Summary and Further Considerations

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jesus continues to captivate the attention of scholars. His attraction is not limited to the pious; non-believers study him, too. Extreme skeptics assert he is a myth. The orthodox declare him deity. And everyone who falls between these two positions offers enough portraits to fill a gallery. Whether Jesus was mythical, mortal, or immortal, and whether it was he or those who wrote about him who are responsible for the phenomenon, few if any other historical figures have received the attention Jesus has.

Scholars are captivated not only with the task of uncovering Jesus’ teachings and deeds, but also with determining his fate. And while nearly every scholar in the world agrees that Jesus was killed by the Romans via the brutal method of crucifixion, it is what happened after he was removed from his cross that has been the subject of more than twenty-five hundred books and articles written during the past thirty-five years.

The outsider might expect that there would be more agreement among scholars in their conclusions pertaining to what happened to Jesus after his crucifixion. Instead they find numerous renditions of a Jesus who either died, survived, or revived. Thus, given the academic interest in the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, we are not surprised to find that it has been called the “prize puzzle of New Testament research.”

Almost without exception, the literature pertaining to Jesus’ resurrection has been written by biblical scholars and philosophers. Could a reason for the varied conclusions on the subject be that those writing on it are not equipped for the task? Have biblical scholars and philosophers received the same training in the philosophy of history and historical method as their cousins, that is, professional historians outside of the community of biblical scholars and philosophers? How do historians of non-religious matters go about their practice? Would an application of their approach lead us closer to solving the puzzle?

The objective of this dissertation was to learn and apply the approach of historians outside of the community of biblical scholars to the question of whether Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. It differs from previous approaches in providing unprecedented interaction with philosophers of history related to hermeneutical and methodological considerations and applies these to an investigation pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus.

Part 1: Summary of Chapters

Chapter One: The task of this chapter was to familiarize ourselves with the approaches of historians outside of the community of biblical scholars. So we discussed a number of matters in the philosophy of history and historical method relevant to our investigation, such as the nature of historical knowledge, managing the influence of one’s horizon on an investigation, and historical method. We observed that, despite the contentions of postmodernist historians, the overwhelming majority of practicing historians outside of the community of biblical scholars are realists, that is, they maintain that the past is knowable to a limited extent and that narratives constructed of the past correspond to the actual past to varying degrees. Indeed, most historians continue to practice history as always. However, postmodernist historians
have reminded conventional historians that there is no strictly objective knowledge of facts independent of interpretation and this has led them away from the unwarranted confidence in the conclusions many of them have portrayed.

We then discussed various opinions pertaining to who shoulders the burden of proof. I concluded with others that methodical neutrality is most appropriate. Historians should presume neither the reliability nor the falsehood of a text. Those making statements about a text are responsible for defending them. A similar approach applies to hypotheses. The truth of a hypothesis must not be presumed and counter suggestions must be supported.

We discussed how historians assess and compare competing versions of the past and observed that they typically employ arguments to the best explanation, which weigh hypotheses according to how well they fulfill a number of criteria. The hypothesis that does this best is to be preferred. Although historians have named various criteria, their number, how they are defined and the importance assigned them differ. We discussed each criteria and I named five which may be employed in weighing hypotheses, adopted and defended specific definitions for them, and assigned them an order of importance. We likewise observed that differences of opinion exist pertaining to when historians are warranted in concluding that a hypothesis has been verified adequately. In light of these, I argued for a spot on a spectrum of historical certainty on which hypotheses being placed at least there may be said to be historical.

Our research revealed some conclusions that came as a surprise. As with biblical scholars, few historians engage themselves in reflective thought pertaining to matters in hermeneutics and historical method. By historical method I am not referring to criteria for authenticity which are commonly employed in historical Jesus research. Rather I am referring to deliberate methods for weighing hypotheses and criteria for awarding historicity. Biblical scholars and historians more commonly rely on their own intuition, which, unfortunately, is heavily influenced by their horizons. Many scholars do not acknowledge the impact their horizon has on their investigations and appear to proceed unaware that it influences their every step. This is perhaps the main reason for the plurality of historical conclusions in both historical Jesus research as well as historical inquiries unrelated to religious matters.

