

*The meaning of the concept of  
resurrection in the New Testament*

After the survey of the biblical and post-biblical Jewish evidence concerning afterlife and the examination of the full New Testament material, what have we learnt about the early Christian concept of the resurrection of the dead in general, and the resurrection of Jesus in particular?

Let it be emphasized once again that most of the Old Testament ignores the idea of the revivification of the dead; that active and effective religious life is seen by ancient Judaism as restricted to man's worldly career and that the inevitability of death and a permanent Sheol entailing a reduced, joyless and as it were Godless existence in a dreamless sleep is accepted as mankind's inexorable heritage.

Yet, while in biblical wisdom this world and the present age are the theatre of the love and worship of God, one detects in Jewish piety of the later centuries of the Old Testament era a secret yearning for a continued relationship after death with the Creator and heavenly Father. We have to wait, however, until the end of the third and early second centuries BC, and in particular until the Jewish experience of religious martyrdom, to encounter the notion of life after death in the form of spiritual immortality or bodily revival. These concepts had been attested, especially under the influence of the Pharisees, from the second

century BC onwards, but they do not seem to have become part of the core of Judaism until the second or third century AD and later. Since in the early first century AD the impact of the Pharisees on Galilee was at best limited, the frequently assumed notion that belief in resurrection was an accepted fact among the contemporaries of Jesus cannot be derived from sources reflecting popular traditions current in the Judaism of that age.

As the relevant findings have been listed in passing in the foregoing chapters dealing with the New Testament, all that remains here is to offer a systematic exposition of the meaning of resurrection. This will be done under three headings. The first two relate to theology, but the third will take us to the heart of the matter, the 'event' of the resurrection of Jesus.

Before addressing these three issues, a preliminary question must be settled. How do the various accounts of resurrection, or rather resuscitation, mentioned in the Old and New Testaments (see pp. 30-32 and chapter 9) compare with the resurrection of Jesus and with the eschatological resurrection envisaged for mankind?

Resuscitation is the 'miraculous' continuation of life as it was lived previously, the climax of charismatic healing. By contrast, the rising of the dead (with the exception of the wandering about of 'the saints' in Jerusalem after the earthquake that marked the death of Christ (see pp. 92-3), is considered as an occurrence awaited in the future. It is associated with the expected Second Coming or *Parousia*, and the accompanying universal, final judgement of all mankind which conclude the present age. As for the resurrection of Jesus, it is depicted as a unique phenomenon, both historical and eschatological. It is not seen as the continuation of Jesus' pre-crucifixion life, nor

is his resurrected body represented as identical with the one known to his companions. Moreover, his resurrection is treated as the anticipation and cause of the reawakening of the dead at the end of time. In short, the resumed existence of the resuscitated dead brought about by Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Peter and Paul sheds no true light on the concept of eschatological resurrection. The two fall into separate categories.

### 1. The significance of the resurrection for the theological understanding of Jesus by nascent Christianity

Contrary to the generally held opinion that the concept of resurrection constitutes the focal point of Christology, the doctrine relating to Jesus, close scrutiny of the New Testament evidence suggests that it forms simply the initial stage of the belief in his exaltation. Christ's complete glorification is seen in his enthronement next to God the Father in fulfilment of the words of the Psalmist, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand' (Acts 2:24, 32-34, quoting Ps 110:1).

The Gospel of John also gives the impression that the resurrection was simply the gateway through which the incarnate eternal Word of God returned to the Father after the accomplishment of his temporary earthly mission. In his first appearance to Mary Magdalene, Jesus immediately announces that he is going to the Father (Jn 20:17). This turning point in his mission is revealed in the general statement that sums up John's Gospel: 'I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father' (Jn 16:28). His heavenly

homecoming was soon marked by the charismatic pouring out of the Holy Spirit over the apostles, left behind as the witnesses of Jesus.

The same idea is voiced by St Paul, for whom the resurrection is the cause of Jesus' elevation to divine Sonship (Rom 1:4). In short, the apogee of the triumphant Christ is not the rising from the dead, but his heavenly exaltation followed by the dispatch of the Holy Spirit.

### 2. The resurrection of Jesus in relation to the resurrection of his followers and of the rest of mankind

The resurrection does not appear to have had a major doctrinal impact on the Gospels. Neither the general background material, nor the teaching ascribed to Jesus on the afterlife, is particularly concerned with the matter. Paul is the first to raise the question, but he does so more from a pragmatic than from a theoretical viewpoint. In the early stages of the expectation of the return of Christ, the eschatologically frenzied communities of believers were chiefly interested in their own entry into the kingdom of God by means of a forthcoming encounter with Jesus returning from heaven on a cloud. They were convinced that the *Parousia* was at hand and would happen within their lifetime. They would witness it before their death. All they expected therefore was in effect a change of clothes, the divesting of themselves from their earthly frame and replacing it with a new spiritual body. The resurrection as such did not concern them.

