

## EASTER: MYTH, HALLUCINATION, OR HISTORY?

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That the Easter faith in the Resurrection of Christ is the core of Christianity can hardly be denied. Whether that conviction is rooted in myth, in hallucination, or in history has often been debated. Some have maintained that the Resurrection of Christ is a myth patterned after the prototypes of dying and rising fertility gods. Others argue that subjective visions of the risen Christ were sufficient to convince the disciples that their leader was not dead. Even those who do not doubt the historicity of Christ's life and death differ as to how the Resurrection may be viewed historically. Let us examine the evidences for these alternatives.

### EASTER AS MYTH

#### A. Dying and Rising Fertility Gods

John H. Randall, emeritus professor of philosophy at Columbia University, has asserted: "Christianity, at the hands of Paul, became a mystical system of redemption, much like the cult of Isis, and the other sacramental or mystery religions of the day" (*Hellenistic Ways of Deliverance and the Making of the Christian Synthesis*, 1970, p. 154). Hugh Schonfield in *Those Incredible Christians* (1968, p. xii) has declared: "The revelations of Frazer in *The Golden Bough* had not got through to the masses.... Christians remained related under the skin to the devotees of Adonis and Osiris, Dionysus and Mithras." **HORUS ATTIS**

The theory that there was a widespread worship of a dying and rising fertility god-Tammuz in Mesopotamia, Adonis in Syria, Attis in Asia Minor, and Osiris in Egypt-was propounded by Sir James Frazer, who gathered a mass of parallels in part IV of his monumental work *The Golden Bough* (1906, reprinted in 1961). This view has been adopted by many who little realize its fragile foundations. The explanation of the Christian Resurrection by such a comparative-religions approach has even been reflected in official Soviet propaganda (cf. Paul de Surgy, editor, *The Resurrection and Modern Biblical Thought*, 1966, pp. 1, 131).

In the 1930s three influential French scholars, M. Goguel, C. Guignebert, and A. Loisy, interpreted Christianity as a syncretistic religion formed under the influence of Hellenistic mystery religions. According to A. Loisy ("The Christian Mystery," *Hibbert Journal*, X [1911-12], 51), Christ was "a saviour-god, after the manner of an Osiris, an Attis, a Mithra.... Like Adonis, Osiris, and Attis he had died a violent death, and like them he had returned to life...."

#### B. Reexamination of the Evidences

A reexamination of the sources used to support the theory of a mythical origin of Christ's resurrection reveals that the evidences are far from satisfactory and that the parallels are too superficial.

In the case of the Mesopotamian Tammuz (Sumerian Dumuzi), his alleged resurrection by the goddess Inanna-Ishtar had been assumed even though the end of both the Sumerian and the Akkadian texts of the myth of "The Descent of Inanna (Ishtar)" had not been preserved. Professor S. N. Kramer in 1960 published a new poem, "The Death of Dumuzi," that proves conclusively that instead of rescuing Dumuzi from the Underworld, Inanna sent him there as her substitute (cf. my article, "Tammuz and the Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXIV [1965], 283-90). A line in a fragmentary and obscure text is the only positive evidence that after being sent to the Underworld Dumuzi may have had his sister take his place for half the year (cf. S. N. Kramer, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 183 [1966], 31).

Tammuz was identified by later writers with the Phoenician Adonis, the beautiful youth beloved of Aphrodite. According to Jerome, Hadrian desecrated the cave in Bethlehem associated with Jesus' birth by consecrating it with a shrine of Tammuz-Adonis. Although his cult spread from Byblos to the GrecoRoman world, the worship of Adonis was never important and was restricted to women. P. Lambrechts has shown that there is no trace of a resurrection in the early texts or pictorial representations of Adonis; the four texts that speak of his resurrection are quite late, dating from the second to the fourth centuries A.D. ("La 'resurrection' d'Adonis," in *Melanges Isidore Levy*, 1955, pp. 207-40). Lambrechts has also shown that Attis, the consort of Cybele, does not appear as a "resurrected" god until after A.D. 150. ("Les Fetes 'phrygiennes' de Cybele et d'Attis," *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome*, XXVII [1952], 141-70).

