Early Traditions and the Origins of Christianity

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Introduction

I have so far endeavored to sketch a historical argument I have urged that the rise of early Christianity cannot be explained except on the basis upon which the early Christians themselves insist, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth, following his shameful execution, was raised bodily from the dead. It is important to notice that we have reached this point without going through most of the hoops chat have normally been deemed necessary and in which a good deal of the debate, like Winnie-the-Pooh after his visit to Rabbit's house, has got stuck. I have not discussed the emptiness of the tomb, the rumors of angels, the question of the third day, the burial habits of first-century Jews, the charge and counter-charge of propaganda leveled this way and that by the early Christians and the early Jews, and, indeed, by the redaction-critics. Nor do I have time to give these important matters anymore than a brief hearing in this lecture. What I propose to do, instead, is to bring into play the key texts in which belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus (without which the rise of Christianity is historically incomprehensible) attains explicit statement. I shall argue, basically, that the position at which we have arrived on other grounds is indeed supported by the relevant texts. And the first text to be considered is, of course, Paul's.

The Witness of Paul

At this point some will no doubt say, following various popular writers, "Surely Paul, the first writer to mention the resurrection, refers simply to a 'spiritual' body? Does this not mean that, for him, the resurrection was a nonphysical event? And, in any case, wasn't his seeing of Christ on the road to Damascus a pretty clear case of what we would call a 'vision' to be explained in terms of his continuing religious experience? Did not the early church assume, and take it for granted, that this was what was meant by resurrection—until, that is, certain much later gospel traditions were invented, in which the waters were well and truly

muddied by the talk of Jesus cooking breakfast on the shore and eating broiled fish?"

As the beginning of an answer to these questions, we may remind ourselves that Paul is the class example of an early Christian who, as we saw in the last lecture, had woven resurrection so thoroughly into his thinking and practice that if you take it away the whole thing unravels in your hands. We may note, further, that Paul came from a Pharisaic background in which, as one of the strictest kind or Pharisee, he believed passionately in the restoration of Israel and the coming new age in which God would judge the world and rescue his people. Paul of all people knew what resurrection meant within the world of first century Judaism. This is the man we are reading when we turn to 1 Corinthians 15, which as well as being our earliest written testimony to the resurrection, purports to contain and embody testimony that goes back further still, to the very earliest days (1 Cor 15:1-3, 11). Here, if anywhere, we are as near bedrock as we are likely to get.

We may bypass the famous opening of the chapter for a moment, and begin at verse eight. At the conclusion of the list of appearances of the risen Jesus, Paul declares, adding his own contribution to an otherwise pre-Pauline tradition: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." *As to one untimely born*. This is a violent image, invoking the idea of a Cesarean section, in which a baby is ripped from the womb, born before it is ready, blinking in terror at the sudden light, scarcely able to breathe in this new world. There is no doubt something here of autobiography, as Paul remembers what it felt like, blinded by sudden light on the road to Damascus, ripped from the womb of his old certainties, and confronted with the light of a new and deeply unwelcome day. But there is also something else here that, for our purposes, is far more important than autobiography.

On the one hand, by "as to one untimely born," Paul is clearly indicating that what happened to him on the Damascus road was precisely *not* like what had happened to the others who had seen Jesus. The others—including even James, who like Paul himself "had not previously been a believer—belonged to one pattern. He, Paul, belonged to another. His experience was of an order different from theirs. What was more, he only just got in as a witness to the resurrection before the

appearances stopped. On the other hand, when he says that his seeing Jesus happened "last of all," he clearly meant that what happened to him on the Damascus road was also not the same as what one might call the ordinary subsequent Christian experience, of knowing the risen Jesus within the life of the church, of prayer and faith and the sacraments, just as in 1 Corinthians 9:1, Paul authenticates his apostleship by asserting that he had "seen Jesus our Lord"—meaning, quite clearly, that he had "seen Jesus" in a sense in which the Corinthian church had act, so here be draws a line after his own experience. Nothing like it happened again. To put it another way, Paul distinguishes his Damascus road experience both from all previous appearances of the risen Jesus and from the subsequent experiences of the church, his own included. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 15 we cannot, therefore, set up the Damascus road event as a model and assimilate the other resurrection appearances of Jesus to it; nor may we regard Paul's conversion experience of Jesus as being the same sort of phenomenon as his own subsequent Christian experience, however ecstatic, or that of his converts.

