

The Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus:
Historiographical Considerations in the Light of Recent Debates

by

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Abstract

Dale Allison refers to the historical question pertaining to Jesus' resurrection as "the prize puzzle of New Testament research." More than 2,500 journal articles and books have been written on the subject since 1975. In this dissertation, I investigate the question while providing unprecedented interaction with the literature of professional historians outside of the community of biblical scholars on both hermeneutical and methodological considerations. Chapter one is devoted to discussions pertaining to the philosophy of history and historical method, such as the extent to which the past is knowable, how historians gain a knowledge of it, the impact biases have on investigations and steps that may assist historians in minimizing their biases, the role a consensus should or should not play in historical investigations, who shoulders the burden of proof, and the point at which a historian is warranted in declaring that a historical question has been solved. I seek to determine how historians outside of the community of biblical scholars generally proceed in their investigations involving non-religious matters and establish a similar approach for proceeding in my investigation of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. In chapter two, I address objections to the investigation of miracle-claims by historians from a number of prominent scholars. My conclusion is that their objections warrant that extra caution should be taken by historians investigating miracle claims but are ill-founded in terms of prohibiting a historical investigation of Jesus' resurrection. Historians must identify the relevant sources from which they will mine data for their investigations. In chapter three, I survey the primary literature relevant to our investigation and rate them according to their value to an investigation pertaining to Jesus' resurrection. I limit this survey to sources that mention the death and resurrection of Jesus and that were written within two hundred years of Jesus' death. I then rate each according to the likelihood that it contains data pertaining to Jesus' death and resurrection that go back to the earliest Christians, and identify the sources most promising for the present investigation. In chapter four, I mine through this most promising material and form a collection of relevant facts that are so strongly evidenced that they enjoy a heterogeneous and nearly universal consensus granting them. These comprise our historical bedrock upon which all hypotheses pertaining to Jesus' fate must be built. In chapter five, I apply the methodological considerations discussed in chapter one and weigh six hypotheses largely representative of those being offered in the beginning of the twenty-first century pertaining to the question of the resurrection of Jesus. I conclude that the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead is not only the best explanation of the relevant historical bedrock, it outdistances its competitors by a significant margin and meets the criteria for awarding historicity. Of course, this conclusion is provisional, since future discoveries may require its revision or abandonment. It also makes no assertions pertaining to the nature of Jesus' resurrection body nor claims to address the question of the cause of Jesus' resurrection.

Key Terms: Jesus, Resurrection, Historiography, Historical Method, Crucifixion, Appearances, Paul, Hallucination, Social Sciences, Miracles.

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Introduction

In 1910, George Tyrrell suggested that research was producing different versions of Jesus as though the scholars at work were simply painting portraits of themselves in first-century clothing. Crossan writes of the “academic embarrassment” resulting from this problem that continues in modern portraits.¹ For a number of years I have been a student of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Anyone who has devoted even a minimal amount of time to this question realizes that the varied results of research by scholars on this subject are reminiscent of what we find in historical Jesus research, if not more so. Major scholars such as Allison, Brown, Carnley, Catchpole, Craig, Crossan, Dunn, Ehrman, Habermas, Lüdemann, Marxsen, O’Collins, Swinburn, Wedderburn, and Wright have all weighed in on the topic during the past three decades and most of them have arrived at different results on a number of related issues.²

Classicist historian A. N. Sherwin-White caught my attention when he noted approaches taken by biblical scholars that differed from those of classical historians. He expressed surprise over the loss of confidence for the Gospels and especially Acts by New Testament scholars. On Acts he added that attempts to reject its basic historicity “appear absurd” and that “Roman historians have long taken it for granted.”³ On the Gospels, Sherwin-White asserted that “it is astonishing that while Graeco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the twentieth-century study of the Gospel narratives, starting from no less promising material [than what Graeco-Roman historians work with], has taken so gloomy a turn in the development of form-criticism.”⁴ The prominent theologian John McIntyre similarly observed that although historical positivism was “severely criticized” in the practice of history “in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, it has lingered on to have a quite devastating effect upon biblical criticism and theological definition in the

¹ For a recent treatment has attempted to identify how this quagmire might be resolved, see Denton (2004).

