

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ

Lecture 41

Postmortem Appearances and the Origin of the Christian Faith

We are wrapping up our discussion of the postmortem appearances of Jesus. We are discussing what evidence there is that these appearances were bodily and physical appearances. Last time we looked at two indications from the apostle Paul that the resurrection appearances were physical and bodily. First, we saw that Paul's doctrine of the resurrection body is that the resurrection body is indeed a physical body. Therefore, when he says that this entity appeared to people that would mean that they saw a physical, tangible body. Secondly, Paul and indeed all the New Testament make a conceptual distinction between a resurrection appearance of Jesus and a vision of Jesus. The only way that I can make sense of this distinction is that the resurrection appearances were extra-mental. That is to say, they took place in the external world, whereas visions of the exalted Jesus were purely intra-mental. Even if caused by God they were simply in the mind of the beholder. That would again imply that given that these are postmortem appearances of Jesus rather than mere visions that these were physical, bodily appearances.

Now we want to turn to what evidence there exists in the Gospels that these appearances are physical and bodily. Again, two points I think should be made. First, every resurrection appearance related in the Gospels is a physical, bodily appearance. The unanimous testimony of the Gospels in this respect is really pretty impressive. Think about it. If none of the original appearances were physical and bodily then it is very strange that we should have a completely unanimous testimony in the Gospels that all of them were physical with no trace whatsoever of the original non-physical visionary appearances. So thorough a corruption of oral tradition in such a short time while the eyewitnesses were still alive is very unlikely.

Secondly, if all the appearances were originally non-physical visions then one is at a loss to explain the rise of the Gospel accounts. If originally the disciples merely experienced visionary seeings of Jesus then you are at a complete loss to explain the rise of these Gospel appearance narratives for physical, bodily appearances would be foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews since neither of them could accept for different reasons the notion of a physical resurrection from the dead. But both Jews and Gentiles would be quite happy to accept non-physical visions of the deceased.

Some critics have suggested that it might be anti-Docetic motives that prompted the materialization of these originally visionary experiences. The Docetists were early heretics who depreciated the value of the material and so denied the incarnation of Jesus.

They said Jesus merely appeared to have taken on a fleshly body but in fact he really didn't have a body of flesh.

So some critics have said maybe the resurrection appearance stories materialized these visionary experiences as a way of responding to the threat of Docetism. But I think this suggestion has little to commend it.¹ In the first place, Docetism was a later Christian heresy and these appearance traditions antedate Docetism. In fact, Docetism is a response to the physical incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, not the other way around. Moreover, the Docetists didn't, in fact, deny that Jesus appeared in a bodily and physical way. They did not affirm purely visionary resurrection appearances. They denied the incarnation, but once Jesus took on the semblance of human flesh they did not deny that he also appeared bodily alive from the dead. They didn't believe in visions. Finally, the Gospel accounts don't evince the rigor of an anti-Docetic apologetic. One would have to do more to refute the Docetists than to have Jesus merely show his wounds as he does to Thomas and the disciples. Notice it never says that Thomas accepted Jesus' offer to reach forth his hand and touch the wounds or probe his side. Jesus merely shows his wounds to Thomas, and Thomas believes. That is not an anti-Docetic apologetic because that wouldn't refute Docetism merely showing the wounds. So I don't think that the resurrection appearance stories can be attributed to anti-Docetic motives.

To be perfectly candid, the only reason for denying the physical and bodily nature of the postmortem appearances of Jesus is philosophical, not historical. If Jesus did appear physically and bodily then these sorts of appearances would be nature miracles of the most astounding proportions, and that many skeptical critics simply cannot accept. But in that case the problem is not historical; it is philosophical. So you need to retrace your steps and go back and review the arguments for the existence of God. As Peter Slezak remarked in his debate with me, *If God exists and created the entire universe then the odd resurrection would be child's play*. The real question here is whether or not a transcendent creator and designer of the universe exists, and we have seen good evidence for such a being. Most New Testament critics, however, are untrained in philosophy and therefore naive when it comes to issues like arguments for the existence of God or the problem of miracles.

So on the basis of these three lines of evidence I think we can conclude that the fact of Jesus' postmortem appearances to various individuals and groups of people under a variety of circumstances is firmly established historically, and moreover I think it is plausible that these appearances were physical and bodily in nature.