1 Corinthians 15:1-7 contains what Paul describes as the very early tradition that was common to all Christians. Paul knew, of course, that at lease some among the Corinthians had contact with Peter, and other apostles had been to Corinth too (1 Cor. 1:12); he therefore was not in a position to pull the wool over anyone's eyes, even had he wanted to do chat. This very early tradition includes the burial of Jesus and therefore, by implication, the empty tomb, so important in first-century discussion, although this clearly was not something Paul fell a need to stress. (The burial of Jesus is conveniently ignored by John Dominic Crossan, who can only suggest darkly that "with regard to the body of Jesus, by Easter Sunday morning, those who cared did not know where it was, and those who knew did not care "1) In the world of a first century Pharisee, to say that someone had been buried and then raised days later was to say that the tomb was empty. To put it another way, for Paul to have said "Jesus was buried and raised, leaving an empty tomb behind him" would have been as much a tautology as it would be for us to say "I walked down the road on my feet."

Perhaps the most important thing about 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 is, however, what Paul and the early tradition that he appears to be quoting

understood the resurrection to mean. It was not a matter of the opening up of a new religious experience. Nor was it a proof of survival, of life after death. It meant that the scriptures had been fulfilled: in other words, that the promised new age had broken in to the midst of the present age, that the kingdom of God had dawned upon a surprised and unready world. The resurrection of Jesus was the decisive eschatological event—not merely in some Bultmannian existentialist sense but in the first-century Jewish sense. "According to the scripture?" did not mean that Paul could find a few biblical texts that predicted this event it he hunted hard enough. It meant that the entire biblical narrative had at last reached its climax, its appointed and God-ordained goal, in these astonishing events.

The resurrection, then, revealed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the one to whom the scriptures pointed. Accompanying this was the immediate sense that in the cross, the climax of the scriptural narrative, Israel's exile had at last been undone; this meant, of course, that Israel's sins had at last been dealt with in the Messiah's death. The Messiah "died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). The repetition of "in accordance with the scriptures" a verse later, this time applied to the resurrection, indicates that this, too, is to be seen as the fulfillment of the scriptural story. In context, and granted an implicitly narratival as well as prophetic leading of the scriptures, this must mean that the resurrection was seen as the beginning of the new age, the great Return, the time of blessing that had at last dawned after the darkness of the present evil age.

We move on rapidly to 1 Corinthians 15:20-26. Here Paul argues, on the basis of Jesus' resurrection, that the coming of the new age is a two-stage affair: the Messiah first and then finally the resurrection of all those who belong to the Messiah. We should note (particularly in view of what I said in the first lecture) that the Messiah is not here understood to be a soul, a spirit, or an angel. He is not in an intermediate state, awaiting a time when he will finally be raised from the dead. He is already risen. He is already, as a bodily human being, exalted into the presence of God. He is already ruling the world, nor simply in some divine capacity but precisely as a human being. Paul emphasizes this by skilfull use of two passages that were enormously important in the early

Christian movement: Psalms 8 and 110. In verse 25 he describes Jesus as having fulfilled the destiny marked out for the Messiah, "for he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (alluding to Psalm 110:1). In verse 27, he describes Jesus as now occupying the role marked out for the whole human race, "for God has put all things in subjection under his feet" (alluding to Psalm 8:7) Jesus, that is, has not been simply translated from an earthly, human existence into a divine one, nor is he now an angelic being or a spirit. He is, according to Paul, the truly human being. Most important, he is the agent of the sovereign rule of the one true God. This is first-century Jewish kingdom-of-God theology, reworked around the death and bodily resurrection of the Messiah.

On this basis, Paul can move in verses 29 to 32 to assert most emphatically the future embodiedness of the Christian dead and the future transformed embodiedness of the Christian living. This, he says, is actually the only explanation for the present practice of the church, both in terms of the strange (to us, though presumably not to the Corinthians) business of baptism for the dead, and in terms of Paul's own apostolic labors: "If with merely human hopes I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (1 Cor. l5:32; cf. 58). The present life of the church, in other words, is not about "soul-making," the attempt to produce or train disembodied beings for a future disembodied life, but it is about working with and for fully human beings who will be reembodied at the last, after the model of the Messiah.