² Dale C. Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005); Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (1973), Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (1987), David Catchpole, *Resurrection People: Studies in the Resurrection Narratives of the Gospels* (2002); William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1989); John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994); James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (2003); Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (1999); Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (2003); Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ* (2004); Willi Marxsen, *Jesus and Easter: Did God Raise the Historical Jesus from the Dead?* (1990); Gerald O’Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus* (2003); Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (2003). Moreover, a number of books with numerous contributors have been published on the topic: Gavin D’Costa, ed. *Resurrection Reconsidered* (1996); Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, Gerald O’Collins, eds. *The Resurrection* (1998); Stewart, ed. (2006). The hypercritical community has also recently weighed in with Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder, *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave* (2005). The first theme issue for the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3.2 (June 2005) was devoted to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Craig, Habermas, and Swinburne are philosophers and conclude that Jesus rose. Marxsen (1990) comments, “There are almost as many opinions about ‘the resurrection of Jesus’ as there are books and essays which have been published on this subject” (39).

³ Sherwin-White (1963), 188-89.

⁴ Sherwin-White (1963), 187.

twentieth century. A curious aspect of this circumstance is that historical positivism has not had that kind of overwhelming influence upon general historiography.”⁵

I began to wonder whether the reason why a more unified conclusion on these matters eludes scholars is because biblical scholars are ill-prepared for such investigations. That is not to say that biblical scholars are not historically minded. Troeltsch made a serious attempt to form historical criteria and even today debates are taking place over what criteria and methods are appropriate for investigating the sayings of Jesus and the degree of certainty that may be attained.⁶ While these are helpful for identifying potentially authentic logia of Jesus and some of his acts, are they the most appropriate for investigating the claim that Jesus rose from the dead? After all, criteria for identifying authentic logia are not very helpful in verifying Caesar’s crossing the Rubicon in 49 BC and Augustus’ defeat of Antony in 31 BC.

What approach should be taken for an investigation involving the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection? When writing on the resurrection of Jesus, biblical scholars are engaged in historical research. Are they doing so without adequate or appropriate training?⁷ How many had completed so much as a single undergraduate course pertaining to how to investigate the past?⁸ Are biblical scholars conducting their historical investigations differently than professional historians? If professional historians who work outside of the community of biblical scholars were to embark on an investigation of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, what would such an investigation look like?

Gary Habermas is a professional philosopher noted for his specialization in the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. He served as director of my master’s thesis, which pertained to the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. Habermas has compiled a massive bibliography consisting of approximately 2,500 journal articles and books written by scholars on the subject of the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection in English, German, and French between 1975 through the present.⁹ He has extensive knowledge of the relevant literature, the major contributors, the positions they maintain and the reasons why they maintain them. I asked Habermas if he was aware of any

⁵ McIntyre (2001), 11. ‘Historical positivism’ is the position that authentic knowledge only comes from historical investigation. Accordingly, failure to prove something means that it has in essence been disproved.

⁶ Troeltsch (1913). For more recent examples, see Eve (2005), Hooker (1972), and Theissen and Winter (2002).

⁷ C. A. Evans (2006): “Eventually I learned that many scholars engaged in the study of the historical Jesus have studied Bible and theology, but not history. These Jesus scholars *are not historians at all*. This lack of training is apparent in the odd presuppositions, methods and conclusions that are reached” (252n16). In a personal dinner discussion with Richard Bauckham and Gary Habermas in San Diego on 11/15/07, Bauckham made a similar comment, which I paraphrase: New Testament scholars need to take courses in how to conduct historical investigation. Very few have training in this area and are simply using the same methods as those before them.

⁸ A search through the catalogues of courses and degree requirements revealed that few to no courses in the philosophy of history and contemporary historical method are offered by the departments of religion and philosophy at the nine Ivy-League institutions for the 2007 fall semester and 2008 spring and fall semesters. The only clear case is a Ph.D. seminar offered by Princeton Theological Seminary (CH 900 Historical Method).

⁹ At the time of my writing, Habermas was in the process of formatting this bibliography for publishing. Of interest is Habermas’ observation that “by far, the majority of publications on the subject of Jesus’s death and resurrection have been written by North American authors” and that these have “perhaps the widest range of views” ([“Resurrection Research,” 2005], 140; cf. 138, 140).

professional historian outside of the community of biblical scholars who had approached the question of the resurrection of Jesus. He was aware of only a handful who had contributed a few journal articles and one who had written a short book on the subject. At that time, he could not recall any treatment by a religious scholar or philosopher who had laid out a detailed philosophy of history and proposed methodology for approaching the question pertaining to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. My interest in taking this direction for doctoral research intensified and I began in March 2003.

