul’s claim to have seen the vision of Jesus, we suggest that his inaugural vision was of Jesus’ body simultaneously wounded and glorified.”22 Thus on Crossan’s account, it should be recognized that the claim of Paul’s witness to the Resurrection was to a vision of a bodily resurrection and, while this was not an actual encounter with the physical body of Christ, neither was it an experience nor vision of a spiritual manifestation of Christ. What matters is what Paul actually believed and Paul believed he had encountered a physical presence, not a spiritual apparition.

While Crossan dismisses the empty tomb, he generally accepts a naturalistic explanation for the belief in the Resurrection as it is based on the visions of the disciples and other witnesses. However, the significance of the

17 Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 170.
Gospel witness for Crossan is not whether the Resurrection is accepted as a historical event, rather the significance of the Resurrection lies in the meaning of the Resurrection as religious metaphor. For Crossan, the meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus matters, not so much for the disciples, but for theologians and believers today as a continuing message of love and justice that should govern human existence.

Crossan asserts that a metaphorical understanding or statement can have a concrete referent such as Jesus in the Emmaus story in Luke 24: 13-32. The discussion of the referent, (e.g. Jesus), may use one mode or type of language that is literal or historical, (e.g., Jesus was a peasant from Nazareth), and another type of language that is symbolic or metaphorical, (e.g. Jesus is the Lamb of God). In the case of the Resurrection, Crossan concedes that some persons may take it to mean a literal arising from the dead. Crossan, however, maintains that the Resurrection did not actually or literally occur but should be understood metaphorically. However, Crossan does accept the Resurrection as a matter of faith, and he claims that its significance is the message that is embedded in belief in the Resurrection.

Ultimately, Crossan maintains that for the believer today it is neither the literalness nor metaphorical nature of the Resurrection that is significant; rather it is the meaning of the Resurrection to the believer. Crossan characterizes this as taking the Resurrection “programmatically.” It is also important to recognize that the literal and metaphorical are not, for Crossan, the same as real and unreal. Crossan dismisses as not important whether the disciples or early Christians viewed the Resurrection as a literal or historical event. He asks: “[H]ow are we sure what percentage of believers took Christian resurrection faith literally and what percentage took it metaphorically. On the other hand we are much more sure what percentage took it programmatically—were, for example, willing to die for it.” Crossan emphasizes the effect of the Resurrection on the lives of early Christians rather than their profession of faith or belief in the Resurrection.

To believe in the Resurrection of Jesus metaphorically is not, for Crossan, a license to give the Resurrection any meaning one wants. Rather, he argues: “[T]o concede historically, theologically, and especially pastorally that while Christians must believe in the resurrection of Jesus, they may do so either literally or metaphorically but that, in either case, the meaning is constrained by what it meant inaugurally for those who first proclaimed it.” For Crossan, this meaning is captured in the teachings of Jesus on justice and love.

**Historical Understanding of the Resurrection**

The historical or realist view of the Resurrection maintains that Jesus was literally raised from the dead in a bodily form, though perhaps in a transformed bodily form; but he was actually, nonetheless, present in space and time. While the discussion in this paper is focused on the publications of contemporary scholars, it is important to note that the views that are being expressed today are by no means new. Over a hundred years ago, James Orr, a professor of theology in the United Free Church College in Glasgow, wrote in support of the historical evidence of the bodily Resurrection of Jesus and its importance to the fundamental beliefs of Christianity.

After considering the accounts in the Gospel narratives and the reported testimony of witnesses to the Resurrection, Orr concluded:

> The resurrection is an evidential fact….The core of the matter is not reached till it is perceived that the resurrection of Jesus is not simply an external seal or evidential appendage to the Christian Gos-

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pel, but enters as a constitutive element into the very essence of that Gospel. Its denial or removal would be the mutilation of the Christian doctrine of Redemption, of which it is an integral part.\textsuperscript{28}

One of the most influential contemporary advocates for a historical understanding of the Resurrection of Jesus is N.T. Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham, who has published \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, a monograph that examines early concepts of “resurrection,” including those in Greco-Roman literature and the Jewish tradition presented in the Old Testament. Wright gives extensive attention to Paul’s writings on the Resurrection of Jesus, as well as the place of the Resurrection in early Christianity, apart from the Pauline texts.\textsuperscript{29} According to Wright’s account, bodily resurrection is a dominant expectation in pre-Christian Jewish sources and the New Testament communicates a hope of new embodiment or new creation in its teaching on the Resurrection.

