

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 45
The Resurrection Hypothesis

We now come at long last to the resurrection hypothesis. Does the resurrection hypothesis do any better than its rivals in explaining the evidence of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances of Jesus, and the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection? In order to answer that question let's run the resurrection hypothesis through those six criteria that McCullagh suggests for assessing historical hypotheses.

First, you will remember, the best explanation or hypothesis must have greater explanatory scope than its rivals. The resurrection hypothesis certainly has wide explanatory scope. It explains the emptiness of the tomb, the appearances of Jesus alive after his death, and the origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection of Jesus. So it exceeds counter-explanations that have a narrower explanatory scope such as the wrong tomb hypothesis or the hallucination hypothesis which, you will remember, could only explain one or two of those three great facts undergirding the inference to the resurrection of Jesus.

The second criterion is explanatory power. This is probably the greatest strength of the resurrection hypothesis. It explains so well the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief. By contrast, hypotheses like the conspiracy hypothesis or the apparent death hypothesis just do not account convincingly for the facts of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith as we have seen. On these theories, in contrast to the resurrection hypothesis, the data become highly improbable. By contrast, on the resurrection hypothesis it seems extremely probable that the observable data with respect to the empty tomb, the appearances, and the disciples' coming to believe in Jesus' resurrection should be just as it is.

Third, the hypothesis should be more plausible than rival hypotheses. The plausibility of the resurrection hypothesis increases exponentially when we consider it in its religio-historical context of Jesus' own unparalleled life and ministry, and also in the philosophical context of the arguments of natural theology. Within the context of natural theology we have seen that we have good arguments to believe that there is a God who has created and designed the universe and is perfectly good. Given the context of Jesus' own unparalleled life and radical personal claims to divinity the resurrection hypothesis seems very plausible. Once you get rid of the philosophical prejudice against miracles and consider the resurrection hypothesis in the religio-historical context of Jesus' own life and ministry then it does not seem at all implausible that God should raise Jesus of

Nazareth from the dead. At the very least it is as or more plausible than the rival hypotheses which oppose it.

Fourth, the hypothesis should be less *ad hoc* than rival hypotheses. It is interesting that McCullagh himself thinks that the resurrection hypothesis has great explanatory power and explanatory scope but he nevertheless thinks that the resurrection hypothesis is *ad hoc*. You will recall that the way he defines being *ad hoc* is in terms of the number of new suppositions that a hypothesis requires which are not already implied by existing knowledge.¹ An *ad hoc* hypothesis will require you to make additional assumptions that go beyond what existing knowledge implies.

Defined in this way I think it is difficult to see why the resurrection hypothesis would be extraordinarily *ad hoc*. It seems to require only one new supposition, namely that God exists. Surely its rivals require many such additional hypotheses or assumptions. For example, the conspiracy hypothesis requires us to believe that the disciples of Jesus really had morally defective characters that would cause them to lie and cheat and fabricate the resurrection. That is certainly not implied by our existing knowledge. Or again, the apparent death hypothesis requires us to assume that the centurion's lance thrust into Jesus' side was just a superficial poke or some unhistorical detail in the narrative which, again, goes beyond existing knowledge. The hallucination hypothesis requires us to assume some sort of psychological preparation on the part of the disciples which, again, is not implied by our existing knowledge. Such examples could be multiplied. So simply in terms of the number of additional assumptions required by the hypothesis it doesn't seem like the resurrection hypothesis is any more *ad hoc* than its rivals. Furthermore, consider this: scientific hypotheses regularly involve the supposition of exotic new entities which we have not known about previously such as quarks, strings, black holes, gravitons, and so on and so forth. Yet these theories are not characterized as *ad hoc* simply because they postulate the existence of these new theoretical entities. Finally, and I think most importantly, for the person who is already a theist, the assumption of God's existence is not an additional assumption. Rather, it is implied by our already existing knowledge. That is why I think we should include in our background knowledge the arguments of natural theology. When we come to the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus we already have in place our arguments for the existence of God so we don't need to assume the existence of God as some additional fact which goes beyond our existing knowledge. Rather our existing knowledge includes the fact that God exists on the basis of things like the cosmological, teleological, moral, and ontological arguments. So the resurrection hypothesis, I think, cannot be said to be *ad hoc* simply because it includes some new suppositions which are introduced. So if the resurrection hypothesis is *ad hoc* it has to be for some other reason than just having additional assumptions.

