

Historical Evidence of Jesus' Resurrection – N.T. Wright and more

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Introduction

If we are to affirm that Jesus is truly Emmanuel (the presence of the unconditionally loving *God* with us), then we will need some sign of His Divine authority and power, so that we can know through both our hearts and minds whether he is more than an unconditionally loving *man* -- and is really the unconditionally loving *God* with us.

The doctrine of the resurrection¹ is central to Christianity – so much so that St. Paul states:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead... Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1Cor 15:13-15, 18-19).

It is truly extraordinary that Paul made the claim that if there is no resurrection from the dead, that the faith of believers is useless and that all who have died in Christ have died in their sins. Paul knows that if he is lying, he and the other disciples have jeopardized the salvation of the whole Christian community, and furthermore he emerges as a false witness (a perjurer) before God, and is answerable to Him. The consequences of lying to (or even deceiving) believers about the resurrection cannot be overstated, because the resurrection is the foundation of Jesus' claim to be the exclusive Son of God – and the unconditional love of God with us.

Is there any way of verifying the claims made by the Christian church about Jesus' resurrection in glory? As a matter of fact, there is – through the use of historical criteria.² We will use some of these criteria to probe the historicity of Jesus' resurrection in four areas:

1. The common elements in the gospel narratives about Jesus' risen appearance to the apostles (Section II).
2. The historical evidence of the resurrection in the writings of St. Paul (Section III).
3. N.T. Wright's historical analysis of the resurrection (Section IV).
4. The historical status of the empty tomb (Section V).

¹ There are at least 45 explicit references to eternal life in the New Testament, and literally hundreds of other implications of it, 43 explicit references to resurrection, and 45 explicit references to "raised from the dead," and many other implicit references to the risen life.

² I will not discuss all of these criteria in this book, but only the ones which are most relevant to the resurrection appearances (and the New Testament narratives that describe them). Readers interested in a fuller explanation may want to consider the following outstanding studies: Jeremias 1969, pp.125-130; Latourelle 1979; McArthur 1969; Meier 1999, pp.459-487; Wright 2002.

There are many other ways of probing the historicity of the resurrection, but these four will be sufficient to give reasonable validation to the Christian claim that Jesus rose in a spiritual body (*pneumatikon soma*) and promised to bestow this resurrection eternally on those who are willing to accept and abide by that love. Before investigating the above four historical sources, we will examine Gary Habermas' survey of contemporary scholarship on the resurrection.

I.

Gary Habermas' Study of Recent Scholarship on the Resurrection

Gary R. Habermas has completed an extensive survey of contemporary exegetes, and has made several interesting discoveries. He notes:

The latest research on Jesus' resurrection appearances reveals several extraordinary developments. As firmly as ever, *most* contemporary scholars agree that, after Jesus' death, his early followers had *experiences* that they at least believed were appearances of their risen Lord. Further, this conviction was the chief motivation behind the early proclamation of the Christian gospel. ¶ These basics are rarely questioned, even by more radical scholars. They are among the most widely established details from the entire New Testament.³

Habermas goes on to explain that:

More skeptical scholars often still acknowledge the grounds for the appearances as well. Helmut Koester [notes]: 'We are on much firmer ground with respect to the appearances of the risen Jesus and their effect.... That Jesus also appeared to others (Peter, Mary Magdalene, James) cannot very well be questioned.'⁴

In view of this general agreement about the historicity of the resurrection appearances, where do opinions diverge? Habermas again notes, "the *crux* of the issue, then, is not *whether* there were real experiences, but how *we explain the nature* of these early experiences."⁵

Habermas then inquires into what these exegetes consider to be the cause of the apostolic Church's early and widespread belief that Jesus rose from the dead. Was it a natural cause or a supernatural cause? The vast majority of exegetes believe that the cause was *supernatural*. Nevertheless, Habermas examines the minority opinion, namely, natural causation. His investigation ranges from the subjective vision theory of Gerd Lüdemann (who grounds his hypothesis in "stimulus," "religious intoxication," and "enthusiasm"⁶), to the illumination theory of Willi Marxsen (who asserts that Peter had an internal experience which led him to convince the

³ Habermas 2006, p. 79, italics mine.

⁴ Habermas 2006, p. 80.

⁵ Habermas 2006, p. 80.

⁶ Lüdemann 1994, pp. 106-7, 174-75, and 180.

other apostles about Jesus' resurrection).⁷ These theories do not stand up well to historical and exegetical scrutiny (see below Section III.B),⁸ and so Habermas concludes, "In the twentieth century, critical scholarship has largely rejected wholesale the naturalistic approaches to the resurrection."⁹

He then examines *supernatural* causes for the early witnesses' experience of the risen Jesus. "Supernatural causation" means that something happened to *Jesus* rather than to His followers. What happened to Jesus must be supernatural because it effects a transition from death to new life. Variations among supernatural explanations are centered on the ways in which the risen Jesus appeared – that is, *the ways* in which His risen life was mediated in the physical world (in history) so that it could be collectively experienced by His followers. There are two major hypotheses in this regard: (1) a luminous appearance and (2) a transformed corporeal appearance.