Wright begins his study of Paul outside the Corinthian texts rather than beginning with the traditional discourses of Corinthians 1 and 2. He says these texts have been used as a basis by other scholars to establish that Paul believed in something other than bodily resurrection (i.e. some form of spiritual resurrection). Nevertheless, for an understanding of early Christian belief about the Resurrection of Jesus, Wright maintains that the letters of Paul are central. With his consideration of Paul’s teaching on resurrection outside the Corinthian letters, Wright maintains that these letters give clear evidence for Paul’s belief in resurrection as a form of physical re-embodiment, not a spiritual resurrection. According to Wright: “resurrection has a concrete referent that is, it means bodies…but it [also] always means transformation, going through the process of death and out into a new kind of life beyond, rather than returning to exactly the same sort of life [one had been living].”\textsuperscript{30} Most importantly, Wright says that Paul was clear that when he spoke about his experience of Jesus’ Resurrection, this could not be reduced to a spiritual experience. Wright sums up Paul’s testimony outside the Corinthian correspondence: “When he [Paul] spoke of Jesus’ resurrection, this was not a coded way for saying that he personally had had a dramatic new spiritual experience, or that he had glimpsed a new pathway of spiritual or psychological development....It was a way of referring to something Paul believed had actually happened.”\textsuperscript{31} The emphasis by Paul is on the Resurrection as experienced as happening, not as believed.

Wright then gives close scrutiny to the scriptural texts of \textit{Corinthians} chapters 1 and 2 with primary focus on 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 5-10. This is Wright’s response to a large body of writing which has maintained that these two passages reflect a shift from a Jewish view of resurrection, which involved a belief in bodily resurrection, to a more Hellenistic or Platonic view, which looked to a spiritual understanding. Rather than a shift in understanding of the nature of resurrection, Wright sees some differences in the passages as reflecting Paul’s awareness that he would die before the coming of the new age or the final judgment. The fact that there would be a time between his death and the final Resurrection led Paul to talk of spiritual existence between the time of one’s death and resurrection. While these passages do not explicitly reference the time between the death of Jesus and his Resurrection, it seems that Paul is saying that after his death, Jesus took on a new body, his incorruptible Easter body.\textsuperscript{32} According to Wright: “Paul probably believes that, at Easter, Jesus’ mortal body was ‘swallowed up by life,’ and a new bodily life in continuity but thus also in discontinuity (immortality instead of mortality) with the previous one.” This understanding of the re-embodiment of Jesus is significant for an understanding of Wright’s later assertion that it was because of Jesus’ transformed physical form that one can explain Jesus’ natural activities, such as eating food, as well as his actions that do not conform to our experience of the natural world, such

\textsuperscript{28} Orr, \textit{The Resurrection of Jesus}, 274.
\textsuperscript{29} Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}.
\textsuperscript{30} Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 273.
\textsuperscript{31} Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 276.
\textsuperscript{32} Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 370-371.
as walking into a locked room. Wright observes that Paul’s experiences with the resurrected Christ correspond with the earlier experiences of the apostles’ encounters with Jesus.\textsuperscript{33}

Wright explains that Paul did sometimes use the concept of resurrection in a metaphorical way “to denote the concrete events of Christian living, especially baptism and holiness.”\textsuperscript{34} But Wright says: “this was not a ‘spiritualization of the idea of resurrection.’”\textsuperscript{35} Rather, Wright concludes: “[Paul] believed he had seen Jesus in person, and that his understanding of who this Jesus was included the firm belief that he possessed a transformed but still physical body.”\textsuperscript{36} Again, for Paul the Resurrection was a matter of experience not belief.

After completing his analysis of Paul’s writings, which Wright maintains provide the earliest written witness to the Resurrection of Jesus, Wright considers the relevant pre-crucifixion material in the New Testament relating to the subject of resurrection. For example in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus predicts not only his death but his resurrection: “Jesus began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”\textsuperscript{37} After his review of various New Testament writings, Wright considers the writings of the early Church Fathers, the Christian Apocrypha, the early apologists, the early Syriac Christian writings, and finally the Nag Hammadi texts including the\textit{Gospel of Thomas}.\textsuperscript{38} These latter texts reflect Gnostic theology that denigrates the body and values the spiritual. Here there was a reinterpretation of Resurrection of Jesus so that it now meant a spiritual resurrection in the present leading to a resurrection of the spirit or soul of the saved in the future.\textsuperscript{39} It is at this point that resurrection is radically redefined as a spirit existence as opposed to a physical re-embodiment.

