

From Easter to Valentinus and the Apostles' Creed Once More: A Critical Examination of James Robinson's Proposed Resurrection Appearance Trajectories

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SUMMARY

Evan Fales' curious hypothesis that the gospel narratives of the empty tomb are of the genre of mythology and so were not taken to be historical accounts by either their purveyors or their recipients is critically examined. Then Fales's responses to eleven lines of evidence supporting the historicity of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb are considered.

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Introduction

Several years ago in his SBL Presidential Address, James Robinson sought to delineate three related sets of parallel trajectories stretching from a common origin in primitive Christianity to their termini in second-century Gnosticism and in credally orthodox Christianity, both of these later viewpoints being divergent (mis)interpretations of the beliefs and experiences of the earliest Christians. [1] Trajectory 1 represents the development beginning with the traditions concerning the first disciples' experiences of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and ending with, on the one hand, the orthodox interpretation of these as physical, corporeal manifestations of the resurrected Christ, and, on the other hand, the Gnostic interpretation of these as visions of disembodied radiance. Trajectory 2 charts the emergence of the orthodox doctrine of the final resurrection of believers in each individual's fleshly body, on the one hand, and of the Gnostic doctrine of spiritual and mystical resurrection attained already in baptism, on the other, from the original apocalyptic expectation of a resurrection of believers at the end of time in a luminous, heavenly body comparable to Christ's. Finally, Trajectory 3 concerns the evolution of the sayings attributed to Jesus to, on the one hand, the orthodox incarnation of Jesus' sayings within the pre-Easter biography of Jesus in the canonical Gospels and, on the other hand, the mystification of Jesus' sayings by means of hermeneutically loaded dialogues of the risen Christ with his Gnostic disciples. Robinson emphasizes that neither the orthodox nor the Gnostic position represents the original Christian position, though both are consistent and serious efforts to interpret it. [2] Although both positions should be heeded as worthy segments of the heritage of transmission and

interpretation of Christian beliefs, nevertheless neither can be literally espoused by serious critical thinkers of today. [3]

The existence of Trajectory 1 is logically foundational for Robinson's construction of the other two, and so in this paper I wish to focus our critical attention on his case for the existence of this first trajectory. According to Robinson, the primitive resurrection appearances were visualizations of the resurrected Christ as a luminous, heavenly body. But due to their aversion to bodily existence, Gnostics disembodied Christ's appearances so as to retain the original luminous visualization while abandoning any corporeality associated with that radiance. In reaction, the emerging orthodoxy emphasized the corporeality of the resurrection appearances by construing them in terms of the resurrection of the flesh, so that in the canonical Gospels Christ's appearances are not only corporeal, but material as well.

Robinson's proposed reconstruction is probably quite appealing to many, since he is claiming, in effect, that the received view in German theology of the resurrection body and appearances of Christ was, in fact, the view of the primitive church itself, and it is rather reassuring to believe that one is holding steadfastly to the faith of the *Urgemeinde* in the face of extremist corruptions thereof. But does a dispassionate weighing of the evidence really support Robinson's proposal? In order to answer that question, let us turn to an examination of his arguments.

Examination of Robinson's Proposed Trajectories

In support of his claim that the primitive traditions of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances related luminous, bodily visualizations which were subsequently construed in opposite directions by orthodoxy and Gnosticism, Robinson adduces four lines of evidence: (1) the only two NT eyewitnesses of a resurrection appearance both authenticate visualizations of luminous appearances; (2) vestiges of luminous appearances remain in the non-luminous resurrection appearance stories and in the misplaced appearance stories; (3) the only two eyewitnesses of a resurrection appearance both identify the resurrected Christ with the Spirit; and (4) the outcome of these trajectories may be seen in second-century Gnosticism.

In support of (1), Robinson appeals to the experiences of (a) the apostle Paul and (b) John of Patmos. (a) On the basis of Paul's reference to Christ's 'glorious body' in Phil. 3.21 (cf. I Cor. 15:43), Robinson concludes, 'Thus, it is clear that Paul visualized the resurrected Christ as a heavenly body, luminous'. [4]The Acts accounts of Paul's Damascus Road encounter (Acts 9:1-19; 22:4-16; 26:9-19) seem to reflect accurately Paul's own visualization of his experience. (b) In Rev.

1:13-16 we have another resurrection appearance narrated, although it is usually overlooked because it lies outside the Gospels. Like Paul, John of Patmos experienced an 'uninhibited luminous visualization of the resurrection'. [5] Since these are the only two resurrection appearances recorded by eyewitnesses and both were of the luminous kind, we may conclude 'that the original visualizations of resurrection appearances had been luminous, the experiencing of a blinding light, a heavenly body such as Luke reports Stephen saw (Acts 7:55-56)'. [6]