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Philosophers of science have found it notoriously difficult to explain what it is exactly that makes a hypothesis *ad hoc*. There just seems to be a kind of ill-defined air of artificiality or contrivedness about an *ad hoc* hypothesis. This is usually sensed even if it cannot be explained by those who are seasoned practitioners of the relevant science.

I think that the sense of discomfort which many feel – and I would include here even theists, theists feel this discomfort – about appealing to God as part of an explanatory hypothesis is that doing this feels contrived in that way. It just seems too easy when confronted with some unexplained phenomenon to throw one's hands in the air and say, "Oh well, God did it!"² The universal disapproval of the so-called god-of-the-gaps (where God is postulated to plug up the gaps in existing scientific knowledge) and the impulse toward methodological naturalism in history and science (which would prohibit the historian or scientist from appealing to supernatural explanations) appeals to this same sense of the illegitimacy of making such explanatory appeals to God. So the question is: is the hypothesis, "God raised Jesus from the dead," *ad hoc* in that sense?

Well, I think not. And here I think it is vital to consider the religio-historical context in which the event occurred. A purported miracle without a context is inherently ambiguous. A miracle without a context could be just a freak of nature, a scientific anomaly, the result of some unknown causes. But in the case of Jesus of Nazareth a supernatural explanation of the facts of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection is not *ad hoc*, I think, because those events took place in the context of and as the climax to Jesus' own unparalleled life, ministry, and personal claims. A supernatural explanation fits readily into such a context. It fits like a hand in the glove with the religio-historical context in which it occurs. I think this is precisely why the resurrection hypothesis does not seem *ad hoc* when it is compared to miraculous hypotheses of other sorts to explain the evidence. For example, that a psychological miracle occurred such that normal men and women suddenly turned into conspirators and liars who would be willingly martyred for their subterfuge, or that a biological miracle occurred on the cross which prevented Jesus' dying despite the lance thrust through his chest and so forth or his dying of exposure in the tomb. It is these sorts of miraculous hypotheses that strike us as artificial and contrived, not the resurrection hypothesis which makes perfectly good sense in the context of Jesus' own ministry and radical personal claims whereby he put himself in God's place. So it seems to me that the resurrection hypothesis cannot be characterized as excessively *ad hoc*.

Number five, the hypothesis must be disconfirmed by fewer accepted beliefs than rival hypotheses. Honestly, I can't think of any accepted beliefs that would disconfirm the resurrection hypothesis. Unless you think, for example, of the belief that dead men do not

rise as disconfirmatory. But the problem is that that statement is ambiguous between “dead men do not naturally rise” and “dead men do not supernaturally rise.” It is true that all the evidence we have indicates that dead men do not rise naturally from the dead. But that doesn’t contradict the resurrection hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead. The Christian believes both of those statements wholeheartedly. He believes as firmly that dead men do not rise naturally from the dead as he believes that God raised Jesus from the dead. So these sorts of beliefs do not, in fact, disconfirm the resurrection hypothesis when it is properly stated.

By contrast with this, rival theories, as we’ve seen, do tend to be disconfirmed by accepted beliefs. For example, the instability of conspiracies, the likelihood of death as a result of crucifixion, the psychological characteristics of hallucinatory experiences, and so on and so forth.³ These sorts of hypotheses do seem to be disconfirmed by accepted beliefs but not the resurrection hypothesis.

Finally, the hypothesis must exceed its rivals in fulfilling those first five conditions so that there is little chance that a rival hypothesis will exceed it in meeting those conditions. I think there is certainly little chance that any of the rival hypotheses that we surveyed will exceed the resurrection hypothesis in meeting McCullagh’s conditions. Indeed the stupefaction of contemporary scholarship in the face of the facts of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples’ faith suggests that no better rival is anywhere on the horizon. New Testament scholars who do not affirm or accept the resurrection of Jesus are by and large self-confessedly left with no explanation at all. So once one gives up the prejudice against miracles I think it is very difficult to deny that the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation of these facts.

START DISCUSSION

Student: You say resurrection is physical resurrection. There is a gap that I could not cross. After the resurrection Jesus ascended and he is the first fruit and we are to follow. And he sits at the right hand of the Father. Any interaction Jesus has with the Father is of a spiritual nature. How does the physical translate into spiritual, or the physical defy gravity? I couldn’t get over that gap.