Following his analysis of such various other Christian texts, Wright examines the Resurrection narratives in the four Gospels. The very portrayal of Jesus as Messiah and Lord presupposes the Resurrection since Jesus’ mere death by crucifixion, which was the fate of other Jewish zealots, would have been insufficient to establish recognition of Jesus as Messiah. The subject of Messiahship in Judaism was strong and others made claims to the title before their deaths, but after their deaths such claims to the title were rejected. Jesus, however, retained the title of “Anointed One” or Messiah. According to Wright, one reason Jesus was called Messiah after his death was because of recognition of his Resurrection. Wright maintains that Jesus’ Resurrection “was a vindication and validation of his Messiahship.”\textsuperscript{40}

Wright claims that the narrative in the Gospels provides a significant basis for claims of historical authenticity. For example, the reliance on women’s testimony to establish the empty tomb serves as a basis for judging their credibility since it is unlikely someone fabricating the story of the Resurrection would have placed women as primary witnesses, because of their denigrated status in the patriarchal society in which the women lived. The reports of the various appearances of the resurrected Jesus with their different language and apparent surface inconsistencies provide a significant basis for judging their credibility since any individual or group of individuals constructing a series of fictional or mythological encounters to support false claims about the resurrection of a central figure would have avoided such variation and inconsistencies. It is the common understanding in our contemporary legal practice that lack of differences in testimony among a group of witnesses increases the likelihood of collusion.

\textsuperscript{33} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 371.
\textsuperscript{34} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 373.
\textsuperscript{35} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 373.
\textsuperscript{36} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 398.
\textsuperscript{37} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 408, quoting Mark 8:31.
\textsuperscript{38} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 334.
\textsuperscript{39} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 538.
\textsuperscript{40} Wright,\textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 583.
Wright has argued “that the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus together constitute a sufficient condition for the rise of early Christian faith as we have studied it—that is to say, if Jesus did rise bodily and was seen not only having left an empty tomb but appearing in the garden and elsewhere, then this would offer a complete explanation of why early Christians not only believed in his Resurrection but told the stories the way they did and modified dramatically the basic Jewish Resurrection belief.” While Wright maintains that his argument does not constitute scientific proof of the Resurrection of Jesus as an historical event, he does maintain that the evidence he provides from scriptural texts constitutes proof in “a somewhat weaker sense, namely, that having examined as many of the alternative explanations as I could find, and having shown them all to be completely inadequate, the one that we are left with, however unlikely, must press itself upon us as being true.” Given the range of explanations for the resurrection, Wright concludes that the experience proclaimed by early Christians was of the physical bodily resurrection of Christ.

Basically, Wright’s argument is that the reason early Christians gave for the development of the Gospel narratives was their conviction that Christ had been raised physically and bodily from the dead. We may ask today whether this conviction is plausible as opposed to being merely fabricated or the product of delusion. Wright has surveyed the alternatives of fabrication (he considers the evidence of the empty tomb and witness testimony as convincing) and delusion (he considers the claim that the appearances of Jesus were visions that gave rise to belief in the Resurrection as not convincing) and finds all of the alternative explanations inadequate or faulty. According to Wright, the combination of the empty tomb along with the narratives of the Resurrection, including the accounts of those who encountered the risen Christ, broaden the evidence for a necessary and sufficient basis for establishing that the bodily resurrection of Jesus occurred as a historical event. Wright maintains that it is valid as a historiographical method to weigh the historical probabilities of elements of narratives of the type contained in the Gospels in order to establish historical truths. Moreover, Wright dismisses the radical distinction between faith and history described earlier. Historical truth is not irrelevant to faith, but can serve as a buttress or support for faith or provide content for faith. Furthermore, Wright maintains that the skeptic is obligated to consider the type of historical evidence presented here, rather than insist as a matter of principle (a matter of faith) that resurrection simply is not possible. Finally, Wright maintains that acceptance of the truth of the Resurrection has theological consequences which lead to an understanding of a transformed world and a radical call to discipleship.