This leaves us with the figure of Osiris as the only god for whom there is clear and early evidence of a "resurrection." Our most complete version of the myth of his death and dismemberment by Seth and his twofold resuscitation by Isis is to be found in Plutarch, who wrote in the second century A.D. (cf. J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*, 1970). His account seems to accord with statements made in the early Egyptian texts. After the New Kingdom (from 1570 B.C. on) even ordinary men aspired to identification with Osiris as one who had triumphed over death.

But it is a cardinal misconception to equate the Egyptian view of the afterlife with the "resurrection" of Hebrew-Christian traditions. In order to achieve immortality the Egyptian had to fulfill three conditions: (1) His body had to be preserved, hence mummification. (2) Nourishment had to be provided either by the actual offering of daily bread and beer, or by the magical depiction of food on the walls of the tomb. (3) Magical spells had to be interred with the dead-Pyramid Texts in the Old Kingdom, Coffin Texts in the Middle Kingdom, and the Book of the Dead in the New Kingdom. Moreover, the Egyptian did not rise from the dead; separate entities of his personality such as his Ba and his Ka continued to hover about his body.

Nor is Osiris, who is *always* portrayed in a mummified form, an inspiration for the resurrected Christ. As Roland de Vaux has observed:

What is meant of Osiris being "raised to life"? Simply that, thanks to the ministrations of Isis, he is able to lead a life beyond the tomb which is an almost perfect replica of earthly existence. But he will never again come among the living and will reign only over the dead.... This revived god is in reality a "mummy" god [*The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 1971, p. 236].

### C. Inexact Parallels From Late Sources

What should be evident is that past studies of phenomenological comparisons have inexcusably disregarded the dates and the provenience of their sources when they have attempted to provide prototypes for Christianity. Let me give two examples, Mithra and the *taurobolium*.

Mithra was the Persian god whose worship became popular among Roman soldiers (his cult was restricted to men) and was to prove a rival to Christianity in the late Roman Empire. Early Zoroastrian texts, such as the Mithra Yasht, cannot serve as the basis of a mystery of Mithra inasmuch as they present a god who watches over cattle and the sanctity of contracts. Later Mithraic evidence in the west is primarily iconographic; there are no long coherent texts.

Those who seek to adduce Mithra as a prototype of the risen Christ ignore the late date for the expansion of Mithraism to the west (cf. M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, The Secret God*, 1963, p. 76). The only dated Mithraic inscriptions from the pre-Christian period are the texts of Antiochus I of Commagene (69-34 B.C.) in eastern Asia Minor. After that there is one text possibly from the first century A.D., from Cappadocia, one from Phrygia dated to A.D. 77-78, and one from Rome dated to Trajan's reign (A.D. 98-117). All other dated Mithraic inscriptions and monuments belong to the second century (after A.D. 140), the third, and the fourth century A.D. (M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, 1956).

The *taurobolium* was a bloody rite associated with the worship of Mithra and of Attis in which a bull was slaughtered on 'a grating over an initiate in a pit below, drenching him with blood. This has been suggested (e.g., by R. Reitzenstein) as the basis of the Christian's redemption by blood and Paul's imagery in Romans 6 of the believer's death and resurrection. Gunter Wagner in his exhaustive study *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries* (1963) points out how anachronistic such comparisons are:

The *taurobolium* in the Attis cult is first attested in the time of Antoninus Pius for A.D. 160. As far as we can see at present it only became a personal consecration at the beginning of the third century A.D. The idea of a rebirth through the instrumentality of the *taurobolium* only emerges in isolated instances towards the end of the fourth century A.D.; it is not originally associated with this blood-bath [p. 266].