The vast majority of scholars hold to the second explanation – namely that Jesus rose in a transformed corporeal state (as a spiritual body), and some scholars hold that this appearance also had luminescent features.

Given the large number of scholars interviewed by Habermas (from every point on the theological and exegetical spectrum) and given the deep scrutiny with which these scholars examined the historicity of the resurrection, their overwhelming consensus lends considerable probative force to the contention that Jesus appeared to his apostles (and hundreds of other followers) in a supernaturally transformed state, manifesting continuity with his former embodiment as well as a spiritual (transphysical) transformation.

There are three major reasons why scholars agree so overwhelmingly about Jesus' transformed corporeality in His risen appearance:

- (1) It is the overwhelming consensus of the Gospel writers in describing Jesus' appearance to his apostles after the resurrection (see Section II),
- (2) This Gospel view is in agreement with St. Paul's description of the "spiritual body" in 1 Corinthians 15 (see Section III), and
- (3) The Christian view of "spiritual body" explains many other differences between Apostolic Christianity and Second Temple Judaism (see Section IV).¹⁰

I will briefly address each in turn.

II. The Gospel Accounts of Jesus' Risen Appearances to the Apostles

⁷ Marxsen 1970, pp. 88-97.

⁸ See Habermas 2006, pp. 84-86. See also Davis 1999, pp. 57-58: "All of the alternative hypotheses with which I am familiar are historically weak; some are so weak that they collapse of their own weight once spelled out."

⁹ Habermas 2006, p. 86.

¹⁰ Second Temple Judaism refers to the religion of Judaism during the Second Temple period, between the construction of the second Jewish temple in Jerusalem in 515 BC, and its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD.

The Gospel accounts show substantial agreement about Jesus' transformed embodiment in his risen appearances. Though it is described in different ways, several characteristics are quite similar. Let us begin with Matthew's Narrative of Jesus' risen appearance.

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they saw him, they worshipped, but some doubted. Then Jesus approached and said to them, 'all power in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matthew 28:16-18).

Matthew accentuates the transformation of Jesus' appearance, noting that the apostles bow down and worship him. Matthew only uses "worship" four other times in his Gospel, two of which concern Jesus' temptation when the devil asks, "All these things I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me," to which Jesus replies, "The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve" (Matthew 4: 9-10). It seems that Jesus has been transformed in a divine and spiritual way – so much so that it evokes worship (reserved for God alone) from the disciples. This interpretation is confirmed by Jesus' subsequent words, "All power on heaven and earth has been given to me (which belongs to God alone)."

There is yet another confirmation of Jesus' Divine/Spiritual transformation, namely that many of the disciples have difficulty recognizing him ("some doubted"). What did they doubt? They were not doubting that a divine appearance (a theophany) was occurring – they were all bowing down and worshipping It. Thus, they must have been doubting that *Jesus* was part of the theophany. They thought they were seeing God, but they were uncertain about *Jesus*. When this Divine-Spiritual Being communicates with and *missions* them, they apparently become aware of His identity – it is Jesus who is transformed into a Spiritual-Divine Being to which "all authority on Heaven and Earth" has been given.

Luke communicates the same spiritually transformed appearance of Jesus in the narrative of Jesus' appearance to the eleven (Luke 24:33ff). He differs from Matthew in attempting to show continuity between Jesus' risen appearance and his former embodiment:

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a spirit. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24: 36-39).

Luke implies here that Jesus is transformed in appearance – looking like a spirit (the word "spirit" is mentioned twice in three sentences). As in Matthew, Luke mentions the disciples' "doubts". They are certainly not doubting that a spirit is appearing (because they are startled and frightened), so presumably they are doubting the presence of Jesus in this *spiritual* appearance. Notice that Jesus resolves those doubts by showing him the wounds of his crucifixion, and inviting them to touch him – calling attention to his body.

Luke is more concerned than Matthew to show continuity with Jesus' former embodiment – amidst his spiritually transformed appearance. Perhaps there was confusion in the Gentile

churches about Jesus being *only* a spirit (having no continuity with his former embodiment). However, Luke's repeated insistence on Jesus' embodiment shows that Jesus revealed not only his spiritual, but also his embodied self. Given the parallel with John 20 – Jesus probably showed the disciples his wounds in addition to his embodiment.