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We have seen evidence to affirm that after his death Jesus in fact appeared alive to various individuals and groups on a variety of occasions and under different circumstances.

We have now looked at the evidence for the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb by a group of his women followers on the Sunday morning after his crucifixion. Moreover, we have seen there is good evidence to believe that after his crucifixion various individuals and groups of people, some of whom are named, experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.

The third fact which any adequate historical hypothesis must account for is the very origin of the Christian faith itself. This fact takes pride of place in N. T. Wright's historical argument for Jesus' resurrection. Indeed Wright's entire book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, an 800-page tome, is probably best understood as the most sophisticated and fullest development of this third point of the overall case.²

In fact, Wright actually argues for the historicity of the empty tomb and the postmortem appearances on the basis of this third point, namely the very origin of the Christian faith. I think this procedure, however, is mistaken because then it makes the empty tomb and the postmortem appearances dependent upon this third point when in fact we have independent evidence (as we have seen and as most critics agree) for the facts of the empty tomb and the postmortem appearances. So it is best to regard these three facts as independently established like three legs of a stool which all lend support to the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Nevertheless Wright's book, I think, does serve to draw attention to the power of this third point: how do you explain the origin of the Christian movement midway through the first century?

Even skeptical New Testament scholars admit that the earliest disciples of Jesus at least believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Indeed they pinned nearly everything on it. To take just one example, their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Jews had no conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a common criminal. Messiah was supposed to be a triumphant figure who would command the respect of Jew and Gentile alike and who would establish the throne of David in Jerusalem from which he would reign. A Messiah who failed to deliver and who was defeated, humiliated, and slain by his enemies is a contradiction in terms. Nowhere do the Jewish texts speak of such a "Messiah." Therefore, as N. T. Wright emphasizes, and I quote,

The crucifixion of Jesus, understood from the point of view of any onlooker, whether sympathetic or not, was bound to have appeared as the complete

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destruction of any messianic pretensions or possibilities he or his followers might have hinted at.”³

It is difficult therefore to overemphasize what a catastrophe the crucifixion was for the disciples. Jesus’ death on the cross spelled the humiliating end for any hopes that they had entertained that he was the promised Messiah. But the belief in the resurrection of Jesus reversed the catastrophe of the cross. Because God had raised Jesus from the dead he was seen to be the Messiah after all. And so in Acts 2:[32], 36 Peter proclaims, *This man God raised again. Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah – this Jesus whom you crucified.* It was on the basis of his resurrection that the disciples could believe that Jesus really was the Messiah after all.

It is no surprise, therefore, that belief in Jesus’ resurrection was universal in the early Christian church. The German scholar Gunther Bornkamm sums it up as follows, and I quote,

The Easter faith of the first disciples . . . was not the peculiar experience of a few enthusiasts or a peculiar theological opinion of a few apostles, who in the course of time had the luck to prevail. No, they were all one in the belief and the confession to the Risen One.⁴

Some critics have tried to avoid this conclusion by maintaining with Rudolf Bultmann that the earliest disciples did not distinguish between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension to heaven. The primitive Christian proclamation, they say, was Jesus’ exaltation to heaven.⁵ God has exalted him to his right hand. Later this became differentiated between his resurrection and his ascension. In effect, the primitive, the original, Christian belief was not in Jesus’ resurrection. Rather, the original Christian belief was simply in Jesus’ exaltation into heaven and therefore there is nothing to be explained beyond their belief that Jesus had been exalted by God to heaven.

N. T. Wright is very critical of Bultmann’s suggestion. I want to read an extended quotation from N. T. Wright in response to Bultmann’s objection. This is what Wright says:

The idea that there was originally no difference for the earliest Christians between resurrection and exaltation/ascension is a twentieth-century fiction, based on a misreading of Paul. Actually, Bultmann’s account is slippery at the crucial point: though he says there was no difference between resurrection and ascension, what

³ N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God, III: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 557-558.

⁴ Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus von Nazareth*, 8th ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968), p. 159.

