

## § 7. Doctrine of Christ

### Lecture 43

#### Mythological Hypothesis and the Origin of the Disciple's Faith

We are in the process of examining competing hypotheses to explain the facts of Jesus' empty tomb, his postmortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' faith. Up to this point, all of the hypotheses that we've examined are defunct hypotheses. That is to say, they are not defended by modern scholars. But today we come to an alternative hypothesis to the resurrection hypothesis which is currently defended by some scholars, and that is the myth or legend hypothesis.

You will remember that David Strauss effectively buried the old conspiracy hypothesis and the apparent death hypothesis in his book on the *Life of Jesus* in 1835. Strauss correctly saw that neither the conspiracy theory of Reimarus nor the apparent death theory of Heinrich Paulus was a plausible explanation of the facts of the case. Therefore, Strauss sought a third alternative in the mythological explanation. According to this theory the miraculous events of the Gospels never happened. Rather, the Gospel accounts of them are the result of a long process of the accumulation of legend and religious imagination. This is what Strauss wrote:

In the view of the church, Jesus was miraculously revived; according to the deistic view of Reimarus, his corpse was stolen by the disciples; in the rationalistic view, he only appeared to be dead and revived; according to our view the imagination of his followers aroused in their deepest spirit, presented their Master revived, for they could not possibly think of him as dead. What for a long time was valid as an external fact, first miraculous, then deceptive, finally simply natural, is hereby reduced completely to the state of mind and made into an inner event.<sup>1</sup>

Strauss thus denied that there was any external fact to be explained. The Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus were unreliable legends which have been overlaid by myth.

Strauss' hypothesis is, in effect, a denial of the fact of the empty tomb. It is an appeal to the hallucination hypothesis to explain the postmortem appearances. Finally, it is an appeal to myth and legend in order to explain the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection.

We've already come to see how contemporary scholarship disagrees with Strauss concerning the historicity of the empty tomb. The empty tomb is today widely recognized as a fact belonging to the historical Jesus. We will say something later about the hallucination hypothesis as an explanation of the postmortem appearances. So let's hold

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<sup>1</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, "Hermann Samuel Reimarus and His 'Apology,'" in *Fragments*, pp. 280-1.

off on that until we come to that hypothesis. For now, what I would like to focus on is Strauss' attempt to explain the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection.

Contrary to Strauss, contemporary scholars have come to the conclusion that Jesus' resurrection was not, in fact, a later development but rather was the belief of the earliest disciples themselves. The belief that Jesus was risen from the dead is the primitive belief of the earliest Christian disciples, not a later product of religious imagination or legend. You will remember the conclusion by R. H. Fuller that I quoted a couple of lessons ago when he says that even the most skeptical critic has to posit some mysterious X to get the movement going.<sup>2</sup> If you deny that Jesus' resurrection was itself that X then you've got to hold that the disciples came sincerely to believe in Jesus' resurrection either because of the influence of Christian theology upon them, or the influence of pagan religions, or the influence of Jewish religious beliefs. Let's examine each of those alternatives.

First, obviously the earliest disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection cannot be due to Christian influences for the simple reason that there wasn't any Christianity yet. Because the belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead lay at the very foundation of the early Christian movement it cannot be explained as the later product and retrojection of that movement. Without this belief, the movement would never have come into being in the first place.

What about pagan influences? Can the belief in Jesus' resurrection on the part of the earliest disciples be explained as the result of the influence of pagan mythology upon them? Back around the turn of the 19th to the 20th centuries scholars in comparative religion ransacked the literature of ancient mythology in an attempt to find parallels to Christian beliefs in pagan religions including parallels to the belief in Jesus' resurrection. Some even sought to show that these Christian beliefs are the result of these pagan influences.