But what sort of a body will this be? We may lump ahead for a moment:

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and thus mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body

put on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled. "Death has been swallowed up m victory." (l Cor. 15:50-54)

Here Paul states clearly and emphatically his belief in a body that is to be changed, not abandoned. The present physicality—in all its transience, its decay, and its subjection to weakness, sickness, and death—is not to go on forever, that is what Paul means by saying "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." The term "flesh" (*sarx*) is seldom if ever for Paul a merely neutral description of physicality; almost always it carries some hint both of the corruptibility and of the rebelliousness of present human existence. What is required for God's future state of affairs is what we might call a "noncorruptible physicality": the dead will be raised "imperishable" and we—that is, those who are left alive until the great day—will be "changed" (1 Cor. 15:52). As the parallel with 2 Corinthians 5 makes clear, Paul envisage the present physical body "putting on" the new body as a new mode of physicality over and above what we presently know. It is not the mere resuscitation of a corpse, coming back into the same mode of physicality it had before, but equally and emphatically it is not disembodiment. And if this is what Paul believes about the resurrection body of Christians, we may assume, since his argument works in both directions, that this was his view of the resurrection of Jesus as well.

In between the passages we have just briefly examined comes the most complex part of the chapter, verses, 35 to 49. Here, Paul speaks of the different kinds of physicality between which there exists both continuity and discontinuity. In verses 36 to 38, he uses the analogy of the seed and she plant: there is both continuity and discontinuity between the one and the other. The oak is, and is not, the same thing as the acorn. Then, in verses 39 to 41, he points out that there are different sorts of physicality appropriate for different kinds of creatures each enjoying its peculiar "glory" (*doxa*). These two points—the analogy of the seed, and the observation that there are different types of physicality—are the basis for the point he then makes in verses 42 to 49; the resurrection body is to the present body somewhat as the plant is to the seed, having a different mode of physicality, differing in its peculiar *doxa*. Mere specifically, the present body is *psychikos* ("natural," KJV), the future resurrection body is *pneumatikos* ("spiritual," KJV).

What does this last distinction mean? A good many people (including at least two well-known bishops) have suggested that Paul here refers to resurrection existence in terms of what we would have to call a "nonphysical" body, in other words, a life beyond the grave that left the grave full, not empty—a view that the NRSV's mistranslation of *psychikos* in verses 44 and 46 as "physical" has doubtless encouraged them to hold. This, as is now regularly argued by a good many commentators, and almost as regularly admitted even by those who think Paul's belief was false, is to allow into the argument a hellenistic worldview that is totally out of place in this most Jewish of chapters. Paul, remember is contrasting the present body, which is a *psychikos*, with the future body, which is a *pneumatikos*. Now, since psyche is regularly translated into English as "soul," we might have assumed, on a strictly hellenistic basis, that Paul would mean that the present body, too, is nonphysical—a "soulish" body! Since that is clearly out of the question, we rightly cake both phrases to refer to an actual physical body, *psychikos* on the one hand—animated by *psychē*, "soul"—and *pneumatikos* on the other—animated by "spirit" (clearly, God's Spirit). Having established his point, Paul in verses 44 to 49 is concerned to counteract the argument of those who were denying the resurrection: presumably they were saying that the "spiritual body" was created first, and then the "soulish body." Paul insists that the order is the other way around; first the present "soulish" body and then the future Spiritual" one. The present body cannot be affirmed forever as it stands, but neither should it be dismissed as irrelevant. It is to be changed, transformed.

Paul, then, writing in the early 50s and claiming to represent what the whole church believed, insists on certain things about the resurrection of Jesus. *One*: It was the moment when the creator God fulfilled his ancient promises to Israel, saving them from "their sins," that is, from their exile. It thus initiated the "last days," at the end of which the victory over death which was begun at Easter would at last be complete. *Two*: It involved the transformation of Jesus' body: it was, that is to say, neither a resuscitation of Jesus' dead body to the same sort of life, nor is it an abandonment of that body to decomposition. *Three*: It involved Jesus' being seen alive in a very limited early period,

after which he was known as present to the church in a different way. *Four*: It was the prototype for the resurrection of all God's people at the end of the last days. *Five*: it was thus the ground not only for the future hope of Christians, but also for their present work.