Within two months of my beginning, N. T. Wright's monumental volume on the resurrection arrived: *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Later that same year the first volume of James D. G. Dunn's work on the historical Jesus was published: *Jesus Remembered*. These authors gave unprecedented considerations to hermeneutics and method, as would Allison two years later in *Resurrecting Jesus*. Even after these works, a void remained when it came to having a carefully defined and extensive historical method to the degree I imagined would be typical of professional historians.

So, how does my research differ from previous treatments? In the pages that follow I will investigate the question of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection while providing unprecedented interaction with the literature of professional historians outside of the community of biblical scholars on both hermeneutical and methodological considerations.¹⁰

In chapter one, I will discuss a few matters pertaining to the philosophy of history and historical method. I will discuss such topics as the extent to which the past is knowable, how historians gain knowledge of it, the impact biases have on investigations and steps that may assist historians in minimizing their biases, the role a consensus should or should not play in historical investigations, who shoulders the burden of proof, the point at which a historian is warranted in declaring that the question has been solved, and a few others. My objective in this chapter is to determine how historians outside of the community of biblical scholars proceed in their investigations involving non-religious matters in order to establish my approach for proceeding in my investigation of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.

In chapter two, I will address objections to the investigation of miracle-claims by historians from a number of prominent scholars. This is very important for the present investigation, since we can go no further if historians are barred from the task. I will address the objections mounted by David Hume, C. B. McCullagh, John Meier, Bart Ehrman, A. J. M. Wedderburn and James D. G. Dunn. My conclusion is that their objections are ill-founded insofar as they prohibit a historical investigation of Jesus' resurrection, although they warn us to proceed with caution. I will provide further discussion on the issue of burden of proof given the added consideration of a miracle-claim.

Historians must identify the relevant sources from which they will mine data for their investigations. In chapter three, I will survey the primary literature relevant to our investigation and rate them according to their value to the present investigation. I will

¹⁰ To be clear, historians outside of the community of biblical scholars have these discussions. But an application of them to the question of Jesus' resurrection has not been performed to the extent herein.

limit this survey to sources that mention the death and resurrection of Jesus and that were written within two hundred years of Jesus' death. These sources include the canonical literature, non-canonical Christian literature (including the Gnostic sources), and non-Christian sources. I will then rate each of these according to the likelihood that it contains data pertaining to Jesus' death and resurrection that go back to the earliest Christians, and identify the sources most promising for the present investigation.

In chapter four, I will mine through the most promising material identified in the previous chapter and form a collection of facts that are so strongly evidenced that they enjoy a heterogeneous and nearly universal consensus granting them. These will comprise our historical bedrock upon which all hypotheses pertaining to Jesus' fate must be built. Facts that do not qualify as historical bedrock will not be allowed in the weighing of hypotheses in chapter five unless needed in the event of a tie-breaker, addressed by a particular hypothesis, or included in the footnotes.

In chapter five, I will apply the methodological considerations discussed in chapter one and weigh six hypotheses largely representative of those being offered in the beginning of the twenty-first century pertaining to the question of the resurrection of Jesus. I will start with the contention of Geza Vermes that we do not know whether Jesus rose from the dead, followed by the proposals of Michael Goulder and Gerd Lüdemann that draw exclusively upon psychohistory and provide naturalistic explanations for the beliefs of the earliest Christians that Jesus had been raised. I will then assess John Dominic Crossan's contention that a combination of psychological conditions, unique exegetical interpretations, competing reports in often ignored sources that contain earlier Christian teachings, Paul's mutation of the Jewish concept of the general resurrection, and the use of resurrection as a metaphor, contributed to the view that God's cosmic clean-up of the world had begun and that a literal understanding of resurrection as the revivification of Jesus' corpse would have been repulsive to the earliest Christians, including Paul. I will then move onto Pieter Craffert's hypothesis that attempts to take the biblical reports seriously while explaining them in natural terms by drawing on the social sciences. Finally, I will assess the Resurrection hypothesis.

Allison refers to the question pertaining to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus as the "prize puzzle of New Testament research."¹¹ It is my hope that this work will assist us in coming closer to solving the puzzle.

¹¹ Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), 200. See also Watson (1987): "The resurrection of Jesus has recently become a *cause célèbre* second only to the controversy about the ordination of women" (365).