This movement, however, soon collapsed principally due to two factors. First of all, scholars came to realize that the supposed parallels were spurious. That is to say, they were not truly parallel to belief in the resurrection. The ancient world was a virtual cornucopia of gods and heroes. Comparative studies in religion and literature require tremendous sensitivity to the similarities and differences in these beliefs or otherwise distortion and confusion will inevitably result. Unfortunately, those who uncritically adduced parallels to belief in Jesus' resurrection failed to exercise that sort of sensitivity. Many of the alleged parallels are actually not about resurrection at all. For example, some of them are really apotheosis stories; that is to say, they are stories about the assumption of the person into heaven, his divinization, how he becomes a god. For example, the stories of Hercules and Romulus would be instances of that. Others would be

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<sup>2</sup> 5:14

disappearance stories where the hero vanishes and is assumed into some higher sphere. Examples of this would be Apollonius of Tyana and Empedocles. Still other stories were simply seasonal symbols of the crop cycle as the vegetation dies during the dry season and then it comes back to life in the rainy season. Examples of these seasonal symbols would be myths about Osiris, Tammuz, and Adonis. Finally, still others are political expressions of emperor worship. For example, the cult of Julius Caesar or Caesar Augustus, who were regarded as gods. None of these is parallel to the Jewish idea of resurrection of the dead. David Aune, who is an expert in comparative ancient literature, has said, “No parallel to them [resurrection traditions] is found in Greco-Roman biography.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, most scholars have actually come to doubt whether there really were any myths of dying and rising gods in the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the Osiris myth, which is one of the most important of the seasonal symbols, Osiris doesn’t really come back to life at all. He just continues to exist in the nether realm of the dead where he reigns. In a recent review of the evidence, the Scandinavian scholar T. N. D. Mettinger reports:

From the 1930s . . . a consensus has developed to the effect that the ‘dying and rising gods’ died but did not return or rise to live again. . . . Those who still think differently are looked upon as residual members of an almost extinct species.<sup>5</sup>

Mettinger himself defends the minority view that myths of dying and rising gods did exist in three cases that he mentions – Dumuzi, Baal, and Melqart. He thinks these are myths of dying and rising gods. But he recognizes that such seasonal symbols are quite unlike the Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection. This is what he says:

The dying and rising gods were closely related to the seasonal cycle. Their death and return were seen as reflected in the changes of plant life. The death and resurrection of Jesus is a one-time event, not repeated, and unrelated to seasonal changes. . . . There is, as far as I am aware, no *prima facie* evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world. While studied with profit against the background of Jewish resurrection belief, the faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religions. The riddle remains.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> D. E. Aune, “The Genre of the Gospels” in *Gospel Perspectives II*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), p. 48.

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<sup>5</sup> Tryggve, N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of the Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), pp. 4, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Notice Mettinger's comment that belief in Jesus' resurrection may be profitably studied against the background of *Jewish* resurrection beliefs (not against the background of pagan mythology). In this remark we see one of the major shifts in New Testament scholarship that has occurred over the last century. This shift has been described as the Jewish reclamation of Jesus. Scholars came to realize that pagan mythology is simply the wrong interpretive context for understanding Jesus of Nazareth. Craig Evans, a fine historical Jesus scholar, has called this shift the "Eclipse of Mythology" in *Life of Jesus* research.<sup>7</sup> Jesus and his disciples were first-century Judean Jews, and it is against that background that they must be understood. The spuriousness of these alleged parallels is just one indication that pagan mythology is the wrong interpretive context for understanding the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. That is the first reason this movement collapsed at the dawn of the 20th century. The parallels turned out to be spurious.

Second, there is no causal connection between the pagan myths and the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. Jews were familiar with these seasonal deities. You actually find them mentioned in Ezekiel 8:14 where it refers to the beliefs of Tammuz, and they found them abhorrent and blasphemous.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, as the German scholar Gerhard Kittel notes, there is no trace of myths of dying and rising gods anywhere Palestine during the first century.<sup>9</sup> I think that the German scholar Hans Grass certainly does not exaggerate when Grass says that it would be "completely unthinkable" that the original disciples would have sincerely come to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead because they had heard about pagan myths of dying and rising seasonal deities.<sup>10</sup>

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* The "no causal" connection – can you explain that?

