

Alternate Critical Theories to the Resurrection

By Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

Ever since the time of Jesus (Mt. 28:11-15), critics have been attempting to explain the empty tomb on natural grounds. They assume that Jesus' body remained dead. In 2,000 years of history many different theories have been proposed. But "not one of these theories has ever met with general acceptance, even among radical critics and rationalists."¹ The following list is representative of these theories.²

How credible are they?

The Swoon Theory

This theory claims that Jesus never died on the cross but merely "swooned." After his crucifixion (which incidentally included a spear thrust into the heart) Jesus was taken down from the cross, wrapped in seventy-five pounds of linen and spices, and placed in a tomb. Yet somehow he revived. After three days without food or water, Jesus unwrapped himself (even though his arms had been wrapped against his body and the spice-soaked linens were probably somewhat dried and hardened by this point), moved the one-to-two-ton stone from the grave entrance and walked some distance on mutilated feet to find his disciples so that he could falsely proclaim himself to be the resurrected Messiah and conqueror of death. And, the disciples believed him! But if Jesus did not expire on the cross, but only swooned, he still would have died sometime later—not exactly what one would expect of "the conqueror of death." The Gospel resurrection accounts, moreover, leave little doubt that he did die on the cross.

The Passover Plot Theory

A version of the swoon theory, this theory asserts that Jesus plotted to fake his death to give the appearance that he arose from the dead. He conspired with Judas to betray him to the Jewish authorities, and with Joseph of Arimathea to see to it that he was given a strong potion on the cross which would put him in "a death-like trance." Appearing as dead to the Roman authorities, Jesus was to be taken off the cross and laid in a tomb—where he would revive, after a short time, and then reappear as "resurrected" to his disciples. But the unexpected spear thrust led to his unforeseen death. Joseph had him buried in an unknown tomb. The disciples, however, came upon the intended place of burial, found the prearranged grave clothes and falsely concluded from this that he was alive. This theory makes Christ a fraud and the disciples near idiots. Moreover, if Christ was dead, how does one account for the many documented resurrection appearances?

The Stolen or Moved Body Theory

This theory proposes that the disciples had stolen or moved the body to make it appear that Jesus had been resurrected. This would again make the disciples frauds. Moreover, such an act would have been unthinkable to them for several reasons: (1) they never *expected* Jesus to rise from the dead; (2) *all* of them would not have willingly remained silent about this lie in view of the likelihood that they would be killed for adhering to it; nor (3) would they have made God responsible for such a deception. Other versions of the theory propose that the Jews, Romans or Joseph of Arimathea moved the body, for reasons hardly more compelling.

The Hallucination/Vision Theory

The hallucination theory asserts that all who had purportedly seen the resurrected Jesus—i.e., the twelve disciples, the women, James (Jesus' brother), the crowd of five-hundred people—were strange visionaries or mentally ill. They hallucinated the risen Jesus through neurotic or psychotic visions. But this theory is wrong because all of the known characteristics of hallucination are entirely absent from the Gospel accounts of the encounter of Jesus' followers with the risen Christ.

More generally, the vision theory claims that the resurrected Jesus appeared to his followers through visions in the mind. This theory also does not fit the accounts: for example, what of doubting Thomas who needed physical confirmation and the crowd of five hundred who simultaneously saw the risen Lord? What of Jesus himself who actively encouraged the disciples to touch him physically to prove to them his resurrection (Luke 24:39; John Ch. 21)?

The Telegram/Telegraph Theory

This theory claims that the spiritually ascended Jesus telegraphed images of himself from heaven to the minds of his followers on earth. These images were so graphic that his followers mistakenly thought that they had physically seen the resurrected Jesus in their midst. But what about the empty tomb (the telegram theory also asserts that Jesus' body remained in the tomb)?

The Mistaken Identity Theory

This theory states that the twelve disciples, who virtually lived with Jesus for three years and never expected him to rise from the dead, sometime after Jesus' death came to the conclusion that he would come back to life. They then misidentified a complete stranger as the risen Jesus. But surely they would have quickly recognized their error when conversing with the stranger or at least seeing him close up.