John's Gospel communicates the same point in a slightly different way. Instead of asserting that Jesus has appeared in a divine-like way (as Matthew does) or in a spiritually transformed way (as Luke does), he says that Jesus appears through locked doors (Jn 20:19 and 20:26) which would not be possible for a resuscitated corpse:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:19)

He then shows them the wounds of the crucifixion on his hands and side (John 20:20) as if he were intentionally identifying himself. John focuses all of the "doubts" in the story on Thomas, and so the doubts of the disciples about who Jesus is in the appearance are somewhat obscured. However, in the Appendix (John 21), John makes very clear that the apostles have doubts about Jesus in the appearance when he says, "None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord" (John 21:12).

The term "the Lord" (*Ho Kurios*) is significant here, showing that the Evangelist is pointing to Jesus' *divine* appearance (very much like Matthew's Gospel). *Kurios* (Lord) in Greek can mean anything from "sir" to "master," but "*Ho Kurios*" (*the* Lord with the definite article) is the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew divine name (Yahweh). Prior to Jesus' resurrection, John never uses "*Ho Kurios*" of Jesus, but after the resurrection this is the *only* term used to refer to Jesus in the minds and on the lips of the Apostles.¹¹ It seems that they saw a divinely transformed Jesus, and that Jesus makes His embodiment known to them through the wounds of his crucifixion.

Now let us return to the curious passage, "No one dared to ask him 'Who are you?' for they knew it was the Lord" (John 21:12). If the apostles knew that it was the Lord (the Divine One) appearing to them, then why are they having doubts (as might be suggested by the phrase, "No one dared to ask him, who are you?"). Once again we see the apostles having difficulty identifying *Jesus* amidst his transformed divine appearance. Jesus apparently makes his embodiment known to them through his communication with and missioning of them.

As can be seen, all three Gospel writers who describe Jesus' risen appearance to the apostles (Matthew, Luke, and John) indicate that he has been divinely and spiritually transformed and that

¹¹ In the closed room, when Jesus appears, the Apostles recognize "the Lord." When Jesus appears to Thomas a week later, he says, "My Lord and My God" ("*Ho Kurios* mou, *Ho Theos* mou").

At the Sea of Tiberius, when John recognizes the appearance to be Jesus, he turns to Peter and says, "Peter, it is the Lord" ("*Ho Kurios*"). On shore, the Apostles recognize that it is "the Lord" who is appearing, but they want to ask him, "Who are you?" indicating that they are having trouble recognizing *Jesus* in the appearance. Notice that only the narrator of the story (not the apostles) refers to "Jesus" in both John 20 and 21, but the apostles only see "*the Lord*" (the divine one).

this transformation outshines his former corporeality – so much so that the apostles at first have doubts about whether Jesus is in this divine-spiritual appearance. Jesus overcomes these doubts by revealing his identity (and continuity with his former embodiment) through the marks of his crucifixion (Luke and John 20) and through his communication with and missioning of them (Matthew and John 21).

Paul's account of how the dead will be raised in 1Corinthians 15 shows remarkable similarities to all three gospel accounts (Matthew, Luke, and John) with respect to Jesus' spiritually transformed body. He asserts that we will be raised in a way similar to Jesus' resurrection – namely, as spiritual bodies (*pneumatikon soma*). His explanation of this adds theological interpretation to the gospel accounts.

The pertinent passage from 1Corinthians 15 can be broken down into three parts:

- (1) But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. *When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.*
- (2) So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised *imperishable*; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in *glory*; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in *power*; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a *spiritual body*. If there is a natural body, there is also a *spiritual body*.
- (3) The first man was of the dust of the earth; *the second man is of heaven*. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. *And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.*

Perhaps it is best to begin with the last line of (3) above (“And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man”). When Paul says that we are going to be in the image of the heavenly man (the risen Jesus), he is saying that all the descriptions he has given of this risen state (in 1Corinthians 15) are similar to the way that Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection. Thus, if we want to know how Jesus appeared to the apostles, all we have to do is look at how Paul describes our future risen state (which will be like that of Jesus).

So, how might we infer that Jesus appeared from Paul's description of our risen state? In (1) above, Paul says that there will only be a seed of our former natural bodies, and that the rest will be transformed. There will be continuity with our earthly bodies, but also a marked transformation of those bodies. From this we might infer that Jesus maintained continuity with his former embodiment but that it was spiritually transformed, giving rise to something new, glorious, and imperishable. This resembles the Gospel accounts of Jesus' risen appearance to his disciples (Section II above).

How was Jesus transformed? In (2) above, Paul says that this seed was transformed with imperishability, glory, power, and spirit. What would this look like? Paul gives only one explicit description – that it will be a “spiritual body.” If we want to know how the imperishability,

power, and glory of this “spiritual body” appeared, we will have to turn to the Gospel writers who describe his power and glory as divine – so much so that the apostles bow down and worship him (Matthew 28:16) and were convinced that it was God appearing (see the references to “the Lord” in John 20 and 21). Furthermore, this powerful, glorious, spiritual, divine-like appearance engenders fear and awe (“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a spirit. He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled...’”– Luke 24:38).