Let me make again, in the light of this whole discussion, a point I made in the first lecture. 1 Corinthians 15 is a remarkably clear and comprehensive statement, considering it was written within thirty or so years of the crucifixion and contains material a good deal older still. We are once again bound to ask: What could have caused such a thoroughly Jewish rethinking of thoroughly Jewish traditions? What could have caused someone with as sharp a mind as Paul's to retell the story of Jewish eschatological expectation in such a new way, new not in that it has left behind the world of Jewish expectation for Hellenistic philosophical speculation, but in that it claims both that the Jewish hope has been fulfilled and that final fulfillment is still awaited? What could have generated, in particular, Paul's clear view of Jesus' resurrection, articulated here in terms of going through death and on beyond into a new son of existence, and of Jesus' new body as both physical and in a sense as transphysical, possessing new properties but remaining definitely human?

All of this only makes sense when understood firmly and absolutely within the world of Judaism. At the same time nothing in pre-Christian Jewish literature—or post-Christian Jewish literature, for that matter—prepares us for these specific moves. The historian is bound to ask, Why did Paul do it like this? Paul's own answer is simple: Because Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus' body was transformed into the new mode of physicality, and all that had been hazy speculation within Judaism suddenly came into focus and made sense. This was how the scriptures had to be fulfilled, though we had never seen it like that before. We have no reason to suppose that Paul knew any of the gospel material we now possess, and indeed some good reasons to suppose that he did not. At the same time, his hilly developed picture of Jesus' resurrection shares to a remarkable degree the pictures we find in the gospels. It is to these pictures that we now turn.

The Witness of the Gospels

I have concentrated so far on the broad historical argument and on the

earliest written document, namely 1 Corinthians 15:1-9. But as we widen our gaze toward the test of the New Testament and early Christianity, we find Paul's perspective reaffirmed at every turn. He is not dependent on the evangelists, nor they on him. Yet what they both say dovetails so well, even though the story they tell is so strange, that as long as we insist on moving from the larger historical picture to the smaller details, instead of getting bogged down in imponderables (nobody will ever be sure how many women went to the tomb, or how many angels, if any, they met there, and so on), we find every reason for supposing that the basic picture goes back to actual historical memory.
With all this in mind, we turn to the resurrection narratives themselves. Once again, it is vital to look at the overall picture and not to allow the details, important though they are in their place, to stop us seeing the forest for the trees. There are seven main things that I want to say.
First, it is remarkable that the stories are told with virtually no embroidery from the Hebrew Scriptures—remarkable, that is, for two reasons. To begin with, the story the evangelists have told up to this point—of Jesus' triumphal entry, his actions in the Temple, his teaching on the Mount of Olives, the Last Supper, the arrest, the hearings, and the crucifixion—not only provides a steady narrative crescendo in itself, but also includes a crescendo of biblical quotation, allusion, reference, and echo. Even the burial narrative has its biblical resonances. After this, the resurrection narratives convey the naked feeling of a solo flute piping a new melody after the orchestra has fallen silent. Granted that the evangelists felt so free, as our own scholarly traditions have insisted, to develop, expand, explain, theologize, and biblicize their story sources, why did they refuse to do so, here of all places?
The other reason why this lack of embroidery is remarkable is that, as we saw in 1 Corinthians 15:4, from the earliest days of the tradition the resurrection was seen as having taken place precisely "according to the scriptures." How easy it would have been to have one of the angels at the tomb, or one of the disciples, or Jesus himself, give voice to a biblical passage which would do for this story what was done for so many others! How easy for the story to be told in glorious and dignified language of the fulfillment of prophecy! One has only to think of the marvelous passage in 1 Maccabees extolling the reign of Simon