The Wrong Tomb/Grave Was Not Visited Theory

This theory proposes that although Jesus' followers saw where his body was buried, three days later they could not locate the tomb. Subsequently they went to the wrong grave, which was empty, and incorrectly assumed from this that Jesus had been resurrected. There were, however, no resurrection appearances. The disciples concluded that Jesus had risen solely on the basis of an empty tomb—a tomb which they were not certain was the correct one in the first place! This theory, however, places an exceedingly low intelligence quotient on the disciples, one greatly at odds with how the four Gospels present them.

The Séance Theory

This theory asserts that Jesus was "raised" in the same manner that a spirit is "raised" in a séance through ectoplasmic manifestation. It claims this despite the fact that it makes Jesus' followers participants in a séance, a practice their own Scriptures sternly prohibits (cf., e.g., Deut. 18:9-12). It also makes them out to be either liars or deluded for believing that something as ephemeral as an ectoplasmic manifestation was the same thing as a literal, physical resurrection appearance.

The Annihilation Theory

This theory claims that Jesus' body inexplicably disintegrated into nothingness. It has received no support.

The "Jesus Never Existed" and Resurrection as Legend Theories

The first theory proposes that Jesus was a fraudulent invention of the disciples, a legend. It

too has no support. But a variation of this theory has held more sway and so we discuss it in more detail below. It asserts that the followers of Jesus derived the resurrection story from similar stories of contemporary Greco-Roman mystery cults. It sees the figure Jesus as a historical person, but considers the resurrection as strictly legendary. The dissimilarity, however, between the mystery cults of the first-century and early Christianity is far too great; moreover, the early church consistently opposed such assimilation.

Anyone who takes the time to compare these theories to the four Gospel resurrection accounts quickly discovers that they are highly inferior explanations, grossly conflicting at many points with each other and more importantly with the biblical evidence itself. The fundamental problem for the critic is that he has yet to propose a theory that *reasonably* accounts for all the historical data to the satisfaction of believer and skeptic alike.

Since the time of Christ, *no attempt* to offer conclusive proof against the bodily resurrection has succeeded. This in itself is very significant. Every alternate theory is more difficult to believe than the belief that Jesus physically rose from the dead, a conviction shared by all four Gospel writers and all New Testament teaching on this point. This conviction is most compelling. Summary statements by some leading scholars who have carefully examined the alternate theories is telling in this regard:

James Orr: "None of these theories can stand calm examination.... The objections are but small dust of the balance compared with the strength of the evidence for the fact."³

James F. Babcock: "These and other chimerical explanations which have been proposed through the centuries do even less justice to the evidence than [does] the straightforward historical interpretation itself."⁴

George Hanson: "The simple faith of the Christian who believes in the resurrection is nothing compared to the credulity of the skeptic who will accept the wildest and most improbable romances rather than admit the plain witness of historical certainties. The difficulties of belief may be great; the absurdities of unbelief are greater."⁵

Wilbur M. Smith: "Of the several attempts to explain rationalistically the empty tomb... it need only be said that none is inherently credible or has commanded general respect."⁶

William Lane Craig: "We have seen that the history of the debate over the resurrection of Jesus has produced several dead ends in the attempt to explain away the evidence of the resurrection. The conspiracy theory, the apparent death theory, the wrong tomb theory, and their variations have all proved inadequate as plausible alternative explanations for the resurrection."⁷

John Warwick Montgomery: "The 'swoon theory' is typical of all such arguments: they are infinitely more improbable than the resurrection itself, and they fly squarely in the face of the documentary evidence."⁸

Bernard Ramm: "It has become evident that if certain minimal historical facts be granted, the logic of the believer in the resurrection is impossible to parry. For this reason practically all of the older efforts to explain away the resurrection by recourse to the swoon theory, wrong-grave theory, telegraph theory, stolen body theory, etc., are beside the point, abortive; therefore we will not spend any time rehashing these theories so ably refuted in the other good evangelical literature."⁹

John Lilly: "All of these attacks have been triumphantly repulsed, their futility demonstrated. The field of biblical criticism resembles a vast graveyard filled with the skeletons of discarded theories devised by highly imaginative skeptics.... One might think that so many repeated failures.... would lead the opposition to abandon their efforts, but not so. They continue un-

abated, and men are still wracking their brains, working their imaginations overtime, and parading a vast amount of erudition and ingenuity in their, to us, futile attempts to destroy the impregnable rock of historical evidence on which the Christian faith in the Resurrection stands proud and unshaken.”¹⁰

