

**THE RESURRECTION:
AN OBSTACLE TO FAITH?**

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The Easter victory of Jesus is the bedrock of Christian faith. But that bedrock is turned into a stumbling block by the naive and misleading interpretations of the resurrection that Fundamentalists are fond of serving up.

Believing in the Easter event in its true Scriptural sense is challenge enough for anyone. But when Fundamentalists require that we believe in their fantastical version of the resurrection, they give "scandal" in the Biblical sense. Far from protecting and preserving Christianity, their pseudo-scholarship distorts the faith, exposes it to ridicule, and finally eviscerates it. Fundamentalism is a form of smiling nihilism, well-intentioned but ultimately destructive.

I wish to offer some suggestions for doing away with the stumbling block and getting back to the bedrock. Let those who want to reject belief in the resurrection of Jesus at least understand and reject the real thing and not some farcical version of it.

My suggestions are in the form of brief theses, documented in my book *The First Coming* (Random House, 1986). On the negative side I argue that the Easter victory of Jesus was not a historical event -- it did not take place in space and time -- and that the appearances of Jesus did not entail the sighting of Jesus' risen body in either a physical or a spiritual form.

On the positive side I argue that the Easter-victory of Jesus, properly understood from the Bible and believed in by Christians, refers to God's appointment of the crucified Jesus to be the absolute savior of the human race. Christians maintain that this happened outside space and time; thus it is a matter of faith and not susceptible of proof. Moreover, I argue that the language of "resurrection" is symbolic -- it means "awakening" -- and that it was not the original way believers expressed Jesus' Easter victory, nor is it the best. Given its symbolic meaning, I henceforth put the word "resurrection" in quotation marks.

I begin with a time line that provides some approximate dates within the first century of

Christianity (or the Common Era: C.E.), dates taken as probable by virtually every reputable scholar of Christian origins. Then I shall state my theses on the meaning of the "resurrection" and the appearances of Jesus. [4]

JESUS' DEATH	30	
STAGE ONE:	30-50	<i>No extant Christian scripture</i> The origin of "Q," the "source tradition" The Easter victory proclaimed first as "exaltation" to glory, then as "resurrection."
STAGE TWO:	50-65	<i>First Christian scriptures: Paul's epistles (51-58 C.E.)</i> I Corinthians (57 C.E.): The Easter victory: brief <i>proclamation</i> of the "resurrection" and appearances, but without narrative details.
STAGE THREE:	70	<i>Mark's Gospel: The first narrative of Easter Sunday</i> A very minimalist story. No appearances recounted.
STAGE FOUR:	85-95	<i>Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John</i> Very detailed narratives of Easter Sunday and Jesus' appearances.

STAGE ONE: 30 C.E. AND FOLLOWING

The earliest proclamations of the "resurrection"

The virtually unanimous opinion of all mainstream scholars of the New Testament is that the earliest language believers used for the Easter victory of Jesus was not "resurrection" but "exaltation" to glory directly from the cross. This symbolic language contains no reference to a "resurrection" and nothing at all about the discovery of an empty tomb or the appearance of angels to women on Easter Sunday morning.

The "Source Tradition" or "Q," which originates before 50 C.E. and bears witness to the earliest Christian faith, nowhere mentions Jesus' "resurrection." However, it does proclaim Jesus' exaltation to glory, as do the pre-Pauline hymns recorded in Philippians 2:8-11 and I Timothy 3:16. None of these earliest first-century records offers grounds for postulating "resurrection" as the first or even the best way of speaking of Jesus' Easter victory. Not only is the language of "resurrection" absent from the earliest traditions; it is neither essential to nor normative for faith in Jesus. When it was eventually employed, the symbol of "resurrection" was at best only one among many ways for speaking about the Easter victory of Jesus.

What, then, did the meta-historical victory of Jesus consist of, and what symbols and metaphors were used to articulate it?

STAGE TWO: 50-65 C.E.

The earliest proclamations of the "resurrection"

The earliest texts that speak of the Easter victory in terms of the "*resurrection*" and *appearances* of Jesus (as contrasted with his exaltation to glory) were written some twenty to thirty-five years after the death of Jesus. They appear in the epistles of St. Paul, composed from around 50 to 65 C.E. Just as in the first twenty years of Christianity (30-50 C.E.), so too in these earliest Christian writings we find *no narratives* of the "resurrection" or the appearances, that is, no descriptions or detailed stories about Easter Sunday and the weeks that followed it.

Instead, we have only *brief proclamations of faith*, bereft of virtually any spatial or temporal details. Along side the earlier expression (God "exalted" Jesus), these proclamations generally take two forms: God "awoke" Jesus from the dead, and "Jesus was made manifest" to so-in-so. For the first four decades of Christianity, up to the year 70 C.E., those simple affirmations -- brief telegraphic statements of faith -- are all we have as accounts of the "resurrection" and appearances.