But the problem became a burning issue in connection with the members of the Church who died recently. Did

they miss the boat? As such injustice seemed inconceivable, Paul reassured the members of his congregation that on D-day the deceased Christians would join the rest of the living followers of Jesus in their triumphant ascent to the divine kingdom. The supplementary ticket issued to this group of Christians who predeceased the *Parousia* was immediately followed by a request for another, and entitlement to resurrection was extended to pagan associates for whom virtual Church membership was secured through the surrogate ritual of baptism for the dead. However, Paul himself did not explicitly apply the power of Jesus' resurrection to the non-baptized righteous of the pre-Christian age. We have to wait until the first letter of Peter for the extension of the saving plan of Christ in regard to the deceased wicked imprisoned in the underworld (see pp. 132-3).

The New Testament remains divided on the final destiny of the ungodly, namely whether they would be raised to face divine justice and eternal hellfire. The resurrection, when conceived as the reward for holy behaviour, was necessarily confined to saints and martyrs, to the just in general, and the wicked were left behind in the cold of Sheol. It was only when some New Testament writers substituted for the loving and forgiving heavenly Father an iron-fisted Judge that the sinners of the underworld were also summoned to be bodily present before the heavenly tribunal to receive a sentence of destruction in the everlasting flames.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. What does the New Testament tell us about the 'event' of the resurrection of Jesus?

We have now reached the principal topic of this book, *the Resurrection*. No New Testament text attempts to describe the actual return to life of the dead Jesus. All we have are bits of circumstantial evidence, if they can be called evidence, divided into two classes.

The first entails various accounts of female witnesses who, on the third day after the crucifixion, discovered an empty tomb. They thought it was the tomb of Jesus and their finding was later confirmed by two male apostles. Only one explanation of the empty tomb is offered in the Synoptic Gospels: the absence of the body of Jesus was due to his resurrection. It is based on the testimony heard by the women from one or two mysterious strangers (angels?). In John, on the other hand, the disappearance of the body is attributed both by Mary Magdalene and by Peter to the interference of an unknown third party and not to a supernatural event.

The second category of circumstantial evidence is given in all the Gospels except the shorter ending of Mark. It consists of a series of apparitions to various individuals (Mary Magdalene, Peter, James, Paul) or groups (several women, two disciples at Emmaus, seven, ten or eleven apostles, or over five hundred brethren) at various times (on Easter Sunday, the following Sunday or on later dates) and in various places (in Jerusalem, at Emmaus, on a Galilean mountain or by the sea of Tiberias). The meaning of the visions is not obvious: no one realizes at first that the appearing person is Jesus. They variously speak of a ghost or the 'gardener' or a stranger. Thomas is said to

have declined to believe his fellow apostles until he experienced by touch the wounds of the resurrected Jesus, and several apostles on the Galilean mountain continued to harbour doubts concerning the reality of their vision of Jesus.

The empty tomb and the apparitions are never directly associated to form a combined argument. For some modern Gospel interpreters the empty tomb saga is 'an apologetic legend' (R. Bultmann), a secondary attempt to provide some 'factual' support to back individual or collective visions. The fragility of the theory is exposed by its intrinsic weakness. The evidence furnished by female witnesses had no standing in a male-dominated Jewish society. In fact, according to Luke, the apostles poked fun at the women. Furthermore, the identity and number of the witnesses differ in the various Gospels as does their testimony. Yet it is clearly an early tradition. If the empty tomb story had been manufactured by the primitive Church to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, one would have expected a uniform and foolproof account attributed to patently reliable witnesses.

To put it bluntly, not even a credulous non-believer is likely to be persuaded by the various reports of the resurrection; they convince only the already converted. The same must be said about the visions. None of them satisfies the minimum requirements of a legal or scientific inquiry. The only alternative historians are left with in their effort to make some sense of the resurrection is to fall back on speculation, hopefully on enlightened speculation.

## Six theories to explain the resurrection of Jesus

One could speak of eight theories, but I have discounted the two extremes which are not susceptible to rational judgement: the blind faith of the fundamentalist believer and the out of hand rejection of the inveterate sceptic. The fundamentalists accept the story, not as written down in the New Testament texts, but as reshaped, transmitted and interpreted by Church tradition. They smooth down the rough edges and abstain from asking tiresome questions. The unbelievers, in turn, treat the whole resurrection story as the figment of early Christian imagination. Most inquirers with a smattering of knowledge of the history of religions will find themselves between these two poles. Some of the explanations of the resurrection are insinuated in the Gospels, others emerge from ancient or more recent history. Let us examine them one by one.