Paul summarizes this transformed corporeality by twice calling it “a spiritual body” (a “*pneumatikon soma*”) which is a completely new concept in both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman world views.¹² What provoked the Christian Church to develop a completely unique view of the resurrection as “spiritual body”? Why did the early Church radically depart from the doctrine of Second Temple Judaism in this regard (when they were careful not to do so in other doctrinal matters)?¹³ Such a large-scale, uniform transformation of the doctrines of Second Temple Judaism by the Christian Church is exceedingly difficult to explain if Jesus’ embodiment did not appear as spiritually transformed as the early witnesses maintain (see below Sections IV. A and B). This points to the plausibility that Jesus appeared in a divine-like glory, power, and spirit in which he showed continuity with his former embodiment.

III.

Paul’s Testimony to the Resurrection of Jesus

St. Paul’s testimony about the resurrection in 1Corinthians 15, gives scholars of all subsequent generations the opportunity to test the historicity of his, and the other witnesses’ claims. While writing within living memory of the resurrection, he challenges his Corinthian audience to “check out the facts” (Section III.A). He then provides an argument to show the value of his and the other witnesses’ testimony to the resurrection through an insightful dilemma (Section III.B).

III.A.

Witnesses to the Resurrection

The most famous *kerygma* (very early proclamation about Jesus by the apostolic church) concerned with the resurrection is found in 1Corinthians 15: 3-8. Here, Paul says he is repeating a tradition which he himself received (showing that it predates the writing of 1Corinthians). It has an obvious formulaic character, relates the resurrection to the death and burial, and gives a list of witnesses to these appearances. This primitive formula contains some additions by Paul (indicated below by square brackets). The *kerygma* may be translated as follows:

[For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received],

¹² See Wright’s exhaustive analysis of this in Wright 2003, pp. 32-128.

¹³ The early Christian Church did not want to separate from the Synagogue or mutate the established doctrine of Second Temple Judaism. They did so only when there was strong reasons given by Jesus Himself. As will be seen below (in Section IV.B) Wright shows that virtually every mutation of Second Temple Judaism’s doctrine of the resurrection (as well as the end time and Messiah) is explained by the description of Jesus’ risen appearance given in both the Gospels and St. Paul. This is viewed by many exegetes as an extrinsic confirmation of the historical truth of His appearance as a transformed or spiritual body.

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
that he was buried,
that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas,
then to the twelve.
Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time
[most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.]
Then he appeared to James,
then to all the apostles.
[Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.] (1Cor. 15:3-8).

Two parts of the *kerygma* are obviously Pauline additions (in square brackets). First, the passage beginning with “Last of all...he appeared also to me” is Pauline in origin, for Paul does not need to refer to a *tradition* about himself. The first passage, “most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep” is also Pauline in origin. This passage merits special attention, not only because it is a Pauline addition, but also because it has value in ascertaining the historicity of the events portrayed in the *kerygma*. By phrasing the passage in this way, Paul is virtually inviting his Corinthian audience to “check out the facts” with the living witnesses. The fact that Paul is writing within living memory of these extraordinary events, and seems to be acquainted with many of the witnesses he lists, that he is aware that these witnesses are still alive, and challenges the Corinthians to investigate them, gives evidential weight to the claims in the passage.¹⁴

There are varied interpretations of Paul’s list of witnesses. Some exegetes believe that the list could be chronological, as Paul seems to suggest with his use of “first,” “next,” and “last of all...He appeared to me.” Others have suggested that the first part of the list establishes Church governance¹⁵ (and may also be chronological) while the second part of the list establishes the missionary Church.¹⁶ It is not inconceivable that both interpretations could be true, such that Jesus could have established Church governance and a missionary Church through the precise chronology elucidated by the *kerygma*.

So who were these witnesses? The first appearance to Peter and to the Twelve are probably linked and occurred in Galilee. Fuller notes in this regard:

...[T]he appearances to Cephas and to the Twelve form a closely linked group. A single *ōphthē* (“he appeared”) functions for both appearances, and the particle *eita* (“then”), used in verses 5-7 to join two items within a single group, connects these two appearances. ... ¶ Even if we assume that the disciples remained hidden in Jerusalem until after the Sabbath, as Mark seems to suppose, yet according to the earliest available tradition (Mark) it was in Galilee that the first appearances took place. ... ¶ We may conjecture that upon arriving back in Galilee, Peter proceeded

¹⁴ See below Section III.B. and also Jeremias 1971, pp. 307-308.

¹⁵ Fuller indicates “that the appearances to Peter and to the Twelve share a common function. In these appearances the Risen One initiates the foundation of the eschatological community: they are church-founding appearances” (Fuller 1971, p. 35).