We observed that historians are asking many of the same questions being asked by biblical scholars. However, they have been debating the issues much longer and are ahead of biblical scholars in their understanding of the problems. The debate over postmodern approaches is a good example. While biblical scholars appear to be moving in the direction of postmodernist history, their historical cousins have recently completed a lengthy debate between postmodern and realist approaches and have for the most part abandoned postmodernism. It is surprising to find biblical scholars who appear to regard themselves as pioneers in adopting a postmodern approach, apparently oblivious to the fact that others have already camped there, extinguished their fires, scattered the ashes, and returned home to realism. Accordingly, biblical scholars would benefit from familiarizing themselves with similar debates between professional historians. Biblical scholars have much they can learn from historians in general and especially from those who have specialized in the philosophy of history. Notwithstanding these discussions, the problems inherent in every historical inquiry
remain and there are no specific canons of history that are broadly accepted throughout the community of professional historians.

Chapter Two: The task of this chapter was to examine a number of objections to the investigation of miracle-claims by historians in order to see if historians are not suited to adjudicate on them. We examined objections offered by David Hume, C. B. McCullagh, John Meier, Bart Ehrman, A. J. M. Wedderburn and James D. G. Dunn. I concluded that none of them stood up to critical scrutiny, although some of them warned us of potential pitfalls in an investigation of a miracle-claim such as the resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, I concluded that historians are not barred from proceeding.

I defined “miracle” as “an event in history for which natural explanations are inadequate.” That is to say that the nature of the event itself is such that there could be no natural cause. Defining “miracle” is a different exercise from indentifying one. I provided two criteria for identifying a miracle in order to distinguish one from an anomaly. We may conclude that an event is a miracle when the event (1) is extremely unlikely to have occurred, given the circumstances and/or natural law and (2) it occurs in an environment or context that is charged with religious significance. That is, we find the event occurring in a context in which we may expect a god to act.

The identification of a miracle had implications for our discussion of Meier’s objection. Meier claims that when all naturalistic explanations have failed, historians cannot claim that “God has directly acted” in a specific situation. While I agree that historians are not warranted in asserting that their investigations have proved that “God” was the cause of the event, I argued that they are not barred from attributing the event to a cause that is supernatural in nature. Such a cause could be a god or a personal force of a sort. Thus, while historians cannot conclude that the cause of the supernatural event was the Judeo-Christian God, they cannot exclude him either. Indeed, given the available options, a historian may conclude, in principle, that the Judeo-Christian God is the most plausible explanation.

This is, of course, contingent on the quality of the context in which the data for Jesus’ resurrection appears. And I concluded that the context was charged strongly in its religious significance, although I reserved a discussion of the context of Jesus’ life for chapter four. Accordingly, historians are warranted in concluding that Jesus’ return to life was a miracle, if the Resurrection hypothesis turns out being the best explanation after a critical examination of numerous hypotheses has been made.

Wedderburn contends that historians cannot adjudicate on the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, given the presence of a discrepancy among the early Christians pertaining to the meaning of resurrection. According to Wedderburn, the Evangelists affirmed the corporeal nature of the event while Paul believed it was non-corporeal given his comments in 1 Corinthians 15. How may one then determine whether Jesus was resurrected when the early Christians could not agree on what they meant by the claim?

I concluded that if Paul taught an incorporeal resurrection while the Evangelists and Orthodoxy a corporeal one, the earlier source (Paul) should be preferred. The waters would be somewhat muddy but visibility for historians would be present. I added that
Wedderburn and Dunn are, in fact, mistaken in their interpretation of Paul who taught a corporeal resurrection, although the discussion of the relevant Pauline texts was reserved for chapter four.