Naturalistic Understanding of the Resurrection

A recurring form of speculation about the Resurrection of Jesus involves an effort to provide a naturalistic understanding of the Resurrection. This involves the establishment of an alternative natural explanation in place of one based on a miracle or supernatural occurrence. To provide a naturalistic theory is to suggest an alternative explanation in place of a divine causation. The contemporary theologian, Gary Habermas, has suggested that:

[A] naturalistic theory is an assertion something like this: ‘Jesus didn’t rise from the dead. What really happened is (fill in the blank).’ Notice that my explanation requires that the notion of Jesus’ resurrection be replaced with a specific variety of natural substitute. The seeming supernatural position of the religious claim is explained in terms of a natural occurrence. Thus, a comment along the lines of a simple denial (‘There’s no way that events like resurrection even take place!’) does not qualify as a naturalistic theory.43

The effort to provide such a naturalistic explanation of the Resurrection has been undertaken by a number of contemporary scholars but it is not a new phenomenon. For example, the English philosopher David Hume argued that natural explanations of miracles are more likely than supernatural ones, and surely the Resurrection of Jesus had such a natural explanation.44

During the nineteenth century, a number of German scholars, while accepting much of the Gospel narrative as historical, provided naturalistic accounts for what they saw as supernatural occurrences. Albert Schweitzer, in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, provides an extensive survey of these efforts.45 For example, a group of naturalists in the 18th century maintained that the body of Jesus, who was not dead, was taken down from the cross, bound tightly with grave clothes and placed in a tomb for three days. According to this speculative account, Jesus recovered sufficient strength to un-wrap the grave clothes, roll back the stone covering the grave, and appear to the disciples in such a way that the disciples believed Jesus had returned from the dead.

Other examples of early naturalistic theory are sometimes viewed by commentators as rooted in the Scriptural narrative itself. This is exemplified by the view of Herman Reimarus who charged that disciples stole the dead body of Jesus.46 Friedrich Schleiermacher was an early proponent of the swoon theory which postulated that Jesus did not die on the cross.47 David Strauss was an early advocate of the hallucination theory that supposed the disciples experienced a false illusion of the physical presence of Jesus.48

An interesting contemporary speculation on the Resurrection of Jesus was published in the *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, entitled, “Resurrection or Resuscitation.” The article was authored by a theologian, Margaret Lloyd Davies, and her husband, a physician, Trevor A. Lloyd Davies.49 The article develops the hypothesis that Jesus lost consciousness, causing the official bystanders to conclude that he was dead. After being taken down from the cross, it is speculated that Jesus was revived and treated. The authors suggest that the flogging of Jesus prior to crucifixion would have resulted in shock with blood pressure and pulse lowered. The Davies observe that Jesus was too weak to carry the cross-piece of his cross to the place of execution. According to the authors, Jesus’ forearms just above the wrist were nailed to the cross-piece and then the cross-piece was inserted into the vertical part of the cross. Jesus’ buttocks rested on a projecting platform and his knees were hoisted sidewise to facilitate the nailing of his ankles between the tibia and the Achilles tendon.

Three hours after the erection of the cross, Jesus gave out a cry. The bystanders were in no doubt that Jesus had died. According to the Lloyd Davies, death from crucifixion usually took place from three to four days from prolonged inability to breathe against the gravitational pulling of the hanging body. The authors note that it is only in the Gospel of John that there is an account of a soldier thrusting a spear into Jesus’ side resulting in an emission of blood and water. The authors observe that an early Church Father, Origen (A.D. 185-254), believed that Jesus was dead when the blood and water were emitted, although even Origen pointed out that corpses usually do not bleed.

From the nineteenth century on, however, there have been efforts to establish the actual cause of Jesus’ death such as a ruptured heart or acute dilation of the stomach as a result of shock, or that the cause was thrombotic

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or arrhythmic in nature, or, possibly, the result of severe exhaustion and hypovolemic shock. In 1948, W.B. Primrose, a senior anesthetist at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary published an article entitled: “A Surgeon Looks at the Crucifixion.”50 Primrose similarly suggested that Jesus did not die on the cross and that somatic activities were maintained at a very low level and that after apparent death, Jesus recovered after being placed in the tomb intended for Joseph of Arimathea.

Margaret and Treavor Lloyd Davies assert that the physical abuse Jesus received as a result of him being flogged and tortured resulted in his inability to carry the cross-piece of his cross as usually would have been the case with a person condemned to be crucified. Jesus collapsed on the cross earlier than usually would be the case because he was in shock. He lost consciousness because of diminished blood supply to the brain. The Lloyd Davies maintain that Jesus’ ashen skin and immobility were mistaken for death, but there is no doubt that the bystanders believed Jesus was dead. The cry of Jesus may have been no more than a loud expiration. The authors surmise that the oxygen supply to the brain remained minimal, but above a critical level, until circulation was restored when Jesus was taken down from the cross. Those who later encountered Jesus would have most certainly encountered Jesus in his bodily form. They would be mistaken, however, to believe that he had actually been resurrected from the dead.