Maccabaeus in high-flown language drawn from various biblical sources:
They tilled their land in peace;
the ground gave its increase,
and the trees of the plains their fruit,
He established peace in the land,
and Israel rejoiced with great joy.
All the people sat under their own vines and fig trees,
and there was none to make them afraid. (1 Macc. 14:8, 11-12)
Matthew, at least, ought to have been capable of outdoing 1 Maccabees, but he does not. Of course, John comments that the two who ran to the tomb "as yet did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (20:9); but even though the rest of John's gospel is replete with biblical allusion and imagery, the last two chapters (56 verses) contain only four biblical allusions, of which only one is of any real significance. Of course, Luke spends a good deal of time telling us that the two on the Emmaus Road had their hearts burning within them while Jesus expounded scripture to them, and that he then opened the minds of all of the disciples to understand the scriptures. There are, as we shall see in the third lecture, possible echoes at one or two points of The Emmaus Road story. But—and this is my point—these Lukan stories, though in themselves consummate works of art, are not works of midrash or exegesis. Even Crossan, who declares that the passion narratives were invented out of whole cloth on the basis of biblical prophecy historical, cannot say anything of the same for the resurrection narratives. First, then, we must note the lack of biblical embroidery or ornamentation in the resurrection stories. For some reason, they are told as though it happened yesterday.
This brings us to the second point I wish to make a point that has often been made but still needs to be kept in mind. The stories are very difficult to classify by the normal canons of form criticism. True (as I have argued elsewhere[2]), those normal canons are themselves in need of some radical revision, but these dense and light stories do not admit of ready classification into a use m the community, at least not on the basis of their form. There are one or two sayings that could suggest pronouncement-stories; there are miracles like the catch of fish. But

there is too little to go on to be able to say with any confidence whether these stories could have circulated independently in the early church and, if so, to what purpose. In particular, they do not share the form of standard Jewish vision-stories, such as one might suppose to have supplied the model had they been merely fictions, projected back oat of a desire to claim that scripture had been fulfilled. On this count, as on the previous one, the stories are remarkable. They are not the sort of thing, quite frankly, that people in that world spoke or wrote about. All attempts to line up the resurrection narratives with other literature have conspicuously failed.

My third point follows closely from this. The portrait of Jesus in the resurrection narratives ought to surprise us in two respects.

First, on the one hand, Jesus is never depicted as a heavenly being, radiant with glory. The brilliant light of the narrative of the transfiguration is absent, making a mockery (as does its form) of those who have tried to see that particular story as a misplaced resurrection-narrative. The sightings of and meetings with Jesus are quite unlike the sort of heavenly visions, or visions of a figure in blinding light or dazzling glory or wreathed in clouds, that one might expect in the Jewish apocalyptic or merkabah traditions. The stories are not, that is to say, attempting to say simply that Jesus had been exalted to a position of either divinity or at least heavenly glory. He appears in the narrative as a human being among human beings. Suppose for a minute that the resurrection stories were invented by a community (or by individual writers) in the middle or late first century, using scriptural precedent as a basis. Which scriptural texts would they use? The one which, in second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, towers above the rest is the following passage from Daniel:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the start forever and ever. (Dan. 12:2-3)

As we saw in the first lecture, this text was picked up by Jesus' contemporary, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, when he predicted chat the righteous would shine forth and run like sparks

through the stubble (3:7). But the gospel narratives of Jesus' resurrection are innocent of all this. Why do they not have Jesus acting like a star?

Second, on the other hand, Jesus is almost routinely depicted as having a human body with properties that are, to say the least, unusual. The same text that tell us Jesus ate broiled fish also tells us that he appeared and disappeared at will, that at one of these appearings close friends did not recognize him, and that in the end he was taken up into heaven (Luke 24:36-52). The funny thing here—and I mean funny amusing, not just funny peculiar—is that so many writers continue to trot out the old idea that Luke was a late first-century writer inventing stories about Jesus' physical body in older to combat Docetism (that is, the idea that Jesus was not really human but only seemed to be). If that was your aim, would you in all honesty tell stories about a physical body that came and went through locked doors and ascended into heaven? This is hardly the work of a writer trying to disprove Docetism by insisting fictitiously on the ordinary human embodiedness of Jesus. Somehow we have to comprehend the fact that the picture of Jesus in the canonical gospels is of one who is embodied as a full human being, but whose body has in some way been transformed, so that it now possesses new and striking, not to say startling, properties.