We observed that a number of professional historians are calling for a paradigm change within the community and that the refusal to consider miracle-claims is usually based on a secular metaphysics rather than historiographical considerations. Finally, we discussed whether historians proposing that a miracle has occurred shoulder a great burden of proof. I concluded that no greater burden is required. However, a particular historian may require additional evidence for himself before believing if the conclusion is in conflict with his horizon. But the horizon of a historian does not place a greater burden on the shoulders of another unless the criterion of consilience is affected. It is the responsibility of all historians to lay aside their biases and consider the evidence as objectively as possible. It is not the responsibility of the evidence to satisfy the biases of historians.

In short, in this chapter I examined a number of objections to the investigation of miracle-claims by historians and concluded that historians are within their professional rights to proceed.

**Chapter Three:** The task of this chapter was to identify sources relevant to our present investigation from which I would mine data. I surveyed the primary literature that mention the death and resurrection of Jesus and that were written within two hundred years of Jesus’ death. These sources included the canonical literature, non-canonical Christian literature—including the Gnostic sources, and non-Christian sources. I rated each according to the likelihood that it contains data pertaining to Jesus’ death and resurrection that go back to the earliest Christians. I identified the sources most promising for the present investigation.

I concluded that Paul’s letters and the oral traditions embedded throughout them, especially 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, are our most promising material. Paul was an eyewitness, had even been hostile toward the Christian message, and some of the oral traditions are both early and probably reflect the teaching of the Jerusalem apostles. Other sources are likewise promising. These include the canonical Gospels, *1 Clement*, Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians, the speeches in Acts, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and on occasion a few non-Christian sources. However, their pedigree is not nearly as clear. Scholars continue to debate over the extent of material in the canonical Gospels that may be traced back to Jesus and his original disciples, the dating and origin of *Thomas*, whether the speeches in Acts reflect apostolic *kerygma*, and whether Clement of Rome and Polycarp knew any of the apostles. Moreover, while certain logia in *Thomas* may go back to Jesus and his apostles, the two logia that are relevant to this present investigation probably do not. What is far more certain is that Paul and the oral traditions preserved mostly in his letters are excellent sources that may assist us greatly in our investigation pertaining to the fate of Jesus. This conclusion enjoys widespread support.

**Chapter Four:** The task of this chapter was to mine our primary and most promising sources for data relevant to our investigation. We first observed that a context exists pertaining to Jesus’ life that is charged with religious significance. Given the strength of supporting evidence, virtually all specialists of the historical Jesus agree that he
believed himself to be God’s eschatological agent and that he performed acts that both
he and many of his followers regarded as miracles and exorcisms. I then contended
that the evidence is quite strong that Jesus predicted his violent and imminent death as
well as his subsequent resurrection by God very shortly afterward, adding fresh
arguments to the discussion. It is within this context that the relevant historical
bedrock pertaining to Jesus’ fate appears. Accordingly, given our discussion in
chapter two pertaining to the identification of a miracle, historians are warranted in
concluding that Jesus’ return to life was a miracle if the Resurrection hypothesis turns
out being the best explanation after a critical examination of numerous hypotheses has
been made.

We observed that there are three facts that are strongly supported by the data and are
acknowledged as facts by a nearly unanimous and heterogeneous consensus of
scholars who have studied the subject.

1. Jesus died by crucifixion.
2. Very shortly after Jesus’ death, the disciples had experiences that led them to
believe and proclaim that Jesus had been resurrected and had appeared to
them.
3. Within a few years after Jesus’ death, Paul converted after experiencing what
he interpreted as a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to him.

These facts form the historical bedrock, facts past doubting, upon which all
hypotheses should be built.