These efforts to provide naturalistic explanations for the Resurrection based on physical evidence and medical speculation involve theories based on external states or conditions. More recent naturalistic explanations have focused on the internal states of mind of those who experienced the risen Christ. These theories are based on psychological speculation focused on hallucinations and visions. The naturalistic understandings of the Resurrection that are based on theories such as the medical speculation just discussed can be characterized as based on a naturalistic objective thesis, while those that are discussed below involving internal states such as visions or hallucinations can be characterized as based on naturalistic subjective theses.51

The naturalistic subjective theses posit that early belief in the Resurrection of Jesus consisted of an internal state of mind in the earliest Christians which led to their conviction that Jesus was alive, even though that was not actually the case. Those supporting this subjective approach generally acknowledge that the disciples firmly believed that the risen Jesus had appeared to them, although their experience was based on hallucinations or subjective visions.52

Gary Habermas reports that, at present, the subjective vision theory provides the most common naturalistic understanding of Jesus’ Resurrection.53 The German theologian Gerd Lüdemann is a strong proponent of the subjective vision theory and has identified such mental processes as involving “stimulus,” “religious intoxication,” and “enthusiasm” as likely producing the visions seen by Peter, as well as those of others including Paul, which resulted in the conviction that Jesus was alive, although nothing had actually happened to the dead Jesus himself.54

There is scientific evidence for the experience of hallucinations of deceased persons and for a positive response to such hallucinations even to the extent of feeling the presence of the deceased person. The British Medical Journal published an article in 1971 entitled, “The Hallucinations of Widowhood,” by W. Dewi Rees.55 The article

was based on interviews of three hundred widows and widowers in Wales. Almost half of the people interviewed had hallucinations or illusions of dead people. The hallucination often lasted many years but were most common during the first ten years of widowhood. The hallucinations were experienced as normal experiences after widowhood providing to these persons helpful and welcomed psychological phenomenal encounters. A similar report of a study of widows in Tokyo, Japan in fact reported that those experiencing such hallucinations felt the presence of their spouse.\(^\text{56}\) While these Japanese reports may be viewed as significant for explaining the experience of apostles and disciples who were closely associated with Jesus, they do not seem to explain the Resurrection experience of Paul who never physically encountered Jesus while he lived.

A contemporary proponent of the naturalistic subjective thesis is James G. Crossley, a professor of Bible, Culture and Politics at the University of Sheffield who has argued the vision theory in opposition to the historical approach of N.T. Wright discussed earlier in this paper.\(^\text{57}\) Crossley maintains that belief in Jesus as Messiah did not require his Resurrection. He rejects the claim about the empty tomb, supported by the reports of appearances, as compelling evidence for the Resurrection since the non-bodily visions of Jesus would have been sufficient to give rise to belief in the empty tomb as well as belief in the Resurrection. Moreover, Crossley maintains that the accounts of witnesses of the risen Jesus in the Gospel narratives of the Resurrection are more likely inventions of the Gospel writers than accounts based on accurate memory.

Crossley’s subjective naturalistic understanding of the resurrection is particularly interesting because it is offered as a direct counter argument to Wright’s claim that he has established historical evidence for the physical resurrection of Jesus. Crossley identified the underlying premise of Wright’s arguments to be the effort of the early Christians to establish the claim that Jesus was the Messiah despite his humiliating and degrading death by crucifixion. Crossley maintains that in fact the early Christians sought to establish their claim that Jesus was the Messiah by a miraculous event and this is the basis of the claim of the Resurrection. Crossley quotes Wright as basing his argument on the early Christian statement that: “[W]e believe that Jesus was and is the Messiah because he was raised bodily from the dead” and that this belief can be explained if the empty tomb tradition was accurate and if the bodily resurrection of Jesus really did take place.\(^\text{58}\)

Crossley concedes that there is good evidence that the early Christians did not invent the Resurrection story from scratch because of the existing Jewish tradition involving belief in resurrection. Moreover, Crossley takes seriously the claim that the appearances of Jesus were thought to be of the bodily transformed Christ, and that Paul understood he had experienced the resurrected Jesus. Nevertheless, Crossley asks: “But does it actually correspond to the acceptability of the bodily Resurrection in the sense of something more than a ‘hallucination?’”\(^\text{59}\) Crossley argues that it was the Jewish background of the disciples, and Jesus’ own claims to being the Messiah, and Jesus’ prophecy to rise after three days following his death which would give rise to visions of Jesus’ Resurrection. Crossley argues: “These very specific cultural assumptions could easily account for the earliest Christians believing Jesus was bodily raised and left an empty tomb.”\(^\text{60}\) According to this view, the early Christians were predisposed to belief in resurrection because of the Jewish Messianic tradition and Jesus’ own prophecies.