What conclusion can be drawn from this remarkable portrait of the risen Jesus? I think there are only two options, and I find the first frankly incredible. Either we have to say, as careful historical readers of these texts, that Matthew, Luke, and John (we shall come to Mark presently) have acquired from Paul a theology of resurrected humanity, in which the human body is neither resuscitated nor abandoned but transformed, and they have quite independently invented very different stories that demonstrate this phenomenon but from which all traces of Pauline theology, including scriptural exegesis, have been removed. Or we have to say that they, like Paul, are aware that this new form of humanity has appeared in their midst, and that, whereas he places the phenomenon into its Jewish apocalyptic context, with full technicolor, they tell stories with the puzzled air of someone saying, "I didn't understand it at the time, and I'm not sure I do now, but this is more or less how it was."

I find the latter option enormously more probable. The gospels are, in effect, describing more or less exactly that for which Paul provides the underlying theoretical framework: an event involving neither the resuscitation nor the abandonment of a physical body, but its transformation into a new mode of physicality, that is, an event for which there was no precedent and of which there remains as yet no subsequent example. But they are not dependent on Paul, nor he on them. The probability must be that, whenever the gospels reached their final form, they continued to preserve genuine early oral tradition. That is the conclusion I reach from my third point, the portrait of Jesus in these narratives.

My fourth point is a redaction-critical comment. Redaction-critics have increasingly recognised that the evangelists were, by and large, careful to describe Jesus as they supposed he was in his own day, not simply as though he were a member of their own church. This, of course, has had a tendency to undercut some earlier form-critical work, and none the worse for that. Redaction-criticism has also (sometimes quite unnecessarily) suggested that such historicizing settings are largely fictitious. But in these narratives the question is posed quite sharply. Are these stories such as would enable us to see Matthew or Luke or John saying to their readers, "This is how it will be in our own day"? The answer is obvious. Of course they are not. The accounts are quite clear that the appearances of Jesus were not the sort of thing that went on happening during the continuing existence of the early church. Luke did not suppose that his readers might meet Jesus om the road to Emmaus. John did not imagine that fishermen were still likely to come upon Jesus cooking breakfast by the shore. Matthew's Jesus will be with his people always, but Jesus is not continually to be met on a mountain in Galilee. If someone were to suggest that the stories were actually allegories or parables of what happens spiritually in the church, no doubt the evangelists would agree that they could in some senses be taken that way as well. If you start by supposing that the stories were in some sense based on actual reminiscence, you can easily see how they could come to be used in this extended sense. I suggest, however, that if you try to imagine the journey being made in the opposite direction you will discover that it is impossible. The surprising elements, noted

above, rule it out.

The fifth general point follows from this. I find it totally incredible to suppose as many New Testament scholars would have us believe, that the gospel accounts of the resurrection, especially those in Luke and John, represent a late development in the tradition, in which for the first time people thought it appropriate or even necessary to speak of the risen Jesus in an overtly embodied fashion. The idea that traditions developed in the church from a more hellenistic early period to a more Jewish later period is in any case extremely peculiar and, though widely held this century, ought to be abandoned as historically unwarranted and in any case counterintuitive. If there was likely to be development, the model we find in Josephus, for example, suggests that we should expect a hellenistic spiritualizing of the tradition. It is far and away more likely that a very Jewish perception in very early Christianity gave way, under certain circumstances, to a more hellenistic one toward the end of the century (though this would itself need careful investigation before we signed up to it wholesale). I suggest that, whenever John and Luke reached their final form, the traditions embodied now in their closing chapters go bade to genuine early memories, told and retold, no doubt, are shaped and reshaped by the life of the community that retold them, but with their basic message preserved intact. Perhaps, however, they were not reshaped as much as is sometimes supposed—hence the absence of developed exegetical allusions. Their message makes sense within the world of apocalyptic Judaism, that is, within the world of Jesus and the earliest Christians. Fifth point, then: beware of development hypotheses that place as late as possible what was probably early.