In support of (2), Robinson sees vestiges of the original luminous, non-human visualizations in the following: (a) the angelic attendants at the empty tomb of Jesus are described as clothed in 'white' (Mk 16:5), in 'dazzling apparel' (Lk. 24:4), having an appearance 'like lightning and ... raiment white as snow' (Mt. 28:2-3). Says Robinson, 'In the canonical Gospels this luminous apparition of the attendant is all that is left of the luminous visualization of the resurrected Christ...' [7] (b) In 'quite docetic style' Jesus passes through locked doors (Jn 20:19, 26; cf. Lk. 24:36) and disappears abruptly (Lk. 24:31, 51; Acts 1:9). (c) The non-recognition motif of some resurrection appearance stories (Jn 20:14-15; 21:4; Lk. 24:16, 31) may derive ultimately from the luminous visualization, as is evident from Paul's question 'Who are you, Lord?' in his Damascus Road experience (Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15). It is understandable that one would not recognize a blinding light, but the lack of recognition and then sudden recognition of Jesus is no longer intelligible in the canonical Gospels' all-too-human visualizations. Thus, this motif may be a vestige from the more primitive luminous, non-human visualizations. (d) Christ's resurrection appearance to Peter seems to be described in 2 Pet. 1:16-17 using the motif of luminosity. Although these verses probably refer to Jesus' transfiguration, the Markan account of that event (Mk 9:2-8) is probably a misplaced resurrection narrative. 'Mark has "historicized" what was originally the resurrection appearance to Peter, tying it down to an unambiguous bodilyness by putting it well before the crucifixion, in spite of its luminousness...' [8] Robinson conjectures that the reason Mark narrates no resurrection appearances is 'perhaps because those available were so luminous as to seem disembodied'. [9]

In support of (3), Robinson argues that in the two instances where the NT contains an eyewitness report of a resurrection appearance, the identification of that appearance as the Spirit seems near at hand. (a) Paul calls the resurrection body 'spiritual' (I Cor. 15:44), identifies the last Adam as 'a life-giving Spirit' (I Cor. 15:45) and calls Christ 'the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:17-18). (b) John of Patmos describes his experience as 'in the Spirit' (Rev. 1:10) and, although the revelation is from the resurrected Christ, John repeatedly exhorts his readers to hear 'what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). In fact, says Robinson, it is precisely 'this identification

of the luminously resurrected Christ as the Spirit' that Luke rejects when he denies that what the disciples saw was a ghost. [10]

Finally, in support of (4), Robinson cites a number of second-century Gnostic texts which, he claims, show that the resurrection appearances were being construed as visions of disembodied radiance. It was in reaction to this tendency that the non-luminous resurrection appearance stories in Matthew, Luke, and John were composed. Thus, just as the trajectory from Easter to Valentinus involved increasing spiritualization, so the trajectory from Easter to the Apostles' Creed involved increasing materialization.

Examination of Argument (1)

Robinson's first argument, that the only two NT witnesses of a resurrection appearance both authenticate visualizations of luminous appearances, implicitly presupposes that we do not have the voice of an eyewitness behind the resurrection appearance stories in the Gospel of John. But whatever his identity, the person known in Johannine circles as the Beloved Disciple is explicitly stated to be an eyewitness whose testimony stands behind the events narrated in the Gospel (Jn 21:24). Although in the past some scholars have regarded the Beloved Disciple as a pure symbol lacking any historical referent, the leading contemporary commentators, such as Brown and Schnackenburg, agree that the Beloved Disciple was a historical person whose testimony, as an eyewitness to some of the events recorded in the latter part of the Gospel of John, including the appearances, stands authoritatively behind them. [11] And, of course, the appearances related in that Gospel are physical and bodily.

Moreover, Robinson's point seems to serve a purpose more polemical than historical, since it ignores altogether the genuinely relevant question of whether the appearance traditions embodied in the Gospels are historically credible in favor of the less relevant question of whether the accounts are first-hand, eyewitness reports. It would be far too facile to dismiss as unhistorical the narratives of, for example, the post-resurrection appearance to the Twelve simply because they were not written by an eyewitness. Hence, even if Robinson's first point were correct, it is far from clear how much force it really has.

But is it in fact correct? Consider first (a) Paul's testimony concerning his Damascus Road experience. Because Paul elsewhere characterizes Christ's resurrection body as 'glorious', are we justified in inferring that it is luminous? In I Cor. 15:40-41 Paul uses 'glory' as a synonym for luminosity, for the differing glory of the sun, moon and stars is their varying brightness.

Significantly, the difference between the glory of terrestrial versus celestial bodies is used as an analogy between the present body and the resurrection body. But did Paul think that whereas our earthly body is dull, our resurrection body will be literally luminous? Is that the difference he means to express between them in saying that the resurrection body is glorious? There are reasons to doubt it, for in contrasting the earthly body with the resurrection body, the antithesis he draws in I Cor. 15:43 is not between their relative luminescence, but between their relative *honor*. The present body is dishonorable, no doubt due to sin and its consequences (*e.g.* mortality), whereas the resurrection body is glorious (cf. the contrast between the lowly state of the earthly body and the exalted state of Christ's resurrection body in Phil. 3.21). This suggests that the glory of the resurrection body has to do with majesty, exaltation, honor and so forth, rather than its becoming luminous. [12] Indeed, if it were not for the Acts narrative of Paul's experience on the Damascus Road, it seems extremely doubtful that anyone could have taken Paul's 'glorious' to mean that the resurrection body would be shining. Paul himself gives no indication of the nature of Christ's appearance to him. [13] From all we know from his hand, the appearance to Paul could have been as physical as the resurrection appearances in the Gospels. [14] In fact, it has even been argued that Luke has de-materialized the appearance to Paul because it was in Luke's scheme a post-ascension encounter and so could not involve Christ's material presence, since Christ had ascended! [15] Be that as it may, I think it is evident that Paul does not provide eyewitness testimony to a luminous resurrection appearance of Christ.