Indeed, there is inscriptional evidence from the fourth century A.D. that, far from influencing Christianity, those who used the *taurobolium* were influenced by Christianity. Bruce Metzger in his important essay "Methodology in the Study of

the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity" (*Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish and Christian* (1968), notes:

Thus, for example, one must doubtless interpret the change in the efficacy attributed to the rite of the *taurobolium*. In competing with Christianity, which promised eternal life to its adherents, the cult of Cybele officially or unofficially raised the efficacy of the blood bath from twenty years to eternity [p. 11].

Another aspect of comparisons between the resurrection of Christ and the mythological mysteries is that the alleged parallels are quite inexact. It is an error, for example, to believe that the initiation into the mysteries of Isis, as described in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, IS comparable to Christianity. For one thing, the hero, Lucius, had to pay a fortune to undergo his initiation. And as Wagner correctly observes: "Isis does not promise the *mystes* immortality, but only that henceforth he shall live under her protection, and that when at length he goes down to the realm of the dead he shall adore her . . ." (op. cit., p. 112).

On the other hand, the followers of Dionysus (Bacchus), the god of wine, did believe in immortality. But they did not hope for a resurrection of the body; nor did they base their faith on the reborn Dionysus of the Orphics, but rather on their experience of drunken ecstasy (cf. M. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age*, 1957).

In any case, the death and resurrection of these various mythological figures, however attested, always typified the annual death and rebirth of vegetation. This significance cannot be attributed to the death and resurrection of Jesus. A. D. Nock sets forth the most striking contrast between pagan and Christian notions of "resurrection" as follows:

In Christianity everything is made to turn on a dated experience of a historical Person; it can be seen from I Cor. XV. 3 that the statement of the story early assumed the form of a statement in a Creed. There is nothing in the parallel cases which points to any attempt to give such a basis of historical evidence to belief (*Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background*, 1964, p. 107).

### EASTER AS HALLUCINATION

The Latin word that is the root of "hallucination" meant "to wander in thought" or "to utter nonsense." The modern concept defines "hallucinations" as "subjective experiences that are consequences of mental processes, sometimes fulfilling a purpose in the individual's mental life" (W. Keup, editors *Origin and Mechanisms of Hallucinations*, 1970, p. v).

David Strauss in his famous *Life of Jesus* (1835) suggested that the recollection of Jesus' teachings in the clear air of Galilee produced among some of the more emotional disciples hallucinations of Jesus appearing to them. In a more positive vein, Theodor Keim in his work on Jesus (1867-72) proposed that the basis of the Easter faith resulted from God-given "telegrams from heaven."

Hallucinations do play a major role in religious cultures, but they are induced either by drugs or by the extreme deprivation of food, drink, and sleep (cf. E. Bourguignon, "Hallucination and Trance: An Anthropologist's Perspective," in Keup, p. 188). These factors were not present in the various appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples.

The details of the varied epiphanies of Christ, which in several cases were to more than one individual and on one occasion to more than 500, are not typical of hallucinations. A visual hallucination is a private event; it is by definition the perception of objects or patterns of light that are not objectively present (*ibid.*, p. 181). The variety of conditions under which Christ appeared also militate against hallucination. The appearances to Mary Magdalene, to Cleopas, to the disciples on the shore of Galilee, to Paul on the road to Damascus, all differ in their circumstances. C. S. Lewis suggests:

And any theory of hallucination breaks down on the fact (and if it is invention it is the oddest invention that ever entered the mind of man) that on three separate occasions this hallucination was not immediately recognized as Jesus (Luke xxiv. 13-31; John xx. 15, xxi. 4) [*Miracles*, 1947, p. 1531.

Hugh Schonfield in *The Passover Plot* (1966) concedes: "We are not dealing in the Gospels with hallucinations, with psychic phenomena or survival in the Spiritualist sense" (p. 159). He further remarks: "What emerges from the records is that various disciples did see somebody, a *real living person*. Their experiences were not subjective" (p. 173).

Finally, what rules out the theory of hallucinations is the fact that the disciples were thoroughly dejected at the death of Christ and were not, despite Christ's predictions, expecting a resurrection of their leader. H. E. W. Turner remarks:

The disciples to whom they [the women] finally report do not believe for joy. There is here no avid clutching at any straw. Something quite unexpected had happened, rather than something longed for having failed to occur [*Jesus, Master and Lord*, 1960, p. 368].