¹⁶ “[The first two appearances] must be distinguished from the later appearances, whose function is the call and sending of apostles to fulfill a mission” (Fuller 1971, p. 35).

to assemble the disciples for the second appearance. Luke contains a hint that this was the procedure: “When you [singular] have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32).¹⁷

The third appearance (to the 500+) probably took place after the Twelve returned to Jerusalem and gathered the community together. Fuller believes that this Jerusalem appearance may have been the point at which the risen Jesus bestowed the Holy Spirit upon the large crowd gathered there.¹⁸ Jeremias adds to this contention by noting:

Paul’s remark in I Cor. 15.6 that of the five hundred “most are still alive, but some have fallen asleep,” which is meant to underline the reliability of the account, also contains an indirect reference to the place of the appearance. That it is possible to ascertain which of the eye-witnesses to this appearance are still alive a quarter of a century later makes one wonder whether at least the majority of the five hundred lived in one and the same place, and that would apply to Jerusalem. Since the days of the Tübingen school, therefore, the hypothesis that the appearance to the five hundred and Pentecost are two different traditions of one and the same event has found many supporters. A further point in favour of this combination is that in John 20.22 we find Christophany and the receiving of the spirit linked together.¹⁹

Some exegetes stress caution with this thesis, because the appearance to the 500 is clearly a Christophany, while the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts is a charismatic activity, including speaking in tongues. But there is no evidence from Scripture to preclude both of these from being combined (i.e., the risen Christ giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples at Jerusalem). Even if one separates the gift of the Holy Spirit from the appearance to the 500+, the remainder of Fuller’s thesis could still be true, namely, that “the +500 are the first-fruits of the church-founding function of Peter and the Twelve after their return from Galilee to Jerusalem.”²⁰

The fourth appearance to James would seem to be (like Paul’s) a post-Pentecost event. Fuller notes that this “James” would almost certainly have to be James the brother (the relative/follower)²¹ of Jesus, for James the Less is too insignificant, and James the Greater is martyred very early on. The appearance to this James would explain why he experienced such a rapid rise in the post-Pentecost Church when he does not appear to be even a significant disciple of Jesus during the ministry. Fuller goes so far as to say:

It might be said that if there were no record of an appearance to James the Lord’s brother in the New Testament we should have to invent one in order to account for his post-resurrection conversion and rapid advance.²²

¹⁷ Fuller 1971, pp. 34-35.

¹⁸ Fuller 1971, p. 36.

¹⁹ Jeremias 1971, pp. 307-308.

²⁰ Fuller 1971, p. 36.

²¹ “In a wider use [brother] signifies a person of common ancestry and relationship; in particular, a member of the same clan or tribe (e.g., Nm 16:10). It is extended to members of the same race or nation (e.g., Dt 15:12) or of a kindred nation (e.g., Dt 23:7). In the NT Christians are called brothers about 160 times, and Jesus Himself said that one who does the will of the Father is His own brother (Mt 12:50; Mk 3:35; Lk 8:21).” (McKenzie 1965, p. 108).

²² Fuller 1971, p. 37.

There is ample evidence in the Acts of the Apostles to show that James serves a double role – he is at once the head of the Jerusalem Church, and also appears to be head of all missionary activities stemming from Jerusalem.²³ If this is the case, then the post-Pentecost appearance to James both establishes Church governance and initiates the mission function of the Church.

The fifth appearance to “all the apostles” refers to “apostles” in another sense than “the Twelve.” Paul commonly uses the term *apostolos* in a way similar to its common usage (“sent forth” or “those sent forth”)²⁴ – that is, “missionaries.” This meaning would certainly correspond to the theory that the second set of appearances (James, “all the apostles,” and Paul) in the 1Corinthians 15 *kerygma* are “mission-initiating.”

If “all the apostles” is meant in this missionary sense, then it refers to all the primary missionaries mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. This would include both Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians and Hellenistic Jewish Christians in the early Church (i.e., prior to the conversion of Paul).²⁵ Fuller conjectures further:

Were these perhaps the missionaries referred to in Acts 11:19, who embarked upon a mission to Hellenistic Jews in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch? Were the seven of Acts 6 originally part of the group consisting of “all the apostles?”²⁶

Whether or not they were, “all the apostles” seems to refer to a significant group of Aramaic-speaking and Hellenistic missionaries who enjoyed prominence in the pre-Pauline Church.

It seems that these missionaries may have witnessed Jesus’ appearance in several different groupings after Pentecost. Why several? Because there is no specific reference to “all at once” as is noted in the passage about the 500+. It seems that these appearances were shared by different *groups* because specific individuals are not named (as they are for Peter, James, and Paul). Furthermore, Jerusalem is a likely place for these appearances, because it follows upon the Church-founding and mission-initiating activities which had already occurred there. The final appearance to Paul will be taken up below.