Crossley attempts to respond to Wright’s arguments against the view that the appearances of Jesus were mere visions. Wright argues that visions do not normally eat and drink with people. Wright also maintains that even


\(^{58}\) Ibid., 172, citing N.T. Wright, Resurrection of the Son of God, 563, 695, 710.

\(^{59}\) Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 174.

\(^{60}\) Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 175.
ancient people knew the differences between visions and things that happen in the real world. Crossley responds that the reports of Christ eating and being touched involve retelling and are not first person or eyewitness accounts equivalent to Paul’s personal experience in 1 Corinthians 15. As for the ancients knowing the difference between “real” and “vision,” Crossely responds that persons who thought they saw Jesus could interpret their experiences as involving a modified post-Resurrection body engaging in the supposed reported activities.

Crossley directly rejects Wright’s claim that supposed visions of the early disciples would have been insufficient to give rise to the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. According to Crossley: “Once seen and interpreted as a bodily raised figure, there is no reason why they [the visions] could not have proven convincing for the earliest Christians.” For the early Christian, the spiritual presence of Jesus was paramount, and it may have mattered little whether the disciples had a physical encounter or a vision of Jesus.

Next, Crossley addresses the claim that the empty tomb and the failure of anyone to produce the corrupted body of Jesus serves as primary evidence of the Resurrection. Wright asserts that this evidence does not involve visions or hallucinations. Wright himself admits that: “There seems to be a constant sense that ‘appearances’ by themselves have to be backed up with evidence that what was seen as a substantial body such as must have left an empty tomb behind it.” In fact Wright admits that the claim of Resurrection assumes an empty tomb (1 Cor. 15.4: “and that he was buried and that he was risen on the third day” is used to establish that the tomb was empty.) Crossley suggests that ultimately the argument is circular: the empty tomb proves the Resurrection and the Resurrection establishes the existence of an empty tomb.

Crossley maintains there is no evidence, but rather an assumption, that there was an empty tomb. Crossley points out that there are no statements of eyewitness knowledge of the empty tomb since, for example, in the Markan narrative (Mark 16:8) the women at the tomb are told to tell Peter and other disciples about the empty tomb; but acting out of fear, they did not. Crossley suggests that it appears that empty tomb story in Mark’s account was known only to unreliable witnesses who fail to provide genuine eyewitness support for the existence of the empty tomb. Crossley goes on to suggest: “[I]t is certainly not impossible that Mark has invented his empty tomb story to explain what happened after Jesus was buried.” At least, Crossley suggests that “some degree of suspicion is justified when after Mark’s statement that the women said nothing to anyone, Peter is suddenly present at the empty tomb (Lk. 24: 11-12; Jn. 20: 6-8) and the disciples are being told about it by the women (Mt. 28:8-9).”

Crossley concludes that the “claim concerning the empty tomb must be completely rejected.” Yet Crossley admits something must have happened after Jesus’ death to invigorate the disciples and to explain the embracing of Christianity by Jew and Gentile alike. Crossley maintains, however, that: “[T]he evidence hardly demanded anything as spectacularly dramatic as the Resurrection in the sense that it would be an unparalleled event in human history and would leave an empty tomb.” Ultimately, Crossley rejects the very evidence that is used to support Wright’s claim to have established historical proof of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Crossley concludes: “The list of eyewitnesses in 1 Cor. 15:5-8 gives no evidence pointing in the direction of the bodily Resurrection as an historical event, except in the sense of a visionary experience. The earlier empty tomb story we have (Mark

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61 N.T. Wright, Resurrection and the Son of God, supra note 12, 690.
62 Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 176.
63 Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 177.
64 N.T. Wright, Resurrection and the Son of God, supra note 12, 692.
65 N.T. Wright, Resurrection and the Son of God, 317-322.
66 Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 181-182.
67 Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 182.
68 Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 186.
69 Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 186.
16:1-8) suspiciously makes it clear that the only witnesses to the empty tomb told no one.” Crossley can take support from the apparent inconsistency in Mark’s account in which the young man at the tomb instructs the women to go and tell Peter and the other disciples about the empty tomb and the subsequent report that they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid (Mark 16:7-8).