## EASTER AS HISTORY

### A. An Existential Concept?

It has become common in circles that find the supernatural aspects of the Resurrection incredible to place an existential interpretation on the Easter event. According to Bultmann's thinking, "Jesus ist auferstanden ins Kerygma"—Jesus arose in the faith and the preaching of the disciples. For Emil Brunner the Resurrection is not an event that "can be fitted into the succession of historical events"; it is a fact only if it has taken place "for us." Karl Barth is more positive though still ambiguous in affirming that the Resurrection is a real event though inaccessible to historical investigation. Barth denies any connection between the appearances of Christ listed in First Corinthians 15 and the Resurrection, for if these should be brought within the context of history, the Resurrection "must share in its obscurity and error and essential questionableness."

In a conference held at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Professor Samuel Sandmel of Hebrew Union College made the following suggestion to Christians:

I think, if I understand right, the issue about the resurrection which has preoccupied us this afternoon stems from the fact that what was once readily credible is in our environment not credible.... If I were a Christian, I think I would not be dismayed by the idea of resurrection. I think I would [find simple prose] that would say: Here is a message that has to do with man's potential perfection.... I would not let this array of values suffer because one element—in view of the present environment—has to be interpreted allegorically or be divested of its pristine meaning and given a different meaning. The world too badly needs Christianity at its best [D. G. Miller and D. Y. Hadidian, editors, *Jesus and Man's Hope*, 1971, p. 324].

### B. A Historical Question?

It is certainly not to be denied that there must be a personal decision for the Resurrection to be meaningful to us as individuals, and that the Resurrection of Christ transcends ordinary history in its significance. But what is at issue is whether the Resurrection of Christ is rooted in history as an objective event or is simply a creation of the subjective faith of the disciples.

Some demur that to make the Resurrection a question of historical research would be to assume that God's ways are open to our observation. But is not this indeed a distinctive feature of God's revelation as recorded in both the Old and the New Testament? Others object that since historical judgments can never achieve absolute certainty, they should not be the basis of our faith.

To this fallacious argument Peter Carnley replies:

The important thing is that it is not legitimate to argue that faith cannot be based on *any* historical judgments or must be *totally* independent of historical research and autonomous, because *no* historical judgment is *ever* justifiably claimed with certainty [S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton, editors, *Christ, Faith and History*, 1972, p. 189].

That is, historians deal not in certainties but in probabilities, but this does not render historical investigation without value for the question of the Resurrection. In his presidential address to the American Historical Association, Kenneth Scott Latourette concluded with these words:

The historian, be he Christian or non-Christian, may not know whether God will fully triumph within history. He cannot conclusively demonstrate the validity of the Christian understanding of history. Yet he can establish a strong probability for the dependability of its insights ["The Christian Understanding of History," *The American Historical Review* LIV (1949), 276].

As J. C. O'Neill has argued:

It will immediately be clear that in asserting that the resurrection is an historical question I have not been asserting that an historian as historian can establish that Jesus rose from the dead. The historian in this case can only show whether or not

the evidence makes it at all plausible to assert that Jesus rose from the dead [Sykes and Clayton, *op. cit.*, p. 217].

### C. Ancient Concepts of the Afterlife

If the Resurrection of Christ can be investigated as a historical question, one may inquire about the ancient concepts of the afterlife at the time of Jesus and ask whether the Resurrection of Christ was a doctrine that arose from contemporary beliefs.

The ancient Mesopotamians had a pessimistic view of the afterlife, which they conceived as a gloomy, shadowy existence. Gilgamesh sought in vain the secret of immortality. When Ishtar tells the gatekeeper of the Underworld "I will raise up the dead," she utters this as a threat "so that the dead will outnumber the living" - a calamity and not a hope! (cf. S. N. Kramer, "Death and Nether World according to the Sumerian Literary Texts," *Iraq*, XXII [1960]: 59-68; H. W. F. Saggs, "Some Ancient Semitic Conceptions of the Afterlife," *Faith and Thought*, XC [1958], 157-82).