If the above explanation of Paul’s list of witnesses is correct, then the 1Corinthians 15 *kerygma* refers to: (1) an appearance to Peter and (2) a subsequent appearance to the Twelve (both of which probably took place in Galilee and were both Church-founding and governance-establishing), (3) an appearance to 500 brethren, which may be a Christophany associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem (which is both Church-founding and mission-establishing), (4) a *possible* post-Pentecost appearance to James, the “brother” of Christ, in Jerusalem (which was both governance-establishing and mission-initiating, given that James is both the head of the Jerusalem Church and the head of the mission activities originating in Jerusalem), and (5) multiple post-Pentecost appearances, probably in Jerusalem, to the primary Aramaic-speaking and Hellenistic missionaries in the early Church (prior to the conversion of Paul). Most of the witnesses

²³ Fuller 1971, p. 38.

²⁴ McKenzie notes: “A similar use transferred to a religious sense seems to lie behind 2 Co 8:23, where the apostles mentioned are not apostles in the technical sense, but missionaries or messengers sent by particular churches” (McKenzie 1965, p. 46).

²⁵ See Fuller 1971, pp. 40-41.

²⁶ Fuller 1971, p. 40.

(from the above five groupings) would have lived within Paul's writing of the 1Corinthians 15 *kerygma* (as Paul, himself, notes). The above list of witnesses is probably incomplete, for it does not account for the appearances to the women,²⁷ or seemingly to minor disciples (such as those on the way to Emmaus).

III.B. St. Paul's Witness Dilemma

Immediately after the 1Corinthians 15 *kerygma* (with its list of witnesses), Paul presents an interesting dilemma which could apply to all the witnesses in that list:

First side of the dilemma: ...if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are also found to be false witnesses of God because we witnessed before God that He raised Christ...

The other side of the dilemma: If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. ...Why am I in peril every hour? ...I die every day! What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1Cor 15:14-32).

If we look at this passage carefully, we can see the makings of a classical dilemma which has the objective of verifying the witness value not only of Paul, but also of the Twelve, the 500, James, and the "other apostles." From a legal perspective, the most objective way of validating a witness' testimony is to show that that witness has "everything to lose, and nothing to gain." From the opposite perspective, a witness who has everything to gain and nothing to lose may be telling the truth, but there is no extrinsic way of validating this. Indeed, there is a haunting suspicion that the witness may be acting in his own self-interest. A better witness would be one who had nothing to gain or lose, for at least he would not be acting in his own self-interest. But the best witness would be one who had everything to lose (and nothing to gain) because this witness would be acting against his own self-interest, which is a disposition which most of us want desperately to avoid. I believe that Paul is trying to show that not only he, but also the others in the list of witnesses, are in this category, and therefore deserve to be ranked among the best possible witnesses.

Paul sets out his test for witness validity in a dilemma with (of course) two opposed parts: (1) the assumption that the witnesses believed in God, and (2) the assumption that the witnesses did *not* believe in God. Let us return to the passage above, and insert these phrases:

- 1) [If, on the one hand, we believe in God, and] if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are also found to be false witnesses of God because we witnessed of God that He raised Christ....

²⁷ It is quite certain that the women discovered the empty tomb, but their absence from the list of witnesses in the 1Cor 15 *kerygma* is puzzling. Many exegetes believe that the women were the first to receive an appearance of the risen Christ, but that their witness value in a credal list was less significant because of Jewish practice and law (see Brown 1973, p. 122, note 204 – "their testimony would have less public authority").

2) [If on the other hand, we do not believe in God, and] if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are, of all men, most to be pitied. . . . If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

The first part of the dilemma assumes that Paul (and the other witnesses) believes in God. If Paul truly believes in God, He does not want to bear false witness before God, because this would not only disappoint the Lord whom He adores, but also might, in fact, jeopardize his salvation. This problem is compounded by the fact that his false testimony would be leading hundreds, if not thousands of people astray, which would not only be a colossal waste of his ministry and time (“our preaching is in vain”), but also a colossal waste of the time and lives of the people he is affecting by his false testimony (“your faith is in vain”). If Paul really does believe in God, why would he waste his life, waste the faith of believers, lead them to apostasy, bear false witness, and risk his salvation? This does not seem to be commensurate with someone of genuine faith (or common sense).

The second part of the dilemma looks at the consequences of Paul and the other witnesses being unbelievers. Paul is saying that the cost of preaching a false resurrection (without any belief in a God who saves) is simply too high. He and the other witnesses are not only being challenged by Jewish and Roman authorities, they are being actively persecuted. As he puts it, he is dying every day and is being subject to trials with substantial risk of martyrdom.