Still, most critics are prepared to accept the general historicity of the Acts account, and Robinson might appeal to that as grounds for regarding the original resurrection appearances as visualizations of a luminous body. But now a number of difficulties arise.

If one is willing to accept the substantial historicity of Luke-Acts with regard to the appearance to Paul, then one must re-open the question of the historical credibility of Luke-Acts with respect to the appearances to the disciples. Why are we willing to accept the one but not the other, apart from an aversion to the physical realism of the Gospel appearances? [16]

On what grounds do we assume that Paul's Damascus Road experience involved the visualization of a bodily shape? As the narrative presents it the experience was of a non-corporeal radiance and auditory phenomena, which were also, with some inconsistency, also experienced by Paul's traveling companions. In other words, the narrative presents *prima facie* precisely the sort of unembodied luminous experience which Robinson wishes to locate on the Gnostic trajectory. Paul's experience thus provides no clear basis for the claim that visualizations of a luminous bodily

form were primitive.

On what basis are we to assume that Paul's experience on the Damascus Road was normative for the experiences of the disciples, so that its form can be imposed on them and used as a yardstick for assessing historicity? It is sometimes said that in placing himself in the list of witnesses to the resurrection appearances in I Cor. 15:3-8, Paul implies that all of these experiences were of the same sort. But surely Paul's concern here is with *who* appeared, not with *how* he appeared; moreover, in placing himself in the list, Paul is not trying to put the others' experiences on a plane with his own, but, if anything, is rather trying to level up his own experience to the objectivity and reality of the others'. [17] Luke presents Paul's experience as *sui generis*, and, far from contradicting this, Paul also seemed aware of its unusualness (I Cor. 15:8) and was anxious to class himself with the apostles as a recipient of an authentic resurrection appearance. If we are to use Paul's experience as a criterion for the historicity of other appearance narratives, then Robinson owes us substantial reasons for such a methodology.

Robinson's argument seems to rest upon a fundamental presupposition that luminosity and physicality are mutually exclusive categories, such that if the visualized bodily shape were luminous, it could not also be material and tangible. Without such an assumption I cannot see that the demonstration that the original visualizations of Jesus were characterized by luminosity does anything logically to prove that they did not also involve the perception of a physical object. Unfortunately, Robinson's presupposition is obviously false. Paul himself, as we have seen, referred to the brightness of the sun, moon and stars, which he no doubt took to be physical objects; even more relevantly, he mentions the brightness of Moses' face as it shone with splendor (2 Cor. 3:7, 12). The decisive counter-example to Robinson's principle is his own example of the transfiguration, in which Jesus' face and garments shone, but for all that did not become immaterial or intangible. Robinson simply assumes that the luminosity of some appearing entity is evidence of that entity's non-physicality. Indeed, that conclusion seems to be implicit in Robinson's use of the very term 'visualization', which he never defines, but which seems to carry with it connotations of subjectivity and non-physicality. After all, one would hardly speak of the disciples' 'visualizing' the pre-Easter Jesus; why, then, apply this term to the post-resurrection appearances, unless one is already assuming their purely intra-mental reality? The vocabulary associated with the resurrection appearances in the NT is fully consistent with their physicality and objectivity. [18] Hence, the demonstration that the original resurrection appearances involved luminosity does nothing to demonstrate that the physicality of those appearances is a later

corruption on the trajectory from Easter to the Apostles' Creed. It seems to me, then, that on the basis of Paul's experience, we are not entitled to conclude either that the original resurrection appearances were characterized by luminosity or that, even if they were, they were therefore non-physical in character.

(b) What, then, can we conclude about John of Patmos's experience of the exalted Christ? It is rather surprising that Robinson should categorize this as a resurrection appearance. The reason it is 'overlooked' by all students of the resurrection is not because it occurs outside the Gospels, but because it is quite clearly a vision rather than a resurrection appearance. [19] Although the resurrection appearances took place within a community that enjoyed visions, revelations and ecstatic experiences (1 Cor. 12-13; 2 Cor. 12:1-5; Gal. 2:1; Acts 16:9), that community nevertheless drew a distinction between visions of Christ and the resurrection appearances of Christ: the appearances were restricted to a small circle designated as witnesses, and even to them Jesus did not continually reappear but appeared only at the beginning of their new life. Thus, for example, although Paul considers Christ's appearance to him to have been 'last of all' (1 Cor. 15:8), nevertheless, he continued to experience 'visions and revelations of the Lord' (2 Cor. 12:1; cf. Acts 22:17). Similarly, the revelation of Christ to John on Patmos is clearly a vision of the exalted Christ, replete with allegorical imagery, not a resurrection appearance of Christ. In the same way, the visions of Christ seen by Stephen, Ananias and Paul (Acts 7:55-56; 9:10; 22:17) are not regarded by Luke as resurrection appearances of Christ, but as veridical, divinely induced visions of Christ. Thus, Robinson's appeal to John's experience as an eyewitness account of a resurrection appearance is spurious.