That so many millions of people today continue to believe that the resurrection took place, after nearly two-thousand years of critical scrutiny by some of the world’s most brilliant minds, is really rather remarkable if it never happened. Modern skeptics face the same problems that skeptics at the time of Jesus faced: the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances. No one then could disprove the empty tomb or explain away the resurrection appearances, and no one today can do it. As Wilbur Smith asserts, “The closest, most critical examination of these narratives throughout the ages never has destroyed and never can destroy their powerful testimony to the truth that Christ did rise from the dead on the third day, and was seen by many.”¹¹

In effect, to maintain, in the first century, that the resurrection never happened would almost be the modern equivalent of maintaining that men have never traveled to the moon: too much evidence exists for a reasonable person to deny the event. Most critics deny the resurrection because of an anti-supernatural bias against miracles, not because of inferior evidence.

As Wilbur Smith asserts, both the empty grave and the resurrection appearances provide “a mass of evidence that can never be destroyed with any of the laws of literary criticism or of logic known to man. They have, consequently, stood the fiercest opposition, investigation, and criticism of at least eighteen successive centuries.”¹² Indeed, it is hard to know which is the more amazing—the alternate theories themselves or the fact that they continue to be put forth by otherwise intelligent men. As the apostle Peter confesses: “We did *not* follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16).

It is not just that these theories are improbable, it is that they are, in the end, impossible. Not only is there no literary or historical evidence in their support, the historical facts themselves refute any and every critical theory ever proposed. These facts are accepted by the majority of scholars, Christian or skeptical:

- 1) Jesus died by crucifixion.
- 2) Jesus was buried in an easily accessible public tomb.
- 3) The death of Christ caused His followers to lose all hope in His Messianic claims.
- 4) The tomb was empty.
- 5) The disciples had genuine experiences which they were convinced were literal appearances of the risen Christ.
- 6) The disciples down to a man were radically transformed from skeptics and doubters to bold proclaimers of Christ’s resurrection.
- 7) Eleven of the twelve apostles suffered martyrs’ deaths for their convictions.
- 8) The resurrection message was absolutely central to the early preaching of the Church.
- 9) The resurrection message was central to the entire New Testament.
- 10) The resurrection was first proclaimed in the very environment most hostile to it, Jerusalem. Even there, those motivated to disprove the resurrection could not do so.
- 11) The Church exists only because of the disciples’ conviction that the resurrection occurred.
- 12) The Sabbath Day was changed to Sunday.

13) James, Paul and many other skeptics were convinced on the basis of historical evidence.

Finally, regarding method, the deathblow to these theories is that collectively each of them refutes something of the others until nothing is left: e.g., theory A, in proposing explanation B, discredits theory C, and so on. They all collapse for the simple reason that although each critical theory rejects part of the Gospel testimony, each also accepts and independently establishes the truth of another part of the Gospel testimony. The accepted evidence of one theory refutes the substance of some of the others. Taken together, all the critical theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries establish *both* the reliability of the New Testament as well as the unreliability of the alternate critical theories themselves. As Dr. Gary Habermas observes,

One interesting illustration of this failure of the naturalistic theories is that they were disproven by the nineteenth-century older liberals themselves, [the very ones] by whom these theories were popularized. These scholars refuted each other's theories, leaving no viable naturalistic hypotheses.... Although nineteenth-century liberals decimated each other's views individually, twentieth-century critical scholars have generally rejected naturalistic theories as a whole, judging that they are incapable of explaining the known data.... That even such critical scholars have rejected these naturalistic theories is a significant epitaph for the failure of these views.¹³

In the end, facts will always win because facts, unlike mere opinion, cannot be changed or disproven. The twentieth-century theories proposed to explain away the resurrection are no better and suffer the same fate as their nineteenth-century counterparts.

Theologically, the severest criticism of these theories is that they make God responsible for a lie. The undisputed teaching of the Gospel accounts and of the New Testament itself is that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead. But according to these theories, Jesus' body never left the tomb. Therefore, for the twelve disciples, all of whom were Jewish, to make God responsible for a work he *clearly* did not do would have been unthinkable.