The Egyptians, as noted in our discussion of Osiris above, did have a more optimistic view of their afterlife. But to call the survival of the Ba and Ka, hovering over the mummified body, a "resurrection" is to obscure the essential differences in concepts.

The ancient Greek attitude was an essentially tragic outlook. Epitaphs reflect an almost universal pessimism about life beyond the grave. Achilles in Hades says he would rather be a landless peasant on earth than king of the Underworld. After Homer's time a hope for a blissful existence in the Elysian Fields was held out, but only for heroes (cf. Lewis R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality*, 1921).

In the classical period the immortality of the soul was stressed in opposition to the body, which was described by the Orphics as *soma sema*, "the body a tomb." Plato in *The Phaedo* taught that the body is the chief hindrance to wisdom and truth.

In the Hellenistic age the Greek philosophers varied in their views on immortality but agreed on the undesirability of reviving the body. The Stoics, who were pantheists, believed that souls left the body to ascend to the celestial regions of the moon before being absorbed in the All. A Stoic epitaph reads: "The ashes have my body; the sacred air has borne away my soul" (cf. Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism*, 1922, reprinted 1959, p. 15). Seneca, the Stoic tutor of Nero and Paul's contemporary, spoke of "the detestable habitation of the body, and vain flesh in which the soul is imprisoned."

Epicurus, whose philosophy was based upon the atomistic cosmology of Democritus, taught that at death the atoms of the body simply disintegrated. There was no immortality but instead freedom from the terrors of the Beyond. The Epicurean indifference to the afterlife is reflected in such epitaphs as: *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*, "I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care," and *Es, bibe, lude, veni*, "Eat, drink, play, come hither" -(cf. I Cor. 15:32). It is therefore

not surprising that the Stoics and the Epicureans at the Areopagus in Athens disdainfully dismissed Paul when he began to preach to them the Resurrection (Acts 17:31, 32). According to Robert Grant ("The Resurrection of the Body," *Journal of Religion*, XXVIII [1948], 189): "In educated circles only the soul of man is valued. For those who took this standpoint as axiomatic, fulfillment of the Christian hope was impossible and in any event undesirable."

That the concept of bodily resurrection was just as difficult to accept at the dawn of Christianity as it is for some today-for different reasons, to be sure-is shown by the reaction of pagan critics and of the Gnostics. The raising of a corpse was ridiculed as a shameful act by Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian. Gnostic teachers such as Valentinus taught a Docetic view that the "resurrection" involved only the noncorporeal elements of personality (cf. Malcolm Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginos: A Valentinian Letter on the Resurrection*, 1969).

If the early apostles of the Gospel had altered their teaching of the resurrection to make their message more palatable to their contemporaries, as we are sometimes advised to do, there would have been no historic continuity of Christianity but only shifting patterns battered to and fro by every passing intellectual fashion.

### D. Jewish Concepts of the Resurrection

As is well known, faith in the resurrection of the dead rose but intermittently and gradually in the Hebrew consciousness, culminating in the declaration of Daniel 12:2 (cf. R. Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 1960; G. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism*, 1972). On the basis of Ugaritic lexicography M. Dahood claims that there are more references to the resurrection in the Psalms than we had realized (cf. Elmer B. Smick, "Ugaritic and the Theology of the Psalms," J. B. Payne, editor, *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, 1970, pp. 104-16).

Faith in the resurrection, generally for the righteous alone, is clearly expressed in some of the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphical books such as Second Maccabees, Second Baruch, and Fourth Ezra, but is not mentioned in Jubilees or the Book of Enoch. Philo in his *Legum Allegoria* (JII, 69) holds that the body "is wicked and a plotter against the soul, and is even a corpse and a dead thing."