Nor is this all, however, for the question at once arises as to what distinguishing feature served to mark off an experience as a resurrection appearance of Jesus rather than as a merely veridical vision of Jesus? So far as I can tell, the answer of the NT to that question is that only an appearance involved extra-mental realities, whereas a vision, even if veridical, was purely intra-mental. [20] But if that is the case, then Robinson's construction collapses, since the hypothesized trajectories did not then grow out of visualizations of Christ lacking any extra-mental referent, experiences which would have been indistinguishable from simple visions. It is therefore incumbent upon Robinson, at the expense of his construction, to provide us with a more plausible explanation of the basis upon which the early church distinguished between resurrection appearances and visions of Christ.

I thus find Robinson's first argument based on the testimony of Paul and John rather unconvincing.

We have not seen any compelling reasons to think that the original resurrection appearances were uniformly characterized by luminosity or that if they were, this fact implies non-physicality. On the contrary, the distinction drawn by the NT church between a resurrection appearance and a veridical vision suggests that the appearances were conceived to be physical events in the external world.

Examination of Argument (2)

Let us then turn to point (2) concerning the vestiges of luminosity in the canonical Gospel appearance stories. With the collapse of point (1), Robinson faces here a very difficult methodological problem: how does one prove that elements of luminosity in the narratives are truly a vestige rather than simply a feature of the stories? In other words, in the absence of a prior proof that the original resurrection appearances were uniformly luminous in character, the elements of luminosity in the Gospel stories cannot themselves be taken as evidence of some more primitive stage. With that in mind, let us consider Robinson's examples.

a. The Angelic Attendants at the Tomb

Robinson is not clear whether the primitive tradition underlying these stories attributed luminosity to the angels or whether this feature of the story is a relic of a luminosity originally attributed to the risen Christ but, under the pressure of opposing Gnosticism, now transferred to the angelic attendants. If the luminescence is truly a vestige of a luminous resurrection appearance, then it would seem that the latter would have to be the case. But the difficulty in proving such a supposed transference is that divine beings are typically portrayed as radiant or clothed in white robes (Ezek. 10; Dan. 7:9; 10:5-6; Lk. 2:9; Acts 1:10; 2 Cor. 11:14; Rev. 4:4; 10:1; I En. 62:15-16; 2 En. 22:8). So why should it be thought that the angels being dressed in white or dazzling in appearance is a vestige of a radiance originally attributed to the risen Christ? Robinson himself seems to recognize the frailty of such an inference, for he asserts, 'The apologetic that apparently caused the resurrected Christ's luminosity to fade into the solidity of a physical body did not affect the luminosity of the accompanying figure(s)'. [21] In this statement he seems to allow that the radiance of the angel(s) is primitive and that only the original luminescence of Christ has disappeared. But in that case, how is the angelic radiance a *vestige* of a luminous resurrection appearance? Once one allows it to be primitive and distinct, then it becomes question-begging to assume that it is all that remains of a doubly ascribed luminescence in the original tradition.

b. The Docetic Elements in the Narratives

Contrary to what Robinson states, Jesus is never said to pass through locked doors in the appearance narratives. He simply appeared miraculously in the closed room, even as he miraculously vanished during bread-breaking in Emmaus. The physical demonstrations of showing his wounds and eating before the disciples indicate that Jesus is conceived to appear physically. His appearances are no more docetic than are similar angelic appearances, which may also begin and end abruptly. In fact, it is instructive to note that the rabbis distinguished between a mere vision of an angel and an extra-mental appearance of an angel precisely on the basis of whether food seen to be consumed by the angelic visitant remains or is gone after the angel disappears. [22] The mode of his coming or going is irrelevant to his physical reality.

c. The Non-recognition Motif as a Vestige of Luminous Appearances

This is an ingenious and more interesting argument. Two questions arise in assessing its force. Does luminosity serve to obscure the identity of the individual appearing? And does the non-recognition motif serve some theological purpose in the resurrection narratives or is it a useless, vestigial feature in those accounts? In favor of an affirmative answer to the first question Robinson appeals to Paul's question, 'Who are you, Lord?' in the Acts narrative of his Damascus Road experience. But the force of this example is diminished by two facts. (1) The Acts account does not say that Paul saw any bodily form whatsoever in the blinding light that surrounded him. Hearing the voice, he asks for the identity of the speaker. Thus, the incident is not portrayed as a recognition scene. [23] (2) Since Paul had apparently never known the earthly Jesus, it is not clear that he could be expected to recognize him (as opposed to, say, an angel), even if he saw him in the light. Since they had lived with Jesus, the disciples' case would thus be different. Moreover, a forceful counter-example to Robinson's claim that luminescence conceals identity is again his own example of the transfiguration of Jesus. The disciples had no difficulty recognizing Jesus and distinguishing him from Elijah and Moses. This counter-example presses all the more strongly against Robinson if one takes this pericope to be a misplaced resurrection appearance story. Hence, I think it is far from clear that the luminosity of an appearing individual masks his identity. As to the second question, is the nonrecognition motif really so unintelligible and useless that it is probably vestigial? I am not so sure. Could it not, for example, serve to underline the difference between the earthly Jesus and the numinous, risen Lord, to say to the disciples that their former way of relating to Jesus was now at an end and a new relationship had begun? That seems to be the point of Jesus' cryptic remark to Mary, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father...' (Jn 20:17). So while the nonrecognition motif is puzzling, it is not evident that it should be

regarded as a relic of some earlier stage in the tradition.