We also investigated Paul’s view of resurrection, analyzing 1 Corinthians 15:42-54
and five other relevant Pauline texts (Rom. 8:11; Phil. 3:21; Col. 2:9; 2 Cor. 4:16-5:8;
Gal. 1:11-19). I concluded that the texts in Romans and Philippians both referred to
Jesus’ corporeal resurrection, the text in Galatians is ambiguous, and the text in
Colossians—which may or may not belong to Paul—refers to Jesus being in a bodily
state now but says nothing about the nature of his resurrection. I also concluded that
in 2 Corinthians Paul is asserting that believers who die prior to the Parousia will
become disembodied until the general resurrection when they will receive their
resurrection bodies while believers alive at the Parousia will have their earthly bodies
clothed with their new resurrection body. Accordingly, Paul has not written anything
in conflict with the views he expressed shortly thereafter in his letters to the churches
in Rome and Philippi. But had he changed his mind since he previously
wrote to the

We focused on four points of contention in 1 Corinthians 15 and I concluded that
none of them support an immaterial or ethereal resurrection. Of particular interest
was our discussion related to the comparison of the terms *natural* (ψυχικόν) and
*spiritual* (πνευματικόν) in 15:44. I located 846 occurrences of the former from the
eighth-century BC through the third-century AD and could not locate a single
occurrence of the term that possessed a meaning of *physical* or *material*. This
discovery in itself eliminates any interpretation of 15:44 that has Paul asserting
physical corpses are buried while resurrection bodies will be immaterial (*a la
Wedderburn, RSV/NRSV, et al*).
We considered a fourth fact: the conversion of Jesus’ skeptical half-brother James when he believed the risen Jesus had appeared to him. Although we observed that this fact has strong supporting evidence and a large and heterogeneous majority of scholars writing on the subject who grant it, most scholars have not given attention to James’ conversion. Thus, I did not judge it strong enough to qualify as historical bedrock. We also considered a fifth fact: the empty tomb. Although—according to Habermas—a strong majority of scholars grant the historicity of the empty tomb, it does not approach a universal consensus. Consequently, we did not pursue it further.

Chapter Five: The task of this final chapter was to pull everything together for a full application of my historical method in weighing hypotheses in order to come to a conclusion pertaining to whether Jesus rose from the dead. We assessed six hypotheses according to their ability to account for the historical bedrock. If there were more than one that could do this, we would repeat the exercise on the best of the six hypotheses, this time including second-level facts; that is, facts for which I contended in the dissertation but that do not qualify as historical bedrock.

The six hypotheses we examined are largely representative of those presently being offered by scholars. We first assessed the proposal of Geza Vermes that we do not know whether Jesus rose from the dead. This was followed by the hypotheses of Michael Goulder and Gerd Lüdemann that drew extensively from psychology and proposed that psychological events such as hallucinations, delusions, and wishful thinking were behind the beliefs of the disciples and Paul that Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to them. While these two hypotheses share a lot in common, they differ quite extensively in their handling of Paul who is a major player in the early Church and his conversion is part of our relevant historical bedrock. We then assessed John Dominic Crossan’s complex proposal that a combination of conditions led the early Christians, including the original disciples and Paul, to believe that God’s great clean-up of the world had begun and that a bodily resurrection of Jesus was far from their understanding. We then moved along to Pieter Craffert’s hypothesis that attempted to take the biblical reports seriously while drawing up the social sciences in order to explain them in natural terms. Finally, we assessed the Resurrection hypothesis.

I judged that the Resurrection hypothesis is by far the best explanation of the historical bedrock. When I applied historical method to the other five, I observed how weak they actually are in comparison. While the Resurrection hypothesis fulfilled all five criteria for the best explanation, the strongest of the others (VH) met only one. RH’s competitors are simply unable to account for the relevant historical bedrock in an adequate manner.

Since the Resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation, fulfills all five criteria, and that it outdistances all of its competitors by a significant margin, I contend that we may declare that Jesus’ resurrection is “very certain,” which is higher on the spectrum of historical certainty than I had expected. Since the Resurrection hypothesis is based on historical bedrock, those who disagree with my conclusion must criticize my method.