According to the Pharisaic *Mishnah*, *Sanhedrin* X, 1:

All Israelites have a share in the world to come.... And these are they that have no share in the world to come: he that says there is no resurrection of the dead prescribed in the Law, and [he that says] that the Law is not from Heaven, and an Epicurean.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, rejected the resurrection-a division of views that Paul exploited in his trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:6).

Despite the rash claims of a few writers that the leader of the Qumran community was believed to have risen from the dead (cf. my article, "The Teacher of Righteousness From Qumran and Jesus of Nazareth," *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, X [May 13, 1966], 12-14), it is not at all certain whether the Dead Sea Scrolls

affirm, a faith in the resurrection. John Pryke comments: "The bliss of the elect as described in the Manual is much nearer to the 'immortality of the soul' than to the 'resurrection of the flesh' " ("Eschatology in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in W. F. Albright *et al.*, *The Scrolls and Christianity*, 1969, p. 57). Matthew Black also notes: "It is surprising that no unambiguously clear evidence has so far been produced for any belief by the Qumran sect in the resurrection or in resurrection" ("The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins," *ibid.*, p. 106).

Though there were scattered indications in the Old Testament of a germinating faith in the resurrection and though important segments of Judaism did maintain this conviction, neither in the Old Testament nor in contemporary Jewish tradition was there a belief in the resurrection of the Messiah (cf. P. Grelot, "The Resurrection of Jesus," in P. de Surgy, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, 136). As Merrill Tenney concludes:

The idea was not so essential a part of Jewish theology that it would be read into the phenomena of the life of Jesus or arbitrarily superimposed upon His teachings. His predictions of rising from the dead and His interpretation of the Old Testament were original with Him; they were not the echoes of current theology that He had absorbed and repeated unthinkingly [*The Reality of the Resurrection*, 1963, reprinted 1972, p. 28].

#### E. The Pauline Evidence

No one questions the centrality of Christ's Resurrection in Paul's teaching (cf. D. M. Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology*, 1961). Nor does anyone deny the genuineness of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written but 25 years after the crucifixion of Christ. In First Corinthians 15: 1-8 Paul gives a list of the appearances of the risen Christ to various believers including himself. Moreover, Paul says he received this tradition in a manner that indicates its great antiquity. According to M. Carrez:

Framed by these two words, *gospel* and *kerygma*, we find a text and a tradition whose Aramaic tenor, archaic character, and primitive catechetical form have been recently pointed out by B. Klappert.... The appearance to Peter, confirmed by the allusion to Lk 24,34, and the appearance to James . . . show the Jerusalemite character of this tradition. What should we derive from it? That, in any case, this formulation already existed in an established way six years after the events of the redemptive drama at the latest. and that everything concurs in underlining the great antiquity of this formulation ["The Pauline Hermeneutics of the Resurrection," in F. de Surgy, *op. cit.*, p. 40].

Of crucial significance is the fact that Paul can claim in First Corinthians 15:6 that of the more than 500 disciples to whom Christ appeared at the same time, most (*hoi pleiones*, not just "the greater part" as in the King James Version) were still alive at the time Paul wrote. As William Lillie, head of the Department of Biblical Study at the University of Aberdeen, notes:

What gives a special authority to the list as historical evidence is the reference to most of the five hundred . brethren being still alive. St. Paul says in effect, "If you

do not believe me, you can ask them." Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written within thirty years of the event is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly two thousand years ago ["The Empty Tomb and the Resurrection," in D. E. Nineham *et al. Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament*, 1965, p. 125].

#### F. The Evidence of the Gospels

The canonical Gospels were all written before the end of the first century A.D. at the latest, and Mark may have been written as early as A.D. 50. Although they differ in details, they concur on the basic point: the two factors that together convinced the disciples that Christ had risen were the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Christ on at least ten occasions. As C. H. Dodd has pointed out, the gospel narratives are free from the legendary embellishments of later apocryphal accounts. They simply recount the surprise of the empty tomb and the gradual realization of its significance after encounters with the risen Christ. The apocryphal Gospel of Peter is not content with such artless narratives. It claims that the soldiers on guard beheld:

...three men come out from the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heavens [E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha 1*, 1963, p. 186].