### *1. The body was removed by someone unconnected with Jesus*

According to the Gospel of John, the emptiness of the tomb discovered by Mary Magdalene and later confirmed by Peter and the 'beloved disciple', is at first ascribed to unknown persons. Interference with graves was not unusual, as can be deduced from the curse put on tomb desecrators contained in funeral inscriptions (see pp. 59–60). The circumstances of the burial of Jesus suggest a simple explication. The burial took place in great haste because of the imminent onset of the Sabbath and the body was laid in a new tomb, conveniently situated in a nearby garden (Jn 19:41). It was obviously prepared for someone else. Hence it is not unreasonable to suppose

that the person in charge of the burial place – the ‘gardener’ according to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:15) – took the first opportunity to move the body of Jesus to another available tomb.

The irregular circumstances of Jesus’ interment easily account for such an outside intervention. Normally, the funeral duties were carried out by male near kin, but as there is no sign in the Gospel narratives of the presence of the brothers of Jesus at the time of the crucifixion and all his apostles had gone into hiding, one or several less-close acquaintances, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, stepped in and performed the charitable obligation on Friday afternoon before sunset. According to John, Nicodemus brought along a large quantity of myrrh and aloes to anoint the dead body. Consequently, contrary to the evidence of the Synoptics, there was no need for Jesus’ women friends to visit the tomb at the start of the new week to complete the unfinished funerary rituals.

The innocent transfer of the body of Jesus developed later into the legend of the resurrection. However, the fact that the organizer(s) of the burial was/were well known and could have easily been asked for and supplied an explanation, strongly militates against this theory.<sup>2</sup>

### *2. The body of Jesus was stolen by his disciples*

An emphatic rebuttal of the reality of the resurrection is attributed in the Gospel of Matthew to the priestly leaders of Jerusalem. Allegedly, they spread the rumour, which many decades after the death of Jesus was still circulating among the Jewish population of Jerusalem, that the body of Jesus was spirited away by his disciples to produce the semblance of a miraculous resurrection. This story

presupposes that a fraudulent prophecy concerning Jesus’ rising from the dead was widely known among Palestinian Jews. However, if the closest associates of Jesus did not expect him to rise, it is hard to imagine that outsiders were aware of a prediction, uttered by Old Testament prophets or by Jesus, about his resurrection shortly after his death. The tale of a mischief perpetrated by the apostles is no doubt a later Jewish gossip circulating in Palestine in the time when Matthew wrote his Gospel. Its value for the interpretation of the resurrection is next to nil.

### *3. The empty tomb was not the tomb of Jesus*

The first two explanations are expressly hinted at in the Gospels themselves. The next derives from more subtle allusions underlying the Synoptics. Mark, Matthew and Luke firmly stress that the Galilean women knew where Jesus was buried. While all the cowardly male disciples kept out of sight, the two Marys (Mk and Mt) or the Galilean women (Lk) watched the burial party led by Joseph of Arimathea (Mk 15:47; Mt 27:61; Lk 23:55). Bearing in mind the attitude of male superiority adopted by the apostles on hearing the report of female witnesses about the empty tomb (Lk 24:11), it strikes as most likely that they suspected that Mary Magdalene and her friends had gone to the wrong tomb. If the rock cavity into which the corpse of Jesus was hurriedly laid was freshly prepared to house someone else’s remains, no doubt it was in a location reserved for burials with similar tombs surrounding it. In the semi-darkness of dawn a mistake was easy. A present-day reader would wonder why Peter and his colleagues, who considered the women untrustworthy, did not consult Joseph of Arimathea, who was apparently the

owner of the tomb (Mt 27:60). Presumably, in the logic of the Gospel narrative, the apparitions of Jesus soon rendered such an inquiry superfluous. The theory of mistaken identity of the tomb, while not inconceivable, certainly does not impose itself.

#### 4. *Buried alive, Jesus later left the tomb*

That Jesus survived the crucifixion has been propounded by modern writers and novelists from Hugh J. Schonfield's *The Passover Plot* (1965) and Barbara Thiering's *Jesus the Man* (1992) to *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown. Less extreme believers in Jesus' survival argue that recovery after crucifixion was possible, as it is attested by Flavius Josephus. In his autobiography, Josephus recalls that on an occasion when he was returning to the capital, he saw many crucified Jews by the roadside. Among them he recognized three of his friends, who were still alive. On his pleading, Titus, the future emperor, promptly ordered them to be taken down and treated by Roman physicians and as a result one of the three survived (*Life*, 420).