Sixth, a word about the ending of Mark. Did Mark intend to include a resurrection story as such? Let us approach this question by thinking of the rest of the gospel. Mark has introduced us to Jairus's daughter. He has told as that Herod thinks Jesus is John the Baptist, raised from the dead. He has conveyed to us the puzzlement of the disciples when Jesus spoke of the Son of Man rising from the dead. What is more, he has told us three times that Jesus warned the disciples of his coming death and told them that afterward he would be raised to life. Finally, he has emphasized that Jesus told the disciples on the Mount of Olives,

and Caiaphas in the Jewish hearing, that the Son of Man would be vindicated, exalted on the clouds to a position or glory (not returning in the clouds in a second coming, please note). Mark's structure is a lot more sophisticated than his grammar. He has so ordered his gospel that the warnings about suffering come to a great climactic crescendo in his crucifixion narrative. What are we to say about what follows?
I tried for some years to believe that Mark was really a postmodernist who would deliberately leave his gospel with a dark and puzzling ending, but I have for some time now given up the attempt. Grammatically, the gospel could have ended with "for they were afraid" (*ephobounto gar*); structurally, it could not have ended without the story of the risen, vindicated Jesus. I am convinced that Mark's scroll, like so many scrolls in the ancient world, lost its ending, and quite possibly its beginning, at a very early stage. What the ending contained I do not know. Stephen Neill reckoned it must have been pretty similar to the ending of Matthew. I am sure, however, that it told stories not unlike those in Matthew, Luke, and John, though no doubt in Mark's own way: stories about a risen Jesus appearing and disappearing, teaching and commissioning, and finally being seen in that way no more. If so many others within the scholarly world have the right to invent new early Christian texts, why should we not do so as well, just this once?
Seventh, if I have understood aright the strange and unprecedented story that the gospel and Paul tell, in their very different ways, then we arrive not only at the problem of what we call the ascension but also at its solution. The continuity between the body of Jesus on the cross and the body with which be rose means that we have a problem; the transformation, producing both the peculiar stories in the gospels and Paul's theology of going through death and out into a new country beyond, hints at the answer. We would be wrong to assume that the language of heaven and earth, and of clouds veiling the passage between the two, was heard with a naive literalism in the first century. People who use three-decker language by no means necessarily think in three-decker cosmological terms, any more than we who say that the son rises in the east are committed to pre-Copernican astronomy. Often enough in the Bible, heaven is simply God's space, interrelated with our space in ways char are usually opaque. Stories about Jesus'

being exalted to a place within God's space are stories designed to safeguard the bodily resurrection on the one hand and the transformed nature of the body—what Paul calls the "spiritual body"—on the other. We do not, of course, find it easy to come to terms with this latter reality. That problem does not start with the ascension narrative; it is there as soon as we distinguish resurrection both from resuscitation and from disembodiment. If we thought it was easy to talk about this new embodiment, that would just go to show that we had forgotten what we were talking about.

What can we conclude from these seven points about the Easter stories in the canonical gospels? Of course, when stories are told once and once only, in any historical source, proof is impossible. But we have seen that it is equally impossible to explain the origin of Christianity without reference to something very like what I have described happening at Easter. We have seen that Paul presupposes, way behind his own very early reflections, that something like this had happened; and we have seen that the stories themselves, though exceedingly odd, show (despite repeated assertions to the contrary) none of the telltale signs of later "writing up" that would enable us to place them with confidence as the work of second- or third-generation scribes or theologians intent on mythography, whether motivated by piety or politics, it is often pointed out that the stones exhibit something of that confusion and surface inconsistency that we associate with the eyewitness testimonies of those who have seen something remarkable, disturbing, and not easily comprehensible. I wish to suggest, in addition, that all of the evidence now indicates that something very like what the evangelists describe must indeed have taken place. However much they have shaped their stories and changed them this way and that, their basic testimony to the strange bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth must be accepted as the best historical explanation available to us for why the early church ever existed at all, for why it took the shape and told the stories that it did.

A Historical Proposal

I have deliberately built up this argument, step by step, according to what seems to me the surest way of historical reconstruction, proceeding from the large, pictures in toward the smaller details. I

believe I have said enough to show, at the very least that as historians we can in principle talk about the resurrection of Jesus. Although, as with almost all history, our theory will fall short of mathematical proof, we need not retreat shyly, as so many have done, into a private fideistic world at this of all points, or complain that the sources do not give us sufficient access for us to be able to say anything. In terms of the illustration I used in the previous lecture, the pillars are sound and there is a bridge between them, though crossing it will take a certain amount of courage and perhaps even a little of that good Jewish virtue known as *chutzpah*.