*Dr. Craig:* What I mean is there is no indication that these pagan myths had any influence upon the first disciples. As I said from Kittel, these cults or worship of these kinds of deities apparently didn't even exist in first-century Palestine so there was no influence even if these myths did exist, which apparently they didn't.

*Student:* You mentioned N. T. Wright before but not here. He set out to do a rather exhaustive listing of all of these ancient myths and pagan gods in his book on the resurrection. Is that relevant here?

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Evans, "Life-of-Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): pp. 18, 34.

<sup>8</sup> 14:36

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Kittel, "Die Auferstehung Jesu," *Deutsche Theologie* 4 (1937): pp. 133-68.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Grass, *Ostergeschehen*, p. 133.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, it is. As I explained when I began to talk about this third leg of the stool, namely the very origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection, N. T. Wright's book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, is the fullest, most thorough development of that argument. Wright argues that the very origin of the disciples' belief cannot be explained through pagan influences or through Jewish influences and therefore requires the historicity of the empty tomb and the postmortem appearances. His book, if you are interested, is a treasure trove of citations of the relevant literature. He doesn't just give the footnotes to it, he actually gives the citations. So it is like a library of ancient sources concerning the resurrection in pagan and Jewish thought and so is very, very helpful for anyone who wants to look at the original sources and see what they say. I'll say something more about Wright in a moment.

*Student:* Something that I am kind of interested in is how you said that the idea of this comparative religions with these pagan gods sort of ended around the beginning of the early 20th century. There is still a huge influence of people like Frazier and Joseph Campbell and all those people in anthropology and comparative religious studies and all that kind of stuff. If that ended in the early 20th century why is there still this continued influence of these kind of concepts in a lot of other scholarly fields?

*Dr. Craig:* I can't speak to that in these other fields like anthropology or sociology. I know simply in New Testament studies or historical Jesus studies there has occurred this eclipse of mythology which says that they are not relevant particularly to the resurrection with respect to these dying and rising gods. So I can't answer the question with respect to the fields that you mentioned.

*Student:* It is too bad that they didn't notice that the scholarship had already squashed those ideas. I just see this come up all the time in people that study these other fields.

*Dr. Craig:* Is that right? I am aware that this is widespread on the Internet, but I tended to just dismiss that as being due to ignorance of contemporary historical Jesus scholarship. But it would be interesting to know what you just said, that perhaps in some other fields like anthropology that perhaps some of these errors persist.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's look at Jewish influences. The real question, then, among contemporary scholars is whether the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection could have been the product of Jewish influences on them. Again, the answer would seem to be negative. To understand this, we need to understand more fully what the Jewish conception of resurrection was.<sup>11</sup> The belief in the resurrection of the dead is explicitly mentioned three times in the Old Testament: Isaiah 26:19, Ezekiel 37, and Daniel 12:2. Those are the three places belief in

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<sup>11</sup> 20:02

the resurrection of the dead is mentioned in the Old Testament. During the intertestamental period, the belief in the resurrection of the dead became a widespread hope. In Jesus' day this belief was held to by the party of the Pharisees, although it was denied by the party of the Sadducees. So there was not unanimity on this belief, but it was a common Jewish belief. The belief in the resurrection of the dead was in itself nothing new but was an accepted Jewish belief.

But the Jewish conception of resurrection from the dead differed in at least two fundamental respects from the resurrection of Jesus. First, in Jewish thought the resurrection of the dead always occurs after the end of the world. Joachim Jeremias, a very prominent German New Testament scholar, has written the following:

Ancient Judaism did not know of an anticipated resurrection as an event of history. Nowhere does one find in the literature anything comparable to the resurrection of Jesus. Certainly resurrections of the dead were known, but these always concerned resuscitations, the return to the earthly life. In no place in the late Judaic literature does it concern a resurrection to *doxa* (glory) as an event of history.<sup>12</sup>