The subjective naturalistic approach to the understanding of the Resurrection maintains that Christianity originated in visionary experience. From this point of view, the origins of Christianity do not arise outside of a human reality (i.e. the subjective psychological experience of the disciples and Paul). Christianity in this view was motivated by the Resurrection of Jesus which was not a divine caused event but a phenomenon that involved the personal psychological experience of such early Christians as Peter and Paul. This suggests that the subjective naturalistic approach to understanding the Resurrection may be inadequate for the believing Christian for whom Jesus is exalted to God. Thus it is relevant to consider the response of N.T. Wright to the alternative metaphorical and naturalistic understandings of the Resurrection.

Critical Reaction to Alternative Contemporary Responses to the Resurrection

While, as a Christian, one may understand the Resurrection either metaphorically or historically, it may, in either case, be possible to grasp the meaning of the Resurrection. So the question arises, what difference is made whether one understands the Resurrection metaphorically or historically? Crossan’s answer is that given many individuals do not accept the historical or factual Resurrection, it is important to have available the metaphorical understanding so that such individuals may share in the meaning of the Resurrection.

According to Crossan: “[I]f all Christians in the world today were perfectly happy with a literal empty tomb and everything literal, a body coming out which you could see, everything like that, I don’t think I’d care enough to raise the issue. It is that I know thousands of Christian for whom the bodily resurrection is equated with the resurrection.” According to Crossan, for these individuals the issue has been reduced to the literal question: “Do you or do you not believe that Jesus came bodily out of the tomb?” and then that means that a camera could have picked up Jesus….If they take resurrection to mean just that, then they say I can’t be a Christian. [But] I think that is awful.” Crossan wants to respond: “I am ready to say that if you are a Christian then you must believe in the resurrection.” Crossan, however, wants to go farther and say to the individual you may either believe in the Resurrection literally or metaphorically; the important thing is to grasp the meaning of the Resurrection.

But N.T. Wright is answering a different question. He wants to know what happened after Jesus died that would cause the early Christians to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and to commit themselves to spreading his teaching. What does historical evidence show about the Resurrection as an historical event? To know whether the Resurrection was a literal occurrence, it is relevant to know what the early Christians thought about the Resurrection. Wright maintains that if the disciples merely had visions of the recently dead Jesus, they were more likely to have said that he was with God, rather than that he was resurrected: “They would have said what Wisdom of Solomon says about the martyrs: the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God.” Without the evidence of the empty tomb and without the witnesses to the appearances of Jesus, it is unlikely that the early

70 Crossley, “Against the Historical Possibility,” 186.
72 Stewart, supra note 41 in The Resurrection of Jesus, 31.
73 Stewart, supra note 41 in The Resurrection of Jesus, 31.
74 Stewart, supra note 41 in The Resurrection of Jesus, 31.
75 Stewart, The Resurrection of Jesus, 36.
Christian would have thought Jesus had risen from the dead. According to Wright: “[I]f you simply have appari-
tions without an empty tomb, they would say, ‘he’s with God,’ he maybe even in some sense is exalted, though
only in the same way as the martyrs are. If you have an empty tomb and something’s happened to the body,
and then if the apparitions actually are not just apparitions, such as one has if somebody you love just died, but
actually involve some extraordinary physical things”76 as the crumbs from the broken bread that the resurrected
Christ had eaten (Luke 24) then there really has been a Resurrection.77

Crossan is not concerned about whether there was a Resurrection event, not even why early Christians might
have believed such an event occurred, he is only concerned about the meaning of the Resurrection. Wright is
concerned not merely with whether one should have a literal historical understanding of the Resurrection, but
whether one should believe in the truth of Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Wright has argued:

If nothing happened to the body of Jesus, I cannot see why any of his explicit or implicit claims should
be regarded as true. What is more, I cannot, as a historian, see why anyone would have continued
to belong to his movement and to regard him as its Messiah. There were several other Messianic or
quasi-Messianic movements within a hundred years either side of Jesus. Routinely, they ended with
the leaders being killed by the authorities, or by a rival group. Some of the movements continued
to exist, where they did, they took a new leader from the same family. (But note: Nobody ever said
that James, the brother of Jesus, was the Messiah.) Such groups did not go around saying that their
Messiah had been raised from the dead. The early Christians did believe that Jesus had been raised
bodily from the dead. What is more, I cannot make sense of the whole picture, historically, or theo-
logically, unless they were telling the truth.78

Wright challenges Crossley’s claim that the Gospel narratives of the Resurrection are likely inventions based on
the visions of Jesus experienced by his disciples after the crucifixion. Crossley’s theory is that the stories of Je-
sus’ Resurrection are not the account of an historical event, but an effort by early Christians to vindicate Jesus’
teachings and their own belief in Jesus as the Messiah.79 Wright maintains Crossley reduces the issue of the sig-
nificance of the Resurrection to a set of beliefs and ideas that needed to be vindicated.