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he means is *that there was no early belief in 'resurrection' at all*, since . . . the word 'resurrection' and its cognates was not used to denote a non-bodily extension of life in a heavenly realm, however glorious. Plenty of words existed to denote heavenly exaltation; 'resurrection' is never one of them. . . . Bultmann therefore has to postulate – though he has covered up this large move – that at some point halfway through the first century someone who had previously believed that Jesus had simply 'gone to heaven when he died' began to use, to denote this belief, language which had never meant that before and continued not to mean it in either paganism, Judaism or Christianity thereafter, namely, the language of resurrection . . . What is more, Bultmann has to assume that, though this theory about a risen body was a new thing within the already widely diverse Christian church, it took over almost at once, so that all traces of the original view – that Jesus was not raised from the dead, but simply 'went to heaven', albeit in an exalted capacity – have dropped out of historical sight.⁶

Given the date, for example, of the tradition quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, which you will recall goes back to within the first five years after Jesus' crucifixion, Bultmann's hypothesis threatens to collapse into the conspiracy theory of eighteenth-century deists who said that the disciples lied about the resurrection of Jesus which would be, I think, the *reductio ad absurdum* of this view. It is reduction to absurdity. Resurrection, which the evidence shows to be the primitive Christian belief, entails exaltation. Jesus rises glorified from the tomb. So resurrection entails exaltation – and given that Jesus is no longer present among us – therefore it entails ascension into heaven; but a reverse extrapolation, from exaltation to physical resurrection and ascension, does not follow from the concept of exaltation.

While it is easy to see how a primitive belief in Jesus' resurrection would lead to his exaltation to heaven, it doesn't make any sense at all to say that the original primitive belief was exaltation and that this later somehow became distorted into belief in his resurrection, a hypothesis that the early date of the traditions in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 will not permit in any case.

So the origin of Christianity thus hinges upon the belief of the earliest disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead. But then the question arises: how does one explain the origin of that belief?⁷ As R. H. Fuller has said, even the most skeptical critic must posit some mysterious X to get the movement going.⁸ But what was that X?

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God, III: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 625-626.

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⁸ R. H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 2.

START DISCUSSION

Student: The anti-missionary rabbi Michael Skobac said it wasn't their belief in the resurrection that created their devotion to Jesus. It was the other way around. It was their incredible devotion to Jesus that led to their belief that he was resurrected. He is saying let the dead bury their own dead. He says follow him without question. They were so devoted to him, so after he died they wanted to continue the movement so any piece of evidence would convince them. If someone else stole the body from the tomb they would say, *OK, he rose from the dead.*

Dr. Craig: This is not a deny of the fact that the origin of the Christian faith owes itself to the belief of these earliest disciples that God raised Jesus from the dead. It is an attempt to explain that fact. Right? They came to believe in this because of their fervent faith in Jesus that led them then to believe he was raised from the dead. That is to be considered later on. Remember the structure of our case. First you establish the facts to be explained, and then the second stage is to ask what is the best explanation of those facts. What you just said is getting ahead to the second stage. It doesn't deny the fact to be explained, namely that Christianity owes its origin to the belief of these first disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead. It tries to provide a psychological explanation of that.

Just by way of preview, let me say I think what I've already said shows why this view is no longer accepted by the majority of New Testament scholars today. This used to be the view back in the 30s and 40s – the heyday of Bultmann. Instead what the scholars have come to realize is that given first century beliefs about the Messiah and what Messiah was supposed to be like the crucifixion would have annihilated any hopes that Jesus was the Messiah. It would have annihilated the faith that the disciples had in him. So their belief in his resurrection can't be explained as a result of their fervent faith in him. It is quite the opposite. It is because they came to believe that he was raised from the dead that they then could put their faith in him. This scenario gets the cart before the horse. It is precisely the reverse situation. You cannot explain their belief in the resurrection on the basis of their fervent faith because that fervent faith would have been completely undermined by the fact of his crucifixion.

Student: Do you think that Peter, James, John, and all the other apostles, the earliest disciples, after Christ's death on the cross do you think that they were of the mindset that, *Oh well, I guess we were wrong. He must not have been the Messiah after all.* Until the resurrection happened, which then convinced them that he was?

Dr. Craig: I think they would have been thrown into deep depression and doubt as a result. I am not suggesting that they came to renounce Jesus or anything of that sort, but I do think that they would have been thrown into deep despair, depression, and doubt about everything that had happened. They had left their families, their livelihoods, to follow

this man because they thought he was the Messiah, and here he got crucified by the Gentiles. This is just the opposite of what the Messiah was supposed to be like. So they would have been in deep doubt I think at this point.