d. The Account of the Transfiguration

It is remarkable that Robinson is prepared to accept 2 Pet. 1:16-17 as a factual description of the appearance to Peter, while rejecting the Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances. One can only take this double standard to result from Robinson's apologetic zeal. As to the claim that the transfiguration represents a misplaced resurrection appearance story, while we may agree that Mark does think of it as a proleptic display of Christ's coming glory, perhaps even rendering a narration of a resurrection appearance in fulfillment of the angel's prediction (16:7) therefore superfluous, nevertheless the narrative is so firmly embedded in its context that it is unlikely to be a misplaced appearance story. [24] More importantly, we have seen that this story actually serves to undercut rather than support Robinson's construction, for it shows that luminosity is not incompatible with physicality and does not serve to obscure the identity of the glorified individual. Hence, it seems to me that Robinson has failed to demonstrate that the elements of luminosity in the canonical Gospels are truly vestiges or that their presence supports his proposed trajectories.

Examination of Argument (3)

Turning to point (3), we need to ask whether Paul and John of Patmos really believed, as Robinson apparently claims, that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are numerically identical, that in rising from the dead Jesus was somehow transformed into the Holy Spirit. Consider first the case of Paul. When Paul speaks of *soma pneumatikon*, we must not overlook the obvious fact that he is talking about a *soma* not an incorporeal spirit. Although *soma* is often taken to be a synonym for the whole person, it is evident that in I Corinthians 15 it is used to refer to the physical body and is roughly synonymous with 'flesh' in a morally neutral sense. [25] Modern commentators agree that by a 'spiritual body' Paul does not mean a body made out of spirit, but a body under the domination of and oriented toward the Spirit. [26] Now when Paul says that the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit, he does not mean that Jesus turned into the Holy Spirit (thereby negating his somatic reality) any more than when Paul says the first Adam became a living soul, he means that Adam turned into a disembodied *psyche*. [27]

Rather, he describes the same two entities respectively as *soma psychikon* (15.44), *psyche zosa* (15.45), *to psychikon* (15.46), and *soma pneumatikon* (15.44), *pneuma zoopoion* (15.45), *to pneumatikon* (15.46). It is because of his desire to construct a parallelism on the words of Gen. 2:7 that Paul abbreviates his reference to Christ's spiritual body in 15:45. As for 2 Cor. 3:17-18, there

is no good reason to think that Paul is claiming more than an identity of *function* between the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit. [28] Given his teaching on the resurrection *soma* and his personal belief in the bodily return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 2 Thess. 1:7-8, 10; 2:1, 8; 1 Cor. 15:23; Phil. 3:20-21; 4:5; Col. 3:4), it seems to me exegetically fanciful to suppose that Paul thought the risen Christ was numerically identical with the Holy Spirit.

The evidence for the case of John is even less compelling for Robinson's thesis. John's being in the Spirit refers only to the mode of his vision of Christ. That Christ himself commands the churches to give heed to the Spirit affords no inference that Christ has turned into an unembodied Spirit, especially when one contemplates John's vision of Christ's millennial reign and personal presence in the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 20-21). Hence, I must confess that I find Robinson's third point to be the weakest of the four.

Examination of Argument (4)

Finally, in support of point (4) Robinson cites a number of second century Gnostic texts in order to show that the Gnostics held the resurrection appearances to be visualizations of pure radiance without any bodily form. Here two questions present themselves. (a) Are the second-century Gnostic beliefs the issue of a process of reinterpretation of primitive traditions of visualizations of a luminous bodily form? And (b) did the second-century Gnostics hold that the resurrection appearances of Christ were visions of pure, unembodied radiance? With respect to (a), it seems clear that apart from his first three points, Robinson's fourth point alone does nothing to prove the existence of an earlier, developing trajectory, but only shows us what second-century Gnostics believed. What Robinson must show is that the second-century Gnostic position is the terminus of a process whereby primitive visualizations of a radiant bodily shape were transformed into visualizations of unembodied radiance. Not only has he failed to shoulder that burden of proof, but, it seems to me, such a hypothetical development is quite improbable. There is simply no evidence that the New Testament writers were opposed by persons who espoused luminous resurrection appearances lacking a bodily shape. In fact, Robinson appears to be lapsing back into nineteenth-century German exegesis's identification of *soma* with the *form* of the body and light or glory as its *substance*. Under the influence of idealism, theologians like Holsten and Lüdemann held that the *soma* is the form of the earthly body and the *sarx* its substance. [29] This enabled one to maintain that in the resurrection the *soma*, or bodily form was retained but was endowed with a new spiritual substance. In this way one could affirm a bodily resurrection without affirming its physicality. Hence, in the older commentaries such as Hans Lietzmann's commentary on the Corinthian

correspondence, one finds the *soma pneumatikon* to be conceived as a body made out of *himmlischer Lichtsubstanz*. [30] Although Gundry states that this interpretation has now been almost universally abandoned, [31] Robinson seems to be presupposing such an understanding. For he thinks that the Gnostic aversion to the *soma* meant an aversion to bodily *form* and that Paul's affirmation of a resurrection *soma* meant an affirmation of bodily *form*. But what Paul affirmed and the Gnostics objected to was real, physical, material corporeality, not just the form thereof. Proto-Gnostics could have affirmed quite happily the allegedly primitive visualizations of an intangible, immaterial, luminous bodily form.