Some of these Easter-victory proclamations found in Paul's epistles go back to earlier years and thus offer insights into early formulations of Christian belief. One such proclamation is I Corinthians 15:3-8, which Paul wrote down around 55 C.E. but which goes back at least into the 40s and perhaps into the 30s. The proclamation makes no mention of an "empty tomb," much less of its discovery by women on Easter Sunday morning. Rather, the two key words in the Greek text are

- ▶ *ēgerthē*: God "awoke" (or "raised") Jesus from the dead; and
- ▶ *ōphthē*: Jesus "was made manifest" (or "appeared") to certain people, including Peter, various disciples, and lastly Paul. [5]

▶ **Regarding "*ēgerthē*" and "resurrection":**

The primary and literal meaning of the verb *egeirō*, from which *ēgerthē* is derived, is "to awaken someone from sleep." For example, when the disciples, storm-tossed in their boat on the Sea of Galilee, cry out to the sleeping Jesus for help, the Greek of Mark's Gospel says they *egeirousin* him (4:38). They do not "resurrect" Jesus, they awaken him. (See also Acts 12:7, where an angel awoke -- *ēgeiren* -- Peter in prison.)

This metaphor of awaking someone from sleep -- in the case of Easter, from the eternal sleep of death -- underlies most of the Pauline scriptures about "resurrection," including the earliest one, I Thessalonians 1:10. There Paul urges his followers "to wait for God's son from heaven, whom He awoke (*ēgeiren*) from the dead." But Paul understands the symbolic nature of his language in this text and makes no commitment to the Fundamentalist's preternatural "physics" of a body shedding graveclothes and exiting from a tomb. The same holds for the use of *egeiró/ēgerthē* in the "resurrection"-proclamation in I Corinthians 15:4: Jesus "was awakened on the third day."

▶ **Regarding "*ōphthē*" and "appearances":**

The verb-form *ōphthē* in I Corinthians 15:5-8 means that Jesus "was made manifest" to various people or "showed himself" ("appeared") to them. But the text makes no claim that Jesus appeared in a body, be it natural or supernatural, which the disciples might see and touch. Those stories would come thirty years later.

The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Jewish Bible, often uses the same verb-form *ōphthē* to indicate that God revealed something to someone, but without specifying any kind of physical or visual seeing. In fact, God appeared -- *ōphthēn* -- to Abraham as a voice, not a vision (Exodus 6:3 with Genesis 21:1).

St. Paul, who claims to have received an appearance of the risen Jesus (I Corinthians 15:8), was blinded and saw no one -- he heard only a voice -- during his experience on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:4-8; cf. 22:7, 26:14). Later Paul referred to this event not as a visual appearance but as an apocalyptic "revelation" (*di' apokalypseōs*, Galatians 1:12). God, he says,

"was pleased to *reveal* his son *in me*" (Galatians 1:16) -- this, without any mention of visual or physical details. This revelation/appearance to the blinded Paul could have been, for example, a voice, a mystical experience, or the bestowal of spiritual insight. It certainly was not the physical appearance of a visible body.

In brief: For the first forty years of Christianity -- from 30 to 70 C.E. -- the verbs *ōphthē* in I Corinthians (Jesus "was made manifest") and *apocalypsai* in Galatians (God chose to "reveal" his son in Paul) are basically the only two words the Scripture provides for Jesus' appearances, and they in no way entail that the disciples visually sighted a physical or supernatural body.

The same text in I Corinthians proclaims that God awoke Jesus from the dead "on the third day" (15:4). In the Bible "the third day" is not a chronological designation and has no specific temporal significance. And here it is certainly not to be confused with "the first day of the week" (Easter Sunday) mentioned in Mark 16:2. Rather, "the third day" is the Bible's way of symbolically indicating any moment in which God acts to save someone from dire straits. Since "the third day" does not mean "three days later," the text from I Corinthians 15:4 does *not* teach that the "resurrection" took place on the "third day after the crucifixion," that is, on Easter Sunday. [6]

STAGE THREE: 70 C.E.

Mark's Gospel: The earliest story about Easter

For the first four decades of Christianity, the best we have about Easter are brief proclamations of faith in Jesus' victory, accompanied by no historical information about where or when or how this victory took place. Only in 70 C.E., in Mark 16:1-8, do we at last get the first *story* about the events that allegedly occurred on Easter Sunday morning, complete with details about an empty tomb and an angel's proclamation of Jesus' "resurrection."

However, even this earliest Easter narrative -- written forty years after the events it purports to relate -- is extremely minimalist in form and content. *According to Mark, Jesus does not appear to anyone after his death.* In fact:

- ▶ After his burial Jesus is never seen again; and
- ▶ The women who discover the empty tomb and hear the angel proclaim the "resurrection" flee the tomb in fear and tell no one about these events.