For a Jew the resurrection always occurred after the end of human history. He had no conception of a resurrection that would take place within history. It is interesting that we find this typical Jewish attitude in the Gospels themselves. For example, John 11:23-24. Here Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead and he tells his sister Martha, "Your brother shall rise again." And what does Martha say? "Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'" She had no inkling of a resurrection within history; she thought that Jesus was talking about the resurrection at the end of the world. I think it is for this same reason that the disciples had so much difficulty understanding Jesus' predictions of his own resurrection. They thought he was talking about the resurrection at the end of the world. Look, for example, at Mark 9:9-11:

As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead. They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant. They asked Him, saying, "Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"

Here Jesus predicts his resurrection. What did the disciples ask? "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" In first-century Judaism it was widely believed that the prophet Elijah would come again before the great and terrible Day of the Lord, the day of judgment when the dead would be raised and judged. The disciples could not understand

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<sup>12</sup> Joachim Jeremias, "Die älteste Schicht der Osterüberlieferung," in *Resurrexit*, ed. Edouard Dhany (Rome: Editrice Libreria Vaticana, 1974), p. 194.

the idea of a resurrection occurring within human history prior to the end of the world. So Jesus' predictions only confused them. Given the Jewish conception of the resurrection of the dead, after Jesus' crucifixion the disciples would not have come to believe that he was already risen from the dead. Rather, they would have looked forward to the resurrection at the end of history and probably, in keeping with Jewish custom, preserved his tomb as a shrine where his bones could rest until the resurrection at the final day.<sup>13</sup>

The second point: in Jewish thought, the resurrection of the dead was always the resurrection of all the people, or of all the righteous dead. They had no conception of the resurrection of an isolated individual apart from the people. Again, the German scholar Ulrich Wilckens, makes this point. Wilckens says,

For nowhere do the Jewish texts speak of the resurrection of an individual which already occurs before the resurrection of the righteous in the end time and is differentiated and separate from it; nowhere does the participation of the righteous in the salvation at the end time depend on their belonging to the Messiah, who was raised in advance as “First of those raised by God” (1 Cor. 15:20).<sup>14</sup>

Wilcken's observation that no connection existed between an individual believer's resurrection and the prior resurrection of the Messiah is an understatement. There existed no belief in the Messiah's resurrection at all. That is why we find no examples of other messianic movements at that time comparable to Christianity's belief in Jesus' resurrection. This is a point that N. T. Wright has been insistent upon. Wright says,

. . . all the followers of these first century Messianic movements were fanatically committed to the cause. . . . But in no case, right across the century before Jesus and the century after him, do we hear of any Jewish group saying that their executed leader had been raised from the dead and he really was the Messiah after all.<sup>15</sup>

Wright invites us to suppose that the disciples were convinced on other grounds that Jesus was the Messiah. Say he had made claims to this effect and so they were convinced he was the Messiah. Wright says,

This would not have led the early disciples to say that he had been raised from the dead. A change in the meaning of “Messiah”, yes (since nobody in the first century supposed that the Messiah would die at the hands of the pagans); but not an assertion of his resurrection. No second-Temple Jewish texts speak of the

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<sup>13</sup> 25:07

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Wilckens, “Auferstehung,” *Themen der Theologie* 4 (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1970), p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> N. T. Wright, videotaped lecture presented at Asbury Theological Seminary, November, 1999.



Messiah being raised from the dead. Nobody would have thought of saying, “I believe that so-and-so really was the Messiah; therefore he must have been raised from the dead.”<sup>16</sup>

The disciples had no idea of the resurrection of an isolated individual apart from the people, especially the resurrection of the Messiah. So following Jesus' crucifixion, again, all they could have done was to wait with longing for the general resurrection of the dead in order to be reunited with their master again in glory.

For these two reasons, we cannot explain plausibly the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection as a result of Jewish influences. Left to themselves, the disciples would not have come to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead.

C. F. D. Moule, who is a late New Testament scholar from the University of Cambridge, makes the point forcefully. Moule writes:

If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole of the size and shape of the Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? . . . The birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church . . . *remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the church itself.*<sup>17</sup>

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* The Mark passage, Jesus did affirm the resurrection and not at the end day. It has already happened that Elijah actually has already come.<sup>18</sup> I guess John the Baptist is . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Right, Jesus seems to think that John the Baptist plays the role of Elijah, and so he does precede the resurrection. But you can imagine how confusing that would be to these first-century Jewish disciples.