One feature of the Resurrection narratives that indicates they were not late inventions of the Church is the striking fact that the first appearances of the risen Christ were not to the apostles but instead to women. As C. F. D. Moule comments:

Further, it is difficult to explain how a story that grew up late and took shape merely in accord with the supposed demands of apologetic came to be framed in terms almost exclusively of women witnesses, who, as such, were notoriously invalid witnesses according to Jewish principles of evidence [C. F. D. Moule, editor, *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ* 1968, p. 9].

If one rejects the traditional interpretation of the empty tomb as resulting from the Resurrection of Christ, one is obliged to supply a better alternative. Such theories have been often discussed-e.g., Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (1930, reprinted 1963); Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (1965). We may briefly summarize these proposals and the objections to them.

Heinrich Paulus in his *Life of Jesus* (1828) suggested that Jesus was not dead when he was taken from the cross. The coolness of the tomb revived him. After exchanging his grave wrappings for the gardener's clothes, Jesus spoke to his disciples for forty days and then walked into a cloud on a mountain and went off somewhere to die. The implausibility of this reconstruction was recognized by Strauss, who wrote:

It is impossible that one who had just come forth from the grave half dead, who crept about weak and ill, who stood in need of medical treatment . . . , and who at

last succumbed to suffering, could ever have given to the disciples that impression that He was a conqueror over death and the grave . . . [The *Life of Jesus* 1879 1, 412, cited by Wilbur Smith, *The Supernaturalness of Christ*, 1940, p. 208].

A modern variation has been proposed by Schonfield in his celebrated work *The Passover Plot*. Jesus plotted with Joseph of Arimathea, Lazarus, a Judean priest, and an anonymous "young man" to arrange a feigned death on the cross by taking a drug. Schonfield seeks to maintain that neither Jesus nor his accomplices were guilty of any fraud. Yet the mysterious young man is mistaken for the risen Jesus on the four occasions of the "appearances" admitted by Schonfield without ever correcting the misapprehension of the disciples. We are asked to believe that the skeptical disciples were confused by the appearance of this young man into believing that Jesus had arisen, and that they were so transformed by this confusion that they turned Jerusalem upside down with their preaching (cf. my review in the *Gordon Review*, X [1967], 150-60; reprinted in the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, XXI [1969], 27-32).

Kirsopp Lake in *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (1907) emended Mark 16:6 so that it read: "He is not here, behold (pointing to the right tomb) the place where they laid him." His ingenious theory that the women saw an empty tomb but the wrong one hardly explains their amazement and fear. Nor is it plausible in view of the fact that Jesus was buried in the private garden of Joseph of Arimathea, and that the women noted where he was buried (Mark 15:47). J. Jeremias has demonstrated that about fifty tombs were venerated by the Jews before the time of Jesus. In the view of such interest in the tombs of holy men, J. Delorme asks:

In these circumstances, is it possible that the original community of Jerusalem could have been completely uninterested in the tomb where Jesus was laid after his death? . . . Can the existence of this tradition at Jerusalem, centered around a specific place, in a relatively short lapse of time after the events, be explained as a pure legendary creation? Could one show an ordinary tomb as being the tomb of Jesus? Can one question without foundation known persons, the women designated by name and Joseph of Arimathea? ["The Resurrection and Jesus' Tomb: Mark 16, 1-8 in the Gospel Tradition," in P. de Surgy, *op. cit.*, pp. 88, 101].

If the tomb where Jesus was laid was indeed empty, could his body have been stolen away by someone? To assume that the body was stolen one must first of all disregard the story of the guard posted at the sepulchre (Matt. 28:65, 66) . We need then to ask, Who would have stolen the body and why? The Romans had no reason to do so; they had surrendered the body to Joseph of Arimathea. It is illogical to suppose that the Jews stole the body, since they could easily have suppressed the nascent Christian movement and exposed the Christians' claim of Christ's Resurrection by simply producing his body.