Why suffer persecution for preaching the resurrection of Jesus if that preaching is false and he does not believe in God, for there would be no hope of a resurrection or being saved by God. He would be suffering persecution for *nothing*. As he puts it, he may as well, “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow, he will die.”

Paul uses this dilemma to show (in a legal fashion) that he and the other witnesses have everything to lose and nothing to gain by bearing false witness to the resurrection of Christ. Could all of the witnesses within living memory of Christ’s resurrection have been so naïve? It seems to me that they could not. If the witnesses lacked authentic motives for preaching the resurrection, they would have had self-interested ones. However, as Paul shows, they could not have had self-interested motives, because false preaching of the resurrection would have led either to risking their salvation for undermining God’s will (if they believed in God), or to persecution for nothing (if they did not believe in God and a resurrection). This dilemma supports the likelihood of the witness’ testimony that they had seen the risen Jesus. In view of this we should give Paul the benefit of the doubt – that he was speaking truthfully and with authentic motivations.

Paul not only believes that he is speaking the truth, but that he is speaking the truth about the Lord he loves (that is, the Lord who has loved him first). He endures persecution not simply because he believes he has a *duty* to bear witness to the truth about the resurrection, but also because he *loves* the One about whom he bears witness. If Paul’s love is true, then it can hardly be thought that he is preaching a falsity about his Beloved. As one probes the depths of Paul’s authenticity, integrity, and love, it is very hard to believe that he (and others like him) could deliberately falsify their claim about the resurrection.

IV.

N.T. Wright's Two Arguments for the Historicity of Jesus' Resurrection

New historical-exegetical evidence has recently emerged in a particularly probative way through the scholarship of N.T. Wright²⁸ and other exegetes. He presents two important arguments:

1. The growth of the Christian messianic movement after the public persecution of its messiah (in his volume, *Jesus and the Victory of God*), and
2. The Christian mutations of Second Temple Judaism's view of the resurrection (in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*).

IV.A.

The Remarkable Rise of Christian Messianism

E. P. Sanders presents the key insight of the messianic argument as follows:

What is unique [about Jesus' claim to bring the kingdom of God] is the result. But, again, we cannot know that the result springs from the uniqueness of the historical Jesus. Without the resurrection, would his disciples have endured longer than did John the Baptist's? We can only guess, but I would guess not.²⁹

Wright expands this insight by noting that it applies not only to the disciples of John the Baptist, but also to the followers of:

Judas the Galilean, Simon, Athronges, Eleazar ben Deinaus and Alexander, Menahem, Simon bar Giora, and bar-Kochba himself. Faced with the defeat of their leader, followers of such figures would either be rounded up as well or melt away into the undergrowth.³⁰

This did not happen in the early Church. After the public humiliation, persecution, and execution of their messiah, the disciples maintained their identity and did not replace Jesus as the true leader of their community. Instead, the early Church acknowledged that Jesus was raised from the dead, continued to be its leader, and was the fulfillment of the prophecies of Israel. Wright points out that no other messianic movement displayed this behavior:

...In not one case do we hear of any group, after the death of its leader, claiming that he was in any sense alive again, and that therefore Israel's expectation had in some strange way actually come true.³¹

²⁸ Wright 2003 is a remarkably scholarly and comprehensive example of the recent application of historical-exegetical method applied to the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

²⁹ Sanders 1985, p. 240.

³⁰ Wright 1996, p. 110. An extensive consideration of all these figures is given in Wright 1992 (Vol. I), pp. 170-181.

³¹ Wright 1996, p. 110.

This early community is even stranger still. It actually begins to *worship* Jesus as Lord, associate Him with divine status, and attribute to Him co-eternity with the Father.³² This is not only historically unique, but also apologetically unappealing – so much so that the early Church had to pay the ultimate price for it (including separation from the synagogue and even persecution).³³

Additionally, the early Church organized itself into a missionary community that not only went beyond the boundaries of Israel but also to the very frontiers of the Roman Empire, making it one of the most pluralistic religious organizations in the history of religions. With a crucified Messiah as its head, the early Church formed one of the most dynamically expansive communities in history.

We are now led to N.T. Wright’s probative questions. Why didn’t the Church follow the patterns of other groups whose leaders had been persecuted? Why did it (uniquely) consider Jesus as its continued leader? Why did it consider Jesus (after the crucifixion) to be the fulfillment of Israel’s destiny? Why did it organize itself so uniquely? Why did it worship Jesus as the Lord and endure persecution for that worship? How did it become one of the most inspired and dynamically expansive missionary organizations in the history of religions with a publicly humiliated and executed “Messiah” as its sole leader?

The answers to these questions requires a cause capable of explaining why Christianity does not follow the pattern of other religions or messianic movements. Why does Christianity pick up momentum from a crucified leader when other messianic movements at the time quickly faded away? Why didn’t Christianity pick out another leader in the face of its leader’s crucifixion, like other messianic movements whose leaders were executed? Above all, why did it become such a powerful Messianic movement capable of threatening the Roman Empire within a few generations after that same empire executed its Messiah?