Let me add to this historical argument three signposts, not to support the bridge any further but co encourage the fainthearted to attempt the arming. It is often pointed out that the tomb of Jesus was not venerated in the manner of the tombs of the martyrs; it should have been, unless was empty. It is often noted that we have to explain, in very early Christianity, the abandonment of the Sabbath and the emphasis on the first day of the week as the Lord's day. It is not often pointed out that the burial of Jesus was intended as the first part of a two-stage burial; had his body still been in a tomb somewhere, someone would sooner or later have had to collect the bones and put them man ossuary, and the game would have been up. By themselves these points and others like them prove little, but they point in the right direction. Taken together with our larger argument, they are of some small significance.

But what theological results can accrue from this investigation?

A Theological Reflection

In a televised conference titled "Jesus at 2000: The Conversation Continues," broadcast live in America on May 1, 1996, John Dominic Crossan asked, in a puzzled sort of way, what point could there be in Jesus' being actually and bodily raised from the dead. It would, he said, no doubt be very nice for Jesus, but what use would it be fore anyone or anything else? That challenge comes, I think, from one who has been deeply bruised by his own tradition, by its insistence that certain things be believed without question, and by its sometimes facile and unhistorical assumptions about how bits of Christian theology fit together. I can understand someone coming to believe that a miraculous resurrection that seemed designed simply to legitimate Jesus

as a divine being, and thereby to legitimate his followers or their self-appointed rulers as a new hierarchy, leading quite quickly to popes and bishops feasting at table with emperors instead of subverting them with dangerous aphorisms—I can, understand someone coming to believe that this is all folly.[3] But that is not, in fact, what the resurrection is about.

The resurrection, as Paul said in quoting what may be the earliest piece of Christian tradition we possess, is about the fulfillment of the purposes of the one true God for Israel, begun in the biblical narrative and left unfinished, waiting not for more ink to be spilt, nor for more masonry to go up on Mount Zion, but for the coming of the Son of David. It is about Israel, called to be the light of the world, strangely and paradoxically fulfilling that calling. It is about the end of exile, the renewal of the covenant, and the forgiveness of sins. And it is about new creation, as what Israel was called to do for the world, her Messiah has done for her and for the world. It is, therefore, about the ingathering of the nations, by the announcing to them that there is another king, namely Jesus, and that there is another way of being human, the way of "forgiveness." The exile of the human race and of the whole cosmos, not just that of Israel, is undone at Easter. Easter is first and foremost about eschatology.

Only then does Easter imply Christology, though not, even then, in the way normally imagined. Certainly, the resurrection "declared" (as Paul says in what may well be a quotation from yet another piece of early tradition) that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah, "descended from David according to the flesh" (Rom 1:3,4). But, in revealing what the Messiah has achieved, bearing Israel's destiny by himself on behalf of Israel and the world, Easter also draws attention to the enormity of this task to its scriptural background. Easter sheds a light on the cross that the cross, by itself, could never have possessed. Easter and the cross, taken together, declare to the astonishment and perhaps the horror of the church's first theologians that Jesus of Nazareth had done, for Israel and the world, what according to Isaiah only Israel's God, YHWH himself, could do.

1 See John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterraneaen Jewish Peasant (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 394. In the entire xxxiv plus 507 pages that compose this volume, there is only one reference to 1 Corinthians 15:4 (on page 397), and it is not in connection with Crossan's discussions of the death of Jesus.
2 See N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (London: SPCK; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1997), 3-124.
3 There is no more moving (or, one suspects, more deeply felt) passage in Crossan's account of Jesus than that where he comments on Eusebius's description of the bishops feasting with the Emporor Constantine: "The meal and the Kingdom still come together, but now the participants are male bishops and they recline, with the Emporer himself, to be served by others. Maybe, Christianity is an inevitable and absolutely necessary 'betrayal' have to happen so swiftly, succeed so fully, and be enjoyed so thoroughly? Might not a more even dialectic have been maintained between Jesus and Christ in Jesus Christ?" (Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 424