In fact--and this leads me to my second point (b)--an examination of Robinson's texts reveals that this is precisely what the Gnostics often *did* affirm. For, contrary to Robinson, the Gnostic resurrection appearance texts do not speak of a bodiless radiance, but usually refer to visions of a luminous human bodily form. The only text which suggests a bodiless radiance is found in the *Letter of Peter to Philip* and even that text is not unequivocal, stating, "then a great light appeared so that the mountain shone from the sight of him who had appeared" (134.10-13) [32] For the rest, bodily appearances are clearly described. For example, in the *Apocryphon of John* we find a sort of trinitarian vision described in which the same human being appears successively as a youth, an old man and a servant, all enveloped in light (1.302.9). [33] In the *Pistis Sophia* 1.4 we read of a post-ascension appearance of Jesus in radiant bodily form:

As they were saying these things and were weeping to one mother, on the ninth hour of the following day the heavens opened, and they saw Jesus coming down, giving light exceedingly, and there was no measure to the light in which he was. [34]

In the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* we read,

After he rose from the dead, his twelve disciples and seven women followed him and went to Galilee on the mountain that is called 'Place of Harvesttime and Joy'...The Savior appeared not in his first form, but in the invisible spirit. And his form was like a great angel of light. And his likeness I must not describe. No mortal flesh can endure it, but only pure and perfect flesh like that which he taught us about on the mountain called 'Of the Olives' in Galilee. And he said, 'Peace to you! My peace I give to you!' And they all wondered and were afraid.

The Savior laughed and said to them, 'What are you thinking about? Why are you perplexed?' (90.14-92.2).[35]

In fact in some of the Gnostic resurrection appearance stories the element of luminosity is

completely lacking. For example, in the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* Peter is confronted by a pearl merchant named Lithargoel, who is described in the following way:

A man came out wearing a cloth bound around his waist, and a gold belt girded it. Also a napkin was tied over his chest, extending over his shoulders and covering his head and arms.

I was staring at the man, because he was beautiful in his form and stature. There were four parts of his body which I saw: the tops of his feet, and a part of his chest, and the palm of his hand, and his visage (2:10-24). [36]

Lithargoel later changes into the dress of a physician, and a recognition scene follows in which Lithargoel reveals his true identity as the risen Christ:

He answered and said, 'It is I! Recognize me, Peter.' He loosed his garment, which clothed him--the one into which he had changed himself because of us--revealing to us in truth that it was he. We prostrated ourselves on the ground and worshipped him. We comprised eleven disciples. He stretched forth his hand and caused us to stand (9.13-23). [37]

This story is especially interesting, since it adopts the recognition motif from the canonical appearance stories and yet without any use of the luminosity motif. Another non-luminous resurrection appearance is related in the *Apocryphon of James*:

Now when the twelve disciples were all sitting together and recalling what the Savior had said to each one of them... lo, the Savior appeared, after he had departed from us, and we had waited for him. And after five hundred and fifty days since he had risen from the dead, we said to him, 'Have you departed and removed yourself from us?'

But Jesus, said, 'No, but I shall go to the place from whence I came. If you wish to come with me, come!'... And having called [James and Peter] he drew them aside and bade the rest occupy themselves with that which they were about (2.7-39). [38]

In this text it is only with Jesus' ascension into heaven that the fleshly body is stripped away; similarly in the *Pistis Sophia* 1.1-6 Jesus is said to have spent eleven years with his disciples after his resurrection prior to his ascension in radiant glory (and even in his post-ascension appearance he, at the disciples' request, retracts his radiance so as to appear in a non-luminescent condition). This is instructive because it shows that the resurrection of the physical body and physical appearances were not objectionable to Gnostics, since further transformation could always be deferred until the ascension. In fact, some Gnostic texts are quite content to preserve the flesh

throughout resurrection and glorification, insisting only that in the resurrection the body comes to possess a higher, incorruptible flesh (*Treat. Res.* 47. 2-12). [39] Thus in *Gos. Phil.* 57.18-19 we read, 'It is necessary to rise in the flesh, since everything exists in it'. [40] With regard to Jesus' resurrection the same text states, 'The Lord rose from the dead. He became as he used to be, but now his body was perfect. He did indeed possess flesh, but this flesh is true flesh. Our flesh is not true, but we possess only an image of the true.' (68.31-37) [41] With such a conception of the resurrection body we can readily understand why Gnostic writings show no compunction about relating bodily and even physical resurrection appearances. Thus, it seems that the view which Robinson wants to pass off as 'the original Christian position' is in danger of being even more Gnostic than that of the Gnostics!