Hermann Reimarus, whose works were published posthumously by Gotthold Lessing in the eighteenth century, did suggest that it was the Christians who removed the body and hid it somewhere. But this is psychologically incredible since the disciples would not only be perpetrating a fraud but also be dying for a

deliberate deception. The neatly deposited graveclothes and napkin observed by Peter and John (John 20:7) are evidence against tomb robbery by ordinary thieves, as they would not have taken the time to tidy up the sepulchre.

### G. The Impact of the Resurrection

Not even the most skeptical can deny the historical attestation of the faith of the early Christians in the Resurrection of Christ. This simple fact is of importance if we accept as genuine the numerous predictions of Jesus concerning his death and resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:9, 22,23; 20:18, 19; 26:2; etc.). Charlatans such as Theudas (Josephus, *Antiquities* XX. 5.1), who claimed to have the power to divide the Jordan River, or the Gnostic Menander, who claimed his disciples would remain ageless, were quickly exposed by the failure of their claims. The Qumran community, which has some features in common with the Christian community, did not survive the destruction of its monastery by the Romans in A.D. 68 because the people had no comparable faith to sustain them.

Something earth-shaking must have transformed the despairing disciples. A. M. Ramsey (*The Resurrection of Christ*, 1946) reminds us: "It must not be forgotten that the teaching and ministry of Jesus did not provide the disciples with a Gospel, and led them from puzzle to paradox until the Resurrection gave them a key" (p. 40).

It should be obvious that the early Christians were completely convinced of the Resurrection. If this were not so, they had everything to lose and nothing to gain. By preaching the Resurrection of Christ they further antagonized the Jewish authorities and in effect accused them of slaying the Messiah (Acts 2:23,24, 36; 3:14, 15, 4:10; etc.). As H. C. Cadbury notes:

The effect of the belief in Jesus' resurrection on the early Christian belief in the wider resurrection experience can hardly be overestimated. It was the kind of assurance, contemporary and concrete, that the most ardent though speculative convictions of Pharisees or other non-Christian Jews could not have equaled ["Intimations of Immortality in the Thought of Jesus," in T. T. Ramsey *et al.*, *The Miracles and the Resurrection*, 1964, p. 84].

Professor Lillie concludes:

The followers of a religious group do not preserve traditions of their leaders forsaking their master and behaving in a cowardly and despairing fashion unless these traditions happen to be true. The fact that the Gospel was boldly and successfully preached by these same followers is attested not only by the New Testament record, but by the historical fact of the growth of the Christian Church. It is indeed one of the few New Testament facts for which we have independent evidence outside the Christians' own traditions. The Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* XV. 44) states that "a most mischievous superstition thus checked for the moment (by the crucifixion of Jesus) *again broke out*" [in D. E. Nineham *et al.*, *op. cit.*].

I would argue that only the appearance of the risen Christ can satisfactorily explain how Jesus' skeptical brother James (John 7:5) became a leader in the

early Church (I Cor. 15:7; Acts 15), how despondent Peter became a fearless preacher at Pentecost, and how a fanatical persecutor of Christians became Paul, the greatest missionary of the Gospel.

#### **A CONCLUDING CHALLENGE**

I have tried to show that theories attributing the Resurrection of Christ to the borrowing of mythological themes, to hallucinations, or to alternative explanations of the empty tomb are improbable and are also inadequate to explain the genesis and growth of Christianity. To be sure, the Resurrection of Jesus is unprecedented, but Jesus himself is *sui generis*, unique. As Tenney remarks, "Although the resurrection was without precedent, it was not abnormal for Christ.... He rose from the dead because it was the logical and normal prerogative of the Son of God" (*op. Cit.*, p. 133).

The historical question of the Resurrection of Christ differs from other historical problems in that it poses a challenge to every individual. Christ said (John 11:25): "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." For the Resurrection of Christ to be more than a beautiful Easter story, each person needs to believe in his heart that God has raised Christ from the dead and to confess with his mouth Jesus as Lord.

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