Summary of Evidences for the Resurrection

1. Messianic prophecy concerning the resurrection.
2. Jesus' many predictions of His death and resurrection three days later.
3. The fact of Jesus' death.
4. The placing of the Roman guard and Roman seal at the tomb.
5. The disciples' radically changed behavior in light of their depressed mental condition, disbelief in the resurrection and skepticism toward it upon hearing the first reports of the resurrection.
6. The fact of the empty tomb, acknowledged by all, when nothing would have stamped out Christianity more quickly than producing the body of Jesus, coupled with the fact of great motive and means for those opposed to Christianity to do so.
7. The 12 recorded, diverse yet consistent, resurrection appearances, including to some 500 people at one time, most of whom survived for many years and could still be questioned regarding what they saw.
8. The founding and very existence of the Christian church; its rapid, phenomenal, continued growth; its boldness and power, particularly in light of the great difficulties and persecutions it encountered. The sheer impossibility of explaining the emergence of Christianity in Jerusalem

itself, the center of greatest opposition to the faith.

9. The conversion of Saul and others most adamantly opposed to the new faith (e.g., members of the Sanhedrin).

10. The conversion of skeptics at the time (e.g., Jesus' own brother, James, and doubting Thomas).

11. The absolute centrality of the resurrection to all New Testament preaching, theology and missions, without which these make no sense at all.

12. The martyrdom of 11 of the 12 original apostles in light of their "heretical" belief that Jesus was God.

13. The inexplicability of the changed Sabbath, from Saturday to Sunday.

14. The existence of the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, both integrally related to the resurrection.

15. The harmony and independent (eyewitness) nature of the Gospel accounts' testimony to the resurrection; their lack of contradiction or evidence of collusion.

16. The existence of the New Testament.

17. The changed lives of millions of Christians throughout history, all of whom claim to have experienced and to *know* the resurrected Jesus.

18. The conversion to faith of those attempting to *disprove* the resurrection, offering a consistent positive testimony throughout 2,000 years.

19. The admittance by all—secular historians, skeptics and rationalists, of a minimum number of historical facts which make any other theory than the resurrection all the more difficult to believe.¹⁴

20. The inability of nineteenth century rationalistic bias against the miraculous to make its case.

21. The inability of twentieth century skepticism against the resurrection to make its case.

22. The critics' own confessed uncertainties regarding the feasibility of their theories. The failure and final disproof of all alternate theories to explain away the Resurrection.

23. The positive testimony of those professionally trained to weigh and sift evidence such as lawyers and many of the most brilliant and able minds in philosophy, history, science, literature, etc. Indeed,

One of the tasks of history writing is to identify the causes of events, and one of the marks of good historians is that they show themselves aware of what constitutes a cause, or set of causes, commensurate with what actually happened. What happened here is that Christianity actually started with the Resurrection. This is the great fact...by which the adequacy of any view about Jesus' rising must finally be judged.¹⁵

24. The testimony of the angels at the tomb.

25. The *cumulative* weight of nos. 1-24.

Notes:

¹ Wilbur M. Smith, *Supernaturalness of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974, rpt.), p. 220.

² For more thorough descriptions and criticisms of these positions, see Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1969), pp. 88-103; W. M. Smith, *Therefore Stand* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 359-437; G. E. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 132-42; Josh

- McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., (San Bernardino: Here's Life, 1979) pp. 232-59; William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), pp. 23-44.
- ³ J. Orr, "Jesus Christ," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Vol. 3, 1st ed., p. 1664; cf. idem., *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Joplin, Mo: College, 1972 repr.), pp. 9-30.
- ⁴ James F. Babcock, "The Resurrection—A Credibility Gap?" in John Warwick Montgomery (ed.), *Christianity for the Tough-Minded* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1973) p. 250.
- ⁵ G. Hanson, *The Resurrection and the Life* (New York: Revell, 1911), p. 24.
- ⁶ Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p. 451.
- ⁷ Craig, *The Son Rises*, p. 43.
- ⁸ John Warwick Montgomery, *History & Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1965), p. 77.
- ⁹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1971), p. 194.
- ¹⁰ J. Lilly, "Alleged Discrepancies in the Gospel Accounts of the Resurrection," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, 1940, p. 99.
- ¹¹ Smith, *Supernaturalness of Christ*, p. 205.
- ¹² Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p. 398.
- ¹³ G. Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection* (New York: Nelson, 1984), pp. 20-21.
- ¹⁴ See Terry L. Miethe (ed.), *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (NY: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 19-20.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.