Student: I think if the disciples perhaps had known their Bible a little bit better they wouldn't have been so depressed.⁹ The majority of messianic prophecies are indeed of a triumphant Messiah, but there is a very important minority of them which present a suffering Messiah and leads to salvation. The two most famous probably are the well-known Isaiah 53 which says *by his stripes we are healed* and the suffering that he had. I don't think anybody would much doubt that that was messianic.

Dr. Craig: That is where I would disagree with you. I think that that would not have been regarded as messianic. The person who is described in Isaiah 53 is the servant of the Lord. He is the righteous servant of the Lord who then bears substitutionally the punishment for Israel's sins. These kinds of passages, I think, when viewed in retrospect would be seen as pregnant with significance. Just as you say, they would see Joseph of Arimathea in the passage when it says, *They made his grave with the rich*. They would see his resurrection when it says, *He will prolong his days*. But you have got to put yourself in the shoes of a first century Jew without any knowledge of Christian history. You can't look at these passages in the rear view mirror of Christian history. You have got to look at them as first century Jews would have. There isn't any evidence that this was interpreted messianically. Remember we talked about this before when you shared with me some rabbinic interpretations, and those were all post-Christian.

Student: I think we'll just have to agree to disagree on that, because when it says he was cut off from the land of the living, I mean, let's face it. Here's another one and that is Daniel 9:27 which I think is the most remarkable prophecy in the Bible – Daniel's seventy sevens. In 9:27 he says, *This anointed one will appear and will be cut off and have nothing*. That was in 530 BC, and there I don't think there is any question there the anointed one is the Messiah. And he is going to be cut off and have nothing. What does that mean? Now, I will admit they were a minority of prophecies, and we can cut the rabbis a little slack for saying, *Wait a minute, this man was killed, so maybe he is not*. But I think Jesus himself was put out with the rabbis and the teachers of the law of his day because he thought that they should have known that based on these prophecies. He said, *You can prophesy the weather by certain signs but you can't read the signs of the times*. I think in that case he may well have been . . .

Dr. Craig: Certainly Jesus did think that his suffering and messianic status was attested in these Old Testament prophecies, but the very fact that the Jewish scribes who are experts in these matters didn't see it, again, suggests that this is rather obscure. It could

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be seen in retrospect, right. But to see those passages in a prospective view would be much more difficult. I think we need to give these disciples some slack here in their fear and doubt and so forth.

Student: We have studied the Bible for the purpose of following Christ and identify with him. This resurrection knowledge at its best leads all the disciples to being willing to be martyred. Then that is the end of our following, and I don't understand . . .

Dr. Craig: That's the end of what?

Student: The following – to be willing to be martyred. From then on, I don't understand how to apply this resurrection understanding in our application of faith following.

Dr. Craig: I am not sure I understand the question. But in my book, *The Son Rises*, which is about the historical evidence for the resurrection, I have a closing chapter that is on the question: what does the resurrection mean today for us? I draw out about seven implications of this that I think are highly significant such as it ratifies the work of the cross. It tells us that Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice for our sins was accepted by God, and therefore we are redeemed.¹⁰ It gives us hope of eternal life. It tells us that the grave is not the end, but that we shall live forever. Therefore our work for the Lord and our lives in relationships in this life are meaningful and of eternal value. It holds promise for complete physical and psychological healing from diseases to infirmities and birth defects and all the horrible shortcomings that we bear in this life to psychological inferiority complexes and other mental illnesses. All of these will be done away with by the resurrection when we will have glorious resurrection bodies and be utterly free from sin. Those are just some of the applications of the fact of the resurrection. It is a doctrine which is just pregnant with theological significance and hope, I believe, for us. But at this time we are just looking at the dry facts, so to speak. We want to make sure that this hope is not pie in the sky, but that rather this is a hope that is firmly grounded in the facts of history. So that is why we are spending this time on this very historical analysis of the resurrection.

Student: To augment the other question, Gamaliel, when the apostles were being examined, he referenced false Messiahs, so there had to be some background of anticipation somewhere. He said, *Let this play out. If it is not from God they will vanish like the others, but if it is you are fighting against God.*

Dr. Craig: Right. He was speaking there of the disciples' proclamation in Jerusalem that God had raised him from the dead and therefore made him both Lord and Messiah. Gamaliel says if this isn't from God it will peter out, but you don't want to be found opposing God.

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END DISCUSSION¹¹

¹¹ Total Running Time: 33:10 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)