Dr. Craig: That is a wonderful question. Thank you for asking. First, let me simply say that the right hand of the Father means a position of exaltation and authority. We should not think that Jesus is literally seated at the right hand of the Father because God doesn’t have a hand. Right? God is omnipresent and has no body. So this is a position to which Jesus is elevated. The question is: where is Jesus’ resurrection body today? He clearly had a resurrection body in the Gospels and the book of Acts. And then he ascends into

heaven. When he comes again he will return bodily and physically. So where is his resurrection body today?

I can think of two possible responses to this. They are both speculative, but that is all we need in order to say these are not implausible. The first could suggest that Jesus has a physical resurrection body but that it is in a different dimension. Physicists regularly talk about physical realities that exist in other spacetimes and do not intersect with our spacetime. So it could be that Jesus' resurrection body exists in some other spacetime distinct from our own. I am not persuaded that that explanation is the best because I think when we die we are disembodied souls during this intermediate period prior to our resurrection from the dead. It would seem very odd for an embodied Jesus to be fellowshiping with disembodied souls. Paul also says when we die we go to be with Christ – *to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord*. That would seem a little bit odd but not impossible.

So here is a second suggestion. See what you think of this. Christ has a human nature even now in his ascended and glorified state. But that human nature does not manifest itself as a physical body except when Jesus is in our four-dimensional spacetime. Here is an analogy to try to make that appealing. Imagine a tuning fork that you pluck and you hear this produced a hum from the vibrations of the fork. But now imagine that without doing anything to the fork – it is still vibrating – you put a vacuum jar over the fork and take out all of the air so that there is a vacuum inside.⁴ Now, though the fork has not changed and is still vibrating, there will be no sound at all. Why? Because the fork is not in a medium in which the vibrations will be manifested as sound. If you reintroduce air into the vacuum jar then all of a sudden the hum will reappear. Why couldn't Christ's human nature be like that? It manifests itself as a physical spacio-temporal body when Christ is present in this spacetime universe. But he has exited our four-dimensional spacetime. He is no longer in it. So there is no body manifested. But when he comes again he will reenter our four-dimensional spacetime and – poof – his physical body will appear again because his human nature will now manifest itself in that medium. So our spacetime is like the air in the vacuum jar. It is the medium in which Christ's human nature is expressed in a corporeal way. I find that to be a plausible answer to the question.

Student: The only verse that I can think of that relates is John 10. He says, *I have a body. I can pick it up and lay it down.* And beforehand, *You've got a body prepared for me.* So where he parks the molecules I don't know, but at any rate.

Dr. Craig: Usually that is thought of in terms of his death and resurrection, but you are saying it could be extended further to support the sort of model that I just suggested. Yeah, that is interesting.

Student: Your supposition, your hypothesis that you just gave us, assumes that Christ has to follow the natural laws of the universe instead of the other way around. I don't see it that way. I think he can decide, *Yeah I want to be seen*, or, *No, I don't want to be seen*. Then the laws of nature are his to determine.

Dr. Craig: I certainly would want to affirm that, too, but on that view that would suggest that Christ still is here in our universe some place sort of, frankly without wanting to be irreverent, like a ghost, this unseen person walking about, because we are talking about a corporeal existence now, remember? That seems kind of bizarre to me. It would seem to me that the ascension means Jesus has left and he has given the Holy Spirit to stand in for him during his absence. Interesting questions!

Student: You have distinguished between resuscitation or reanimation or something like that when it comes to a human body and the resurrection of Christ or the resurrection we anticipate for ourselves. My first question is: I think we are committed by the New Testament accounts to believe that Jesus' tomb was empty. So his bones were part of his resurrected body somehow. There are many cases where there is no body that exists after thousands of years and things like cremation and 9/11 and so forth. Is there a necessary connection between the physical body and the resurrected body? Could you have the bones of a person, a Christian, that are not involved in their spiritual resurrection?

Dr. Craig: Let's do one at a time so I don't lose track. The question that you are asking is one that the early rabbis discussed because this is a question facing Jews as well as Christians. It is important to understand, and I think you intimated this, that the primary object of the resurrection in Jewish belief is the bones. It is not the flesh. It is not the body. It is the bones. That is why the typical Jewish funerary practices were to bury the body or put it in a sarcophagus so that the flesh would rot away, be eaten away, and then after a year the bones would be collected and placed into an ossuary or bone box and these bone boxes would be stored until the resurrection at the end of history.⁵ It would be the bones that are the principal object of the resurrection. For a vivid picture of this look at Ezekiel 37 when the prophet receives this vision of a valley full of these dry bones and then they all come together and then God clothes them with sinew and flesh and they become living persons. The Jews were aware because of the Jewish martyrs such as during the Maccabean revolts that sometimes the bodies and even the bones of the dead might be completely destroyed. In that case there wouldn't be any vestige of the original body to raise again. The answer of the rabbis was that in a case like that it would be exceptional and God would create new matter to constitute the body. So the normal case would be that the vestiges of the original body, the bones principally, would be the object of the resurrection. They would be raised. But in a case in which the corpse was

completely vaporized and annihilated they recognize that it lay within God's omnipotence to recreate a body anew, and then the soul of the person would be imbued into that new body.