It therefore seems to me that Robinson's construction of a trajectory from Easter to Valentinus collapses. The Gnostics did not take as their point of departure visualizations of a radiant bodily form and then disembodied them to arrive at visions of pure radiance. Rather, they departed from the primitive conception of physical, bodily resurrection appearances and sometimes dematerialized them in order to arrive at visualizations of a radiant bodily form. [42]

By the same token, it does not seem that Robinson has provided sufficient evidence to support his constructed parallel trajectory from Easter to the Apostles' Creed. We have seen no convincing reasons to think that the original resurrection appearances were visualizations of an immaterial and intangible refulgent bodily form. Indeed, had this been the case, then it is difficult to understand why the trajectory should have advanced to the Apostles' Creed's affirmation of the resurrection of the flesh, for faced with the supposed Gnostic denial of bodily form in the radiance, all that would have been necessary was to reaffirm the bodily form or shape of the resplendent glory, not to materialize it by means of crass physical demonstrations of displaying wounds and eating fish. And those who like Robinson are wont to speak of Luke or John's 'apologetic against Gnosticism' need to recall that the physicalism of the stories belongs to the traditional material received by these authors, not their redaction of it. There are, in fact, substantive reasons for thinking that the physicalism of the resurrection appearance stories is not a counter-response motivated by Gnostic opponents. [43] Therefore, I see no reason to think that Robinson's hypothesized trajectory from Easter to the Apostles' Creed is any firmer a span than the bridge he has built from Easter to Valentinus.

Conclusion

In summary, none of Robinson's four points supplies sufficient evidence for the existence of twin trajectories taking as their common point of departure primitive first-century visualizations of the resurrected Christ as a luminous bodily form and finding their respective termini in second-century Gnosticism's supposed reinterpretation of these experiences as visions of unembodied luminosity, on the one hand, and in the affirmation of the Apostle's Creed of the resurrection of the flesh, on the other. Robinson has invested an enormous amount of time and industry in the study of the Nag Hammadi documents, and he is understandably anxious that these texts should prove fruitful in the interpretation of the New Testament. But the results of this examination suggest that their value is not to be found in their relevance to the post-resurrection appearances of the Gospel tradition.

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#)

J.M. Robinson, 'Jesus from Easter to Valentinus (or to the Apostles' Creed)', *JBL* 101 (1982), pp. 5-37.

[\[2\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 37.

[\[3\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 37.

[\[4\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 7.

[\[5\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 10.

[\[6\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 10.

[\[7\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 14.

[\[8\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 9.

[\[9\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 10.

[\[10\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 13.

[\[11\]](#)

R.C. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 1119-20; *idem*, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 22-23; R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* (3 vols.; HTKNT, 4; Freiburg: Herder, 1976), III, pp. 368, 452-56; so also B. Lindars (ed.), *The Gospel of John* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972), p. 602.

[\[12\]](#)

See the study by J. Coppens, 'La glorification céleste du Christ dans la théologie néotestamentaire et l'attente de Jésus', in E. Dhanis (ed.), *Resurrexit* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974), pp. 37-40.

[\[13\]](#)

Sometimes appeal is made to 2 Cor. 4.6, which is thought to refer to the blinding light on the Damascus Road. But in fact the verse does not seem to be connected to Paul's conversion experience: the light is the light of the gospel (4.4) and is compared to God's act of creation (cf. Gen. 1.3). There appears to be no reason to think that it refers to the Damascus Road experience.

[\[14\]](#)

All Paul tells us is that Jesus appeared (*ophthe*) to him (I Cor. 15.8). that he saw (*heoraka*) Jesus (I Cor. 9. 1), and that God revealed (*apokalupsai*) his Son to him (Gal. 1.16). Dunn argues that Paul's use of *en emoi* in Gal. 1.16 instead of the simple dative shows that he is describing 'a personal subjective experience' (J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and The Spirit* [London: SCM 1975], pp. 105-106), but Dunn concedes that it is his *conversion* that Paul describes as a subjective experience; Paul 'is not talking about the visionary side of his conversion experience as such'. Hoffmann agrees that *en emoi* says nothing about the nature of Paul's experience, but he appeals to *apokalupsai* as evidence of the appearance's being visionary and eschatological (P. Hoffmann, 'Auferstehung II. Auferstehung Jesu Christi II/1. Neues Testament', *TRE* [1979], pp. 492-97). But apart from other

difficulties, Hoffmann's argument rests on the unproven presupposition that in the mind of the biblical writers one cannot have an apocalyptic-eschatological experience of a physically real entity.

[\[15\]](#)

See P. Borgen, 'From Paul to Luke', *CBQ* 31 (1969), p. 180; cf. C.F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament* (SBT, 12; London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 55-56; X. Léon-Dufour, 'L'apparition du Ressuscité à Paul', in Dhanis (ed.), *Resurrexit*, p. 294; C.W. Hedrick, 'Paul's Conversion/Call: A Comparative Analysis of the Three Reports in Acts', *JBL* 100 (1981), pp. 430-31.

[\[16\]](#)

See the remarks of J .E. Alsup, *The Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories of the Gospel-Tradition* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1975), pp. 32, 34, 54.

[\[17\]](#)

For good statements of this point, see B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel of the Resurrection* (London: Macmillan, 1906), pp. 93-94; J. Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), p. 39; P. Gardner-Smith, *The Narratives of the Resurrection* (London: Methuen, 1926), pp. 21-22; J.A.T. Robinson, 'Resurrection in the New Testament', *IDB*. Dunn even hypothesizes that Paul's placing himself in the list could be a case of special pleading-- interpreting a less distinctive religious experience as a resurrection appearance in order to boost his claim to apostolic authority (Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 99)! Dunn rejects the hypothesis in the end because the pillar apostles accepted Paul's claim without serious dispute (*Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 108).