The suggestion is made that in Crossley’s view: “[W]hen the early Christian had visions, they interpreted them
in terms of resurrection because they were first-century Jews and because they were followers of Jesus, whose
‘beliefs’ required vindication.”80 On the contrary, Wright asserts: “[T]he resurrection narratives have several fea-
tures which strongly suggest that they are not simply inventions to support belief reached on other grounds.”81
According to Wright, the portrait of Jesus and the story of his Resurrection is precisely not the sort of thing one
would have expected if some Second Temple Jews had wanted to produce an account of the resurrection of a
recently dead leader.82 For example, Wright maintains that his view of the significance of women as witnesses
lending credibility to the Resurrection narratives is not effectively undermined by Crossley’s assertion that the
role of the women within Jesus’ ministry may have made their testimony more acceptable for the followers of
Jesus, since no such significant role for women in the ministry of Jesus is demonstrated. Wright further argues
that Crossley is mistaken in his assertion that with only a brief statement about the Resurrection in Mark, the

76 Stewart, The Resurrection of Jesus, 37.
77 Stewart, The Resurrection of Jesus, 37-38.
Crossley, “Against the Possibility of the Empty Tomb,” supra note 57, 173.
80 Wright, “Resurrecting Old Arguments,” 218.
81 Wright, “Resurrecting Old Arguments,” 220.
82 Wright, “Resurrecting Old Arguments,” 221.
other evangelists created their own stories of the Resurrection. Wright maintains that all of the evangelist’s accounts go back to an early oral period and were regarded as too significant not to be faithfully rendered.

Wright’s principal challenges to Crossley’s naturalistic subjective understanding of the Resurrection belief as based on visions is that a vision by itself would not generate belief in an empty tomb. Nor would the discovery of an empty tomb by itself generate visions. Ultimately, Wright maintains that the rise and spread of Christianity itself required that one take seriously the strong historical probability of the Resurrection as evidenced by the existence of the empty tomb, and the occurrence of the appearances of the resurrected Christ in a physically transformed body.

In evaluating the three approaches to the understanding of the Resurrection that have been discussed, one can see them as answering the question of whether the significance of the Resurrection lies in its role in the life of the believer or in the life of Jesus. The metaphorical understanding is primarily concerned with the role of Resurrection in the life of the believer as can be seen in Crossan’s emphasis on the meaning of the Resurrection for the believer today.

The naturalistic understanding of the Resurrection does take seriously the life of Jesus; however, by eliminating any miraculous quality to the “Resurrection event,” the Resurrection loses its force in establishing Jesus as Messiah or supporting Jesus’ claim to divinity. The historical approach obviously places great emphasis on the Resurrection as part of the life history of Jesus. Moreover, the significance of the Resurrection to the life of Jesus is found in its centrality to the Christian faith, and hence it is of central importance to the life of the believer.

It should be conceded that no historical judgment will verify the truth claims of the Christian faith. Faith is not based on objective historical facts, and the Resurrection belongs to the life of the faith of believers. The objective of the historical understanding of the Resurrection is not to verify faith on the basis of historical evidence. Rather, the historical understanding of the Resurrection has the objective of establishing the received tradition of the Resurrection as an event in the personal life and destiny of Jesus.

A historical understanding of the Resurrection should not be seen as giving rise to the faith of believers; but it should be seen as part of the life and personal identity of Jesus which is a central feature of the faith of believers. David Fergusson has succinctly stated the connection between a historical understanding of the Resurrection and Christian faith: “[T]o ask whether a belief in the resurrection is grounded in religious experience or in the historical testimony of the Gospels is to pose a fake antithesis. To know the presence of Jesus is also to understand his identity as it is narrated in the story of his life, death and resurrection. A belief in the Gospel story is thus wedded to a sense of Christ’s presence; the shape and content of one’s experience is determined by the nature of the story. Thus the interpretation of the resurrection is linked to wider considerations in Christology.”

We can conclude this paper with the observation of another theologian, Hans Frei: “To know who he is in connection with what took place is to know that he is. This is the climax of the story and its claim. What the accounts are saying, in effect, is that the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his nonresurrection becomes inconceivable.” Likewise, Christianity is inconceivable without the Resurrection.

83 Wright, “Resurrecting Old Arguments,” 222.