Student: The second part – I have not studied this in detail but – I know there has been a debate between Murray Harris and Normal Geisler about the nature of the resurrection. As I understand it, Murray Harris – who I think was your colleague at Trinity . . .

Dr. Craig: Yes, and my Greek teacher as well!

Student: He is a New Zealander and I think he studied under F. F. Bruce. But anyway, he emphasizes discontinuity, as I understand it, between the physical body and the spiritual body. Geisler wants to say, no, it has got to be continuity – more continuity than Harris describes. Can you comment on that?

Dr. Craig: That is almost right. But let's understand it accurately. The radical view that both Harris and Geisler want to avoid is the view that the physical body of Jesus lay in the tomb and rotted away but that God gave him a new spiritual body – a resurrection body – to replace the old body. This is a view that is very congenial to German theologians who cannot bear the idea of a nature miracle – of somebody being raised from the dead. They will say that the belief in the resurrection of the dead is unconnected with the remains of the dead person. The remains of Jesus are irrelevant. What matters is that God has created a new spiritual body for him. Harris wants to have a mediating position between that and the orthodox view. Harris says, no, no, God did raise the body of Jesus that is in the tomb, but in raising him from the dead he transformed it into a spiritual body so that now Jesus is basically an immaterial, unextended entity. Remember our discussion of Paul's discussion of the spiritual body in 1 Corinthians 15. I think Harris has just fundamentally misunderstood Paul's doctrine. His view is that there is continuity between the earthly body and the resurrection body, but there is this radical transformation in it so that it now becomes spiritual rather than physical. So what does Harris do with the resurrection appearances? This is where it becomes kind of *ad hoc*. The liberal German theologian has no problem in just saying, *Those resurrection appearance stories in the Gospels are late developing legends. They have no historical value whatsoever*. But Harris, being an evangelical teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has to affirm the historicity of those resurrection narratives in the Gospels. What he says is that the disciples couldn't have understood a spiritual resurrection. So Jesus condescended to their level by appearing physically to them so that they could understand that he was risen from the dead. But that material state in which they saw and experienced him was not really the fundamental, normal state in which Jesus existed. It was merely a kind of object lesson for the sake of the disciples to help

them understand that he was risen.⁶ It is not wholly unlike the old natural explanation school of Heinrich Paulus that we talked about where you affirm the letter of the text (“Yes, those things really happened like that”) but then you explain it away through the use of these *ad hoc* conjectures.

Student: In the New Testament, John introduced Jesus as the Word. We all know the Word and it is Jesus. In my mind, I was thinking that Jesus actually resurrected as a Word, and that Word gives us flesh as in Ezekiel where God said *prophesy to the bones*. That prophesy brings about the wind and gives the flesh to the bones. We are to follow the resurrection in the form of Word where our physical body (whatever happened to it, we don’t know) but then what is effective is, like Jesus said, the physical body counts for nothing but the spirit gives birth to spirit. That is the best I can . . .

Dr. Craig: Let’s not misunderstand Jesus there. He was clearly talking about the earthly body when he said the body counts for nothing and the spirit gives life. He’s talking there about the mortal, fallen, human nature. But obviously the Gospels and Paul affirm the value of the resurrection body. Christ is not an unembodied soul. He doesn’t just slough off his human body when he dies. It is raised from the dead. This is an affirmation of the goodness of the material world and the physical world against every attempt to spiritualize it away and diminish the importance of the material and the physical in favor of the spiritual. For the Jewish view, materiality and physicality is good. The best testimony to that is that Jesus takes our human physicality into eternity and to heaven when he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven. So we must not in any way depreciate the importance of the physical and the material. As I will explain a little bit more next time, when Christ comes again and returns it will be in a physical and bodily way.

END DISCUSSION

That brings us to the close of our assessment of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. What I want to do next time is to talk about some of the application of this important doctrine to our lives today.⁷

⁶ 30:02

⁷ Total Running Time: 33:56 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)