*Student:* So the disciples would not have suspected that one person would be resurrected before the general resurrection, but would they have been that shocked for Jesus to have been resuscitated like Lazarus?

*Dr. Craig:* That is a really good point. No, I don't think belief in his resuscitation would have been contrary to Jewish beliefs. In fact, Jeremias makes that point. Resuscitations

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<sup>16</sup> N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God, III: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 2/1 (London: SCM, 1967), pp. 3, 13.

<sup>18</sup> 30:04



were known – the return to the earthly life. Jesus himself is said to have revived people. I prefer the word “revivification” to “resuscitation,” because when I think of a resuscitation, I think the person is not really dead. He has just been brought back again to consciousness. But a revivification – made alive again, a return to the earthly life – would be within Jewish expectations or permissible. But that makes it all the more striking that that is not what the early Christian movement affirmed about Jesus. They affirmed his resurrection to glory such as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15, not his mere resuscitation like Lazarus.

*Student:* When the apostles came to believe in the resurrection and they quote Old Testament psalms and typology and such, would you just say that was obscure and they didn't see it beforehand? How would you explain that?

*Dr. Craig:* That is exactly right. It used to be thought that one of the things that fueled their belief in the resurrection was these Old Testament passages which prompted them to believe Jesus was risen from the dead. That suggestion tended to be made more implausible by the demonstration that in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 you have a formula that goes back to within the first five years after the crucifixion that shows the resurrection to be so early, so primitive, a belief that there doesn't seem to have been that sort of time for that kind of theological reflection to take place. But even more importantly than that, as a point I made in a response the other day with regard to Isaiah 53, namely these passages in the Old Testament are so obscure that you would never read them as resurrection from the dead unless you were looking at them through Christian lenses and reading the resurrection back into them. A great example is Psalm 16:10 where David says, *You will not allow your holy one to see corruption*. In his sermon in the book of Acts Peter says this is a prediction of the resurrection – that his body would not see corruption but would be risen from the dead. But in the original context what David is talking about is he won't allow his righteous one to die, that God is going to protect the king and he won't allow him to experience death, which is quite different. These passages, I think, can be read through Christian lenses *after* you've come to believe that Jesus is risen from the dead, but they aren't clear enough to have prompted the belief in the resurrection of the dead especially given these two hallmarks of Jewish resurrection beliefs that would preclude it. Good question.

*Student:* If they were waiting for the end time for the resurrection then, to the earlier point, you would see this in John the Baptist because he said the kingdom is at hand and you are being baptized for something new. You are accepting a new understanding of the Old Testament and the laws and so forth.

*Dr. Craig:* This raises the whole question of the delay of Christ's return and the establishment of the kingdom. In Acts chapter 1 the disciples are still hoping for the

establishment of the kingdom in their lifetime. They said, *Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom?* And Jesus says, *You don't know the times and the seasons when this is going to happen.* So it may have been that some of them at least anticipated that this would happen within their lifetimes.<sup>19</sup> But, remember, the end of the world had to come about first and then the dead would be raised. So you can just imagine putting yourself back into the shoes of these first-century Jewish believers how confusing this all would have been because of the changes it involved in Jewish eschatological expectations.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Up to this point, what I have assumed is that the disciples were just sort of left on their own following the crucifixion. I've argued that neither is a result of Christian, pagan, or Jewish influences would they have come to sincerely believe God had raised Jesus from the dead. But suppose they weren't just left on their own? Suppose somehow they discovered that the tomb was empty. We don't know how. We will just say somehow the tomb was empty. And that that caused them to hallucinate visions of Jesus. Would that have led them then to proclaim God has raised him from the dead? That will be the question we will take up next time when we meet again.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 35:04

<sup>20</sup> Total Running Time: 37:01 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)