[\[18\]](#)

See H. Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 4th edn, 1970), pp. 186-89.

[\[19\]](#)

On the difference between a resurrection appearance and a vision see the discussion by Grass, *Ostergeschehen*, pp. 189-207. It should be noted that this distinction is conceptual in nature, not primarily linguistic.

[\[20\]](#)

See the discussion in W.L. Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the*

Resurrection of Jesus (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, 16; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989), pp. 68-69.

[\[21\]](#)

Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 15.

[\[22\]](#)

See various tests cited in K. Berger, *Die Auferstehung der Propheten und die Erhöhung des Menschensohnes* (SUNT, 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), pp. 159, 458.

[\[23\]](#)

This conclusion is not affected by any inference from Paul's letters that he saw a bodily form in the light, for the question concerning the speaker's identity occurs in the Acts account only, and in that account there is no suggestion of a bodily form.

[\[24\]](#)

For a discussion of suggested misplaced appearance stories, see C.H. Dodd, 'The Appearances of the Risen Christ: A Study in Form-Criticism of the Gospels', in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), pp. 119-22; R.H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (London: SPCK, 1972), pp. 160-67; Alsup, *Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories*, pp. 139-44.

[\[25\]](#)

See J. Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief* (KEK, 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), p. 372. The most important work on this subject is certainly R.H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); see his summary statement on p. 50. See also J. Gillman, 'Transformation in 1 Cor.15, 50-53', *ETL* 58 (1982), pp. 328-39.

[\[26\]](#)

See the discussion in Craig, *New Testament Evidence for the Resurrection*, pp. 133-37.

[\[27\]](#)

Kleinknecht et al., '*pneuma*', *TWNT*. I am astounded by the number of scholars who appeal to I Cor. 15.45; 2 Cor. 3.17-18, etc., to prove that Christ turned into the Spirit at the resurrection and so is now immaterial and invisible (e.g. Robinson, 'Easter to Valentinus', p. 13). Morissette shows from

Jewish texts that 'life-giving' means 'to resurrect' and comments,

'The appellation "Spirit", for its part, is sometimes used by Paul to designate Christ. [Cf. 2 Cor. 3-17a, 18c; comp. Rom. 8:9-11. This affirmation is implied occasionally by Luke: Comp. Lk. 12.12; 21.15; Acts 16.6, 7.] Nonetheless, there is no formal identification whatever. [Between 2 Cor. 3.17a ('the Lord is the Spirit') and 18c ('the Lord who is the Spirit') Paul distinguishes in v. 17b 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, etc.']. The identification is always functional: it serves to show what Christ means "now" for the faithful. [The Apostle frequently attributes similar functions to Christ and the Spirit; W. D. Davies in *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, p. 177, has a good summary of these texts]. The statement of I Cor. 15.45b is no exception, as the verb *zoopoion* . . . and the entire context indicate' (Rodolphe Morissette, 'L'antithese entre le "psychique" et le "pneumatique" en I Corinthiens, XV, 44 à 46', *RSR* 46 [1972], p. 141).

[\[28\]](#)

See the remarks of Dunn (*Jesus and the Spirit*, pp. 318-26), particularly the following: 'Of course he is speaking primarily in existential rather than in ontological terms. Jesus still has a personal existence; there is, we may say, more to the risen Jesus than life-giving Spirit (cf., e.g., Rom. 1.3f.; 8.34; 1 Cor. 15.24-28). But so far as the religious experience of Christians is concerned Jesus and the Spirit are no different. The risen Jesus may not be experienced independently of the Spirit, and my religious experience which is not in character and effect an experience of Jesus Paul would not regard as a manifestation of the life-giving Spirit'(pp. 322-21).

[\[29\]](#)

C. Holsten, *Zum Evangelium des Paulus und des Petrus* (Rostock: Stiller, 1868); H. Lüdemann, *Die Anthropologie des Apostel Paulus und ihre Stellung innerhalb seiner Heilslehre* (Kiel: Universitätsverlag, 1872).

[\[30\]](#)

H. Lietzmann, *An die Korinther I, II* (rev. W.G. Kümmel; HNT, 9; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 4th edn, 1949), p. 194.

[\[31\]](#)

Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, pp. 161-62, where he lists six factors contributing to this consensus.

[\[32\]](#)

Text from J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), p. 395.

[\[33\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 99.

[\[34\]](#)

Text in C. Schmidt (ed.), *Pistis Sophia* (trans. V. MacDermot; NHS, 9; Leiden: Brill, 1978), p. 15.

[\[35\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 207-208

[\[36\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 266.

[\[37\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 269.

[\[38\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 30.

[\[39\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 52. For a list of similar Gnostic affirmations of the resurrection of the flesh or body, see the comment on this passage by M.L. Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginos* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

[\[40\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 135.

[\[41\]](#)

Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 141.

[\[42\]](#)

See the remarks of E.E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (NCB; London: Nelson, 1966), p. 175; Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, pp. 119-20; K. Bornhäuser, *Das Recht des Bekenntnisses zur Auferstehung des Fleisches* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1899), pp. 47-61; W. Künneth, *The Theology*

of the Resurrection (trans. J.W. Leitch; London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 92-93.

[\[43\]](#)

See discussion in Craig, *New Testament Evidence for the Resurrection*, pp. 335-39.