Thus the earliest narrative about Easter Sunday morning gives hardly any grounds for the traditional story of Easter that Christians are accustomed to hear proclaimed from the pulpit.

STAGE FOUR: 85-95 C.E.

The elaborate narratives of Easter in the later Gospels

Finally, in 85 C.E., fifteen years after Mark's very minimalist narrative of Easter, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke -- and a decade later, the Gospel of John -- explode with elaborate narratives of events that allegedly took place on Easter Sunday and the weeks following. These imaginative accounts -- first published between fifty-five and sixty-five years after Jesus' death - - are replete with detailed accounts of the visible, very physical appearances of Jesus.

All of a sudden Jesus has "flesh and bones," "hands and feet," a body that walks for miles, carries on long conversations, eats parts of at least two dinners, teaches his disciples how to baptize, offers his wounds to be touched, appears and disappears, levitates into heaven, and even (in John's Gospel) offers breakfast to his friends after giving them lessons on how to fish. These are the stories that Christians usually draw on for their narratives of Easter Sunday.

The explosion of details in these later accounts of Easter includes the following new elements:

- ▶ An angel descends from heaven, rolls back the stone from the tomb, and sits on it. (Matthew)
- ▶ The dialogue between the two angels (no longer just one) and the women at the tomb expands well beyond Mark's account to include a recollection that Jesus had predicted his own "resurrection." (Luke)
- ▶ The women (who, according to Mark, told no one) now inform Peter and others about the empty tomb; and Peter visits it (Luke) and, together with the beloved disciple, even sees the burial clothes. (John)
- ▶ Mary Magdalen has a private encounter and conversation with the risen Jesus at the tomb site. (John)
- ▶ For the first time, *elaborately detailed appearances* of the "resurrected" Jesus are narrated, and they include Jesus eating food and allowing his "risen" body to be touched. These appearances happen at various places and times and culminate in:
- ▶ Jesus' physical ascension into heaven, which is narrated for the very first time around 85 C.E. and only in Luke.

Moreover, these differing narratives of Easter in the later Gospels cannot be harmonized to produce a consistent story without doing violence to the accounts both individually and as an ensemble. The various Easter narratives contradict one another egregiously on such matters as:

- ▶ who went to Jesus' tomb, and when, and why;
- ▶ how many angels showed up in or around the tomb;
- ▶ what the angel or angels said to the women;
- ▶ what the women did after they encountered the angels; [7]
- ▶ who received the first appearance of Jesus;

- ▶ how often Jesus appeared to the disciples, and to which disciples, and where, and when;
- ▶ whether or not Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to them, and if so, when;
- ▶ whether or not he ascended visibly and bodily into heaven (only Luke says that he did) and,
- ▶ if Jesus he did ascend into heaven, whether he did so on Easter Sunday or forty days later on Ascension Thursday (Luke gives both dates).

READING THE BIBLICAL FACTS

Over a period of over six decades -- from 30 C.E. to the end of the century -- the Christian community's belief in Easter developed through four stages, from the barest, unembellished proclamations of Jesus' "exaltation" to glory with no mention of "resurrection," up to the later Gospels' quite elaborate accounts of what the risen Jesus did, hour by hour, on the first Easter Sunday. How does the Fundamentalist exegete interpret this development?

The Fundamentalist's usual procedure is to take the four very different stages of announcing the "resurrection" and the appearances and, violating every rule of serious scholarship, to *collapse* them into one harmonious account of post-crucifixion events running from Easter Sunday, April 9, 30 C.E., to Ascension Thursday, May 27, 30 C.E.

In this compressed and twisted fabrication, the Fundamentalist uses the later and very elaborate accounts in Matthew, Luke, and John to violently reinterpret the earlier proclamations in Paul's epistles. Flying in the face of both history and scholarly exegesis, the Fundamentalist disregards the different literary forms of these separate accounts, wipes out the years that separate them, and reads the legendary stories of the 80s and 90s back into the utterly minimalist proclamations of the earliest Church.

Thus, whereas St. Paul proclaims that the appearances of Jesus consisted simply in his being "made manifest" or "revealed" to various witnesses, the Fundamentalist uses Luke's imaginative account of Easter Sunday evening in the Upper Room (written in 85 C.E.) to restage those appearances, and insists that they necessarily entailed the ocular sighting and physical touching of a "risen" body that walked, talked, ate, and levitated.

And while Paul and the Gospels simply proclaim that God "awoke" Jesus from the eternal sleep of death and appointed him the Christ in the final age of salvation, the Fundamentalist rewrites Paul's "resurrection" texts and forces them to announce a literal, physical, historical event that happened inside a tomb very early on Easter Sunday morning.