Jesus remained on the cross for such a short time that Pilate wondered whether he was truly dead when Joseph of Arimathea asked for his body (Mk 15:44). One may further speculate that the piercing of his side by one of the executioners was a later invention introduced by John (Jn 19:34) to dispel doubts as to whether Jesus was dead. But assuming that a semi-conscious Jesus crept out of the tomb in the darkness of night, what happened to him afterwards? Did he disappear into thin air? Not very likely.

#### 5. *The migrant Jesus*

The idea of Jesus leaving Judaea after he had recovered from his coma is a relatively modern creation. It is part of the teaching of the Ahmadiyya sect of Islam (formed in the nineteenth century), according to which the revived Jesus left the Holy Land, set out towards the east in search of the lost tribes of Israel, and died in Kashmir in India. In the last century, the rich poetic imagination of Robert Graves brought the post-crucifixion Jesus to Rome.<sup>3</sup> So also did Barbara Thiering's peculiar interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Her married, divorced and remarried Jesus, father of four children, died of old age in Nero's Rome.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of real ancient evidence these modern musings need not detain us.

#### 6. *Do the appearances suggest spiritual, not bodily, resurrection?*

While no apparition of the risen Jesus figures in the original, shorter ending of Mark, the oldest of the Gospels, all the other sources describe numerous visions of Christ by Mary Magdalene (Jn, Mk B), the Galilean women (Mt), the Emmaus disciples (Lk, Mk B), Peter (Lk, Paul), the apostles in Jerusalem on Easter Sunday (Mk B, Lk), one without the presence of Thomas and another, on the following Sunday, in his presence (Jn). Jesus was further seen some days later in Galilee on a mountain by eleven apostles or by seven at the sea of Tiberias (Mt, Jn). Further appearances were witnessed, according to Paul, by more than five hundred brothers, by James, and finally by Paul himself at unspecified times and places.

Four types of vision are listed. 1. In Matthew no concrete

details are given. 2. In John and Luke an unknown ordinary man (the gardener or a traveller) is later recognized as Jesus. 3. Again in Luke and John, a spirit mysteriously enters the apostles' residence despite the locked doors. 4. The ghost later becomes a stranger with flesh and bones, who says he is Jesus and invites the apostles to touch him, and he eats with them.

In order to judge the significance of these appearances, we must try to determine the purpose of the resurrection of Jesus in the mind of the evangelists and Paul. From the fact that no one suggests that he came into contact with people outside the circle of his close followers, we must deduce that for the New Testament writers the resurrection was not meant to enable Jesus to perform any further public act. The forty days' extension of his stay with the apostles, not witnessed by anyone from the outside world, formally contradicts Luke as well as Mark's longer ending (Mk 16:19) as both imply that the Ascension happened on Easter Sunday (Lk 24:50). The alleged need for Jesus' remaining with his disciples to give further instruction about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3) is rendered superfluous by the promise in John that the Holy Spirit will come to teach them all things (Jn 14:26; 16:13). If this was the case, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus is best seen as the first step on the spiritual ladder that leads to his heavenly glorification (see p. 138). Viewed from this angle, the resurrection becomes a purely spiritual concept without requiring any accompanying physical reality. Spiritual resurrection is best associated with visions and appearances. The strictly Jewish bond of spirit and body is better served by the idea of the empty tomb and is no doubt responsible for the introduction of the notions of palpability (Thomas in John) and eating (Luke and John).

What is the evidential value of such diverse visions perceived by individuals or groups of individuals? In essence, they do not differ from the visions of mystics throughout the centuries. No doubt the New Testament characters believed in the reality of their visions of Jesus. But what about people who were not so privileged and had only the word of 'eyewitnesses' to go by? They depended on a double act of faith: faith in the reliability of the reporters and in the reality of the report. Resurrection as a spiritual entity is appropriately expressed by a vision. Anything more tangible is suspect of hallucination, whether individual or collective.

The theory of spiritual resurrection cancels the need for an empty tomb. The body of a risen but immaterial Jesus could have remained in the tomb, with his bones later collected and put into an ossuary inscribed with the Aramaic name Yeshua bar Yehosef (Jesus son of Joseph). Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the ossuary bearing this name, found at Talpiot in Jerusalem in 1980, and recently made famous by a television documentary, originally contained the remains of the Jesus of the Gospels.<sup>5</sup>

All in all, none of the six suggested theories stands up to stringent scrutiny. Does this mean that the traditional resurrection concept, i.e. the miraculous revival in some shape or form of the dead body of Jesus, is doomed to failure in the rational world of today? Or is there another way out of this conundrum that may offer an explanation, if not for the physical resurrection of Jesus, at least for the birth and survival of Christianity?