Summary: The objective of this dissertation was to learn and apply the approach of historians outside of the community of biblical scholars to the question of whether
Jesus rose from the dead. Far more work has been performed by philosophers of history than by biblical scholars pertaining to hermeneutical and methodological considerations. Yet, the typical practicing historian, like her cousin by profession in biblical studies, rarely gives much attention to these matters. Through my work, I profited immensely as a student of history, employing the fruits of discussions between philosophers of history and formulating my own criteria and method where needed.

I followed this method throughout the dissertation, surveying and assessing the relevant sources for a collection of strongly evidenced facts that are agreed upon by virtually all scholars studying the subject and then weighing a number of hypotheses representative of what is being proposed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the end, the resurrection hypothesis came out on top and meets the standards discussed herein for being historical. On the other hand, I acknowledge that this conclusion is provisional, since future discoveries may require its revision or abandonment. This conclusion makes no assertions pertaining to the nature of Jesus’ resurrection nor does it claim to address the question of the cause of Jesus’ resurrection.

Part 2: Contributions

I would like to draw attention to a few other points in this dissertation that I believe are of especial interest. I discovered that historians and biblical scholars give little attention to the philosophy of history and important aspects of historical method. In fact, there are no canons of history. Yet biblical scholars have much they can learn from discussions among philosophers of history. Informing themselves of these discussions will help them avoid repeating the work of others and allow them to focus on new areas.

I also believe that I have contributed to the discussion of whether historians are within their professional rights to investigate miracle-claims such as “Jesus rose from the dead.” I am unaware of any discussions on the subject that directly address this issue relevant to historical Jesus studies to the degree found in chapter two.

Since scholars disagree on their interpretations of 1 Corinthians 15:44, I surveyed the use of ψυχικόν and πνευματικόν in all of the extant literature from the eighth century BC through the third century AD. Both terms carry numerous meanings. While πνευματικόν can refer to something as being ethereal, ψυχικόν never referred to something as physical or material. Consequently, while this exercise validates a number of interpretations of 15:44 without endorsing any, it eliminated one that has been long held: Christians are buried with physical bodies but raised with non-physical bodies. This interpretation is no longer sustainable.

While the historicity of Jesus’ predictions concerning his death and resurrection have been widely discussed, I believe that I have taken the discussion to a new level, introducing new arguments for historicity and proposing solutions for the tensions.

I believe that I have introduced a nuanced approach to the question of the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection that has not been previously taken. My conclusions were both more sanguine and restricted than I had anticipated. I was surprised by the actual
strength of the resurrection hypothesis. At the same time I learned that carefully defined method applied to the question of Jesus’ resurrection cannot ascertain the cause of Jesus’ resurrection with substantial certainty, although a supernatural cause is by far the best candidate. Furthermore, the historical bedrock cannot tell us anything about the nature of Jesus’ resurrection state. However, I have argued that there is superb evidence that the earliest Christians understood that Jesus’ corpse had been raised and transformed and that is what Paul and the original disciples believed they had seen.

**Part 3: Considerations for Future Work**

Although the majority of scholars who comment on the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to James grant that James had an experience he believed was his risen half-brother, this experience is largely neglected by scholarship. More work in this area is desirable.

While nearly all alternative hypotheses to Jesus’ resurrection propose a combination of natural events, this is largely the result of the anti-supernatural bias of Enlightenment thinking. Since our modern world is quickly becoming open to the supernatural, skeptics may wish to consider new hypotheses employing supernatural explanations that attempt to account for the historical bedrock. Dale Allison’s recent treatment has paved the way for these.¹

What impact may the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection have on future historical Jesus research? If Jesus was actually raised as a critical historical approach suggests, a limited number of reports about Jesus in the canonical Gospels may gain greater plausibility, such as his miracles, his claims to divinity, and his predictions pertaining to his imminent and violent death and subsequent resurrection shortly afterward.

¹ See Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005).
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