The Fundamentalist claims that Easter consisted of [A] Jesus' returning from the dead in

a "real" body albeit a "new" and "spiritual" one, then [B] his quite literally "passing through" the graveclothes in which he had been wrapped, and finally [C] his physical evacuation of the tomb, although "by means other than the doorway." I quote here from one of [8] the best known Fundamentalist apologists of the "resurrection," Professor Gary Habermas (*The Resurrection of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, 1980, p. 157f. and *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry*, Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1976, p. 236, n. 105.).

Of course, anyone is free to believe such ignorant and unbiblical nonsense if they wish, and even to maintain that it represents the true meaning of Jesus' Easter victory. In Fundamentalist doctrine, such fantasies are the norm. However, these reveries find no support among today's mainstream professional exegetes and theologians, men and women who, without sacrificing one iota of the content of their biblically inspired faith, also refuse to surrender one bit of the scholarly gains in exegesis made by their God-given reason.

Fundamentalists like Professor Habermas seem supinely ignorant of the category mistake they make when they take God's supernatural, eschatological act -- rescuing the crucified Jesus from death and appointing him the coming Son of Man -- and reduce it to the status of an allegedly historical event in space and time. If this were done intentionally, we would call it blasphemy. But it is done in ignorance, and we must be more kind. But the consequences of it are no less pernicious.

Informed Christians, who understand the New Testament rather than just parrot its words, know that the Easter narratives in the Gospels are not literal accounts of historical events that supposedly took place during the six weeks after the crucifixion. They also know that the "resurrection" did not happen on the morning of Easter Sunday, or on any other day in time.

The "resurrection" of Jesus was an eschatological occurrence, beyond space and time -- a meta-historical act of God that took place "in heaven" when the crucified Jesus died on earth. And it could no more be observed by a human beings within history than one could observe Lucifer's fall from grace or the entrance of one's great-grandmother into heaven.

The theological meaning of Easter is not that Jesus "came back to life" in a spiritualized body, passed through graveclothes, and exited (presumably naked: John 20:6-7) from his tomb. Easter has nothing to do with angels literally and historically showing up in an empty tomb (all non-Fundamentalist exegetes agree the angels are a literary invention of the early Church), and it does not climax in Jesus' physical ascension into heaven.

These are inspiring myths and legends that the Gospel writers used to communicate the extra-historical, supernatural reality of God's "awakening" of Jesus from the dead and "exalting" him to heaven. They are not events of or within history, and for an exegete or theologian to claim they are is professionally irresponsible.

The theological content of the "resurrection" is that God

- ▶ rescued Jesus from the fate of eternal death and
- ▶ appointed him to be the absolute savior, the Christ, who would return at the immanent end of history to usher in the eternal reign of God.

In the symbolic, apocalyptic language of the New Testament, God

- ▶ awoke Jesus from the dead, exalting him to His right hand, and
- ▶ designated him the coming Son of Man.

To put this in biblical shorthand, the Easter victory consisted in God's "Christopoetic" or "Christ-making" act. I take the phrase from Acts 2:36, which says in Greek that God made Jesus be the Christ (*Christon epoiésen*), that is, meta-historically constituted the crucified Jesus to be the coming agent of salvation. The Christian believes God did this not three days after the crucifixion but at the very death of Jesus on the cross. [9]

IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

Much more can and should be said about the "resurrection" of Jesus, but there is one path not worth taking.

The distinction between the symbolic, apocalyptic *language* the Bible uses about Easter and the true Christian *meaning* of that language is the *pons asinorum*, the "bridge of jackasses," that separates naive, backwater interpretations of Easter from professional, mainstream exegesis. Unfortunately, Fundamentalists like Professor Habermas or, for that matter Rev. Jerry Falwell, who insist on riding Balaam's ass to their scripture classes, will never get over that bridge.

We have already cited Habermas, but Falwell is equally clear on how the Fundamentalist approaches the biblical accounts of Easter: "The Bible is absolutely infallible, without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as well as in areas such as geography, science, history, etc." (*Listen America*, Doubleday, 1980, p. 63).

This a priori commitment to the total inerrancy and literal truth of the Bible is the Fundamentalist's cheap and easy ticket to escape the hard exegetical work that the Christian scriptures require. Preachers like Habermas and Falwell, despite their academic pretensions, opt for the revivalist's tent rather than the scholar's study. They exclude themselves from the circle of professional Christian exegetes and exile themselves to the self-imposed ghetto of unscholarly literalism.

That is their choice. But let it not be called Christian scholarship. Christianity is not defended by fudging the facts, nor is it advanced by slight-of-hand exegesis. And God is not served by telling lies on His behalf.

End