## *Epilogue: Resurrection in the hearts of men*

The opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles takes us to the Mount of Olives, where the apostles of Jesus wave goodbye to their Master. They believe, without comprehending it, that he is no longer in the tomb and is on his way to the Father in heaven. It is of little importance whether this spiritual spectacle was witnessed on the third day after the crucifixion or forty days later. What matters is that within a short time the terrified small group of the original followers of Jesus, still hiding from the public gaze, all at once underwent a powerful mystical experience in Jerusalem on the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost). Filled with the promised Holy Spirit, the pusillanimous men were suddenly metamorphosed into ecstatic spiritual warriors. They proclaimed openly the message of the Gospel, and the charismatic potency, imparted to them by Jesus during his ministry, which had enabled them to preach, heal and expel demons, burst into life again and manifested itself in word and in deed. The formerly terrified fugitives courageously spoke up in the presence of the authorities and healed the sick in public, at the gate of the Temple itself. The reality of the charisma opened the apostles' eyes to the mystery of the resurrection. The spiritual healing power of belief lay at the basis of the teaching, curing and exorcizing ability of Jesus in his life. According to the evangelists,

he often told the sick who had been restored to health: 'Your faith has healed you.' During his life, Jesus managed to pass on this spiritual power to his disciples so that they could exclaim with joyful amazement: 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name' (Lk 10:17).

According to the New Testament, the chief act of the resurrected Christ in his heavenly glory was the dispatch of the Holy Spirit. 'This Jesus God raised up', Peter announced to the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem. 'Exalted at God's right hand, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured it out' over his disciples (Acts 2:32). The impact and guidance of the Spirit empowered the apostles and disciples to act as witnesses of Jesus. They did so through charismatic deeds: 'In my name' – Christ is said to have declared – 'they will cast out demons, they will speak in tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover' (Mk 16:18).

The scene being set, let us now consider from an existential, historical and psychological point of view the original Galilean followers of Jesus during the short period following the first Easter Sunday. The tale of the empty tomb and the apparitions of the lost Lord momentarily illumined their dark despair with a ray of hope. Doubts nevertheless lingered on. However, when under the influence of the Spirit their self-confidence revived, prompting them to resume their apostolic mission, they felt increasingly sure that they were not acting alone, but that Jesus was with them. So, when they again started to preach the gospel 'with authority', as their miracle-working teacher did in Galilee; when they realized that in *the name of Jesus* his charisma was working again, their doubts melted away in



the inward certainty that the crucified Master was close to them, as in the old days.<sup>1</sup> The helping hand that gave them strength to carry on with their task was the proof that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Nowhere has this inner transformation been more movingly portrayed than in the haunting final paragraph of a famous book, *On the Trial of Jesus*, by my late friend Paul Winter:

*Sentence was passed, and [Jesus] was led away. Crucified, dead, and buried, he yet rose in the hearts of his disciples who had loved him and felt he was near. Tried by the world, condemned by authority, buried by the Churches that profess his name, he is rising again, today and tomorrow, in the hearts of men who love him and feel he is near.*<sup>2</sup>

The conviction in the spiritual presence of the living Jesus accounts for the resurgence of the Jesus movement after the crucifixion. However, it was the supreme doctrinal and organizational skill of St Paul that allowed nascent Christianity to grow into a viable and powerful resurrection-centred world religion.

Resurrection in the hearts of men may strike a note of empathy even among today's sceptics and cynics. Whether or not they adhere to a formal creed, a good many men and women of the twenty-first century may be moved and inspired by the mesmerizing presence of the teaching and example of the real Jesus alive in their mind.

## Notes

### Foreword

1. Geza Vermes, *The Passion* (Penguin, London, 2005), p. 116.
2. Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend* (Penguin, London, 2006).
3. For faith wrapped in scholarship, see the 800 page-long monumental *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham (SPCK, London, 2003).
4. For a recent example, see Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder, *The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2005).

### Prologue: The Christian notion of resurrection and its antecedents

1. *Natural History*, 7:55, 150.
  2. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, 4:45.
2. Death and its sequels in ancient Judaism: Paving the way for resurrection
1. For the exception of 1 Enoch, see pp. 44–5.
  2. 'Exploit the present day'.
3. Biblical and post-biblical antecedents of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus
1. According to an ancient Jewish belief, attested in rabbinic literature, the departed soul, still longing to return to the