What kind of cause could explain so many unique phenomena? A powerful one – one capable of overcoming the crucifixion of the movement’s leader, capable of communicating both imminent and transcendent hope (amidst the death of its presumed messiah); one capable of revealing that God’s kingdom had arrived in the world, and capable of providing sufficient momentum to turn a little Jewish sub-cult into an empire-wide – indeed, worldwide religion within a few generations. This powerful cause would seem to be the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in combination with Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit which enabled the apostles’ (along with other missionaries) to perform miracles in the *name* of *Jesus*. John P. Meier summarizes this unique historical phenomenon as follows:

...[T]here was a notable difference between the long-term impact of the Baptist and that of Jesus. After the Baptist’s death, his followers did not continue to grow into a religious movement that in due time swept the Greco-Roman world. Followers remained, revering the Baptist’s memory and practices. But by the early 2d century A.D. any cohesive group that could have claimed an organic connection with the historical Baptist seems to have passed from the scene. In contrast, the movement

³² See Chapter 6 (Section III) of this volume. See also the many indications of the community’s worship of Jesus in Matthew’s, Luke’s and John’s resurrection narratives (above in this Chapter).

³³ See Chapter 2 (Section II.B) of this volume. See also Wright 1996, pp. 110-112.

that had begun to sprout up around the historical Jesus continued to *grow* – amid many sea changes – throughout the 1st century and beyond. Not entirely by coincidence, the post-Easter “Jesus movement” claimed the same sort of ability to work miracles that Jesus had claimed for himself during his lifetime. This continued claim to work miracles may help to explain the continued growth, instead of a tapering off, of the group that emerged from Jesus’ ministry.³⁴

If the resurrection appearances and the apostles’ ability to work miracles are not the cause of this uniquely powerful messianic movement (after the humiliation, persecution, and execution of its Messiah), then what other cause would have the same explanatory power? History has left us with a void of realistic alternatives, suggesting that the Christian claim to have seen the risen Jesus is true, and that the early community’s power to perform miracles in Jesus’ name was derived from the risen Jesus Himself.

IV.B. The Christian Mutation of Second Temple Judaism

Wright’s second and more extensive argument for the historicity of the resurrection appearances stems from several Christian mutations of the Jewish doctrine of resurrection prevalent at the time of Jesus (Second-Temple Judaism). He shows through a study of the New Testament (particularly the Letters of Paul and the Gospel narratives of the resurrection appearances) that Christianity changed the dominant Jewish view of “resurrection” in five major ways:

1. The Jewish picture of resurrection was a return to the same kind of bodily life as the one experienced before death (except in a new world with the righteous). Christian views always entailed *transformation* into a very different kind of life – incorruptible, glorious, and spiritual while still maintaining embodiment.³⁵ The Christian view is so different from the Jewish one that Paul has to develop a new term to speak about it – “body spiritual” (*soma pneumatikon*). In 1 Corinthians 15:44-46 he makes every effort to distinguish the Christian doctrine from the Jewish one: “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.....However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual.”
2. In Second Temple Judaism, no one was expected to rise from the dead before the initiation of the final age by Yahweh, however Christians claimed that this occurred with Jesus.³⁶
3. No one connected the Messiah to the resurrection or the Jewish doctrine of resurrection to the Messiah prior to Christianity: “There are no traditions about a Messiah being raised to life: most Jews of this period hoped for resurrection, many Jews of this period hoped for a Messiah, but nobody put those two hopes together until the early Christians did so.”³⁷
4. For the Jewish people, the eschatological age was in the future; for Christians the eschatological age had already arrived (and would be *completed* in the future).³⁸

³⁴ Meier 1994, p. 623.

³⁵ See Wright 2003, p. 273.

³⁶ See Wright 2003 pp 200 – 206 (the conclusion to Chapter 4).

³⁷ Wright 2003, p. 205.

³⁸ See Wright 2003, p. 272.

5. The doctrine of resurrection is *central* to the earliest writings of Christianity (e.g., all 9 of the early *kerygmas*), central to the writings of Paul³⁹ and all the Gospel writers,⁴⁰ and is the interconnecting theme among early Christian doctrines. The doctrine of the resurrection grounds Christology, particularly the doctrine of Christ's glorification and, in part, the doctrine of Christ's divinity; it grounds the Christian doctrine of soteriology – “for if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised” (1Cor 15:16); it shows God's vindication of Jesus' teaching; it grounds Christian eschatology; and is, in every respect, central to all other doctrines. St. Paul thinks it is so important that he proclaims:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain [useless]; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all (1Corinthians 15: 17-19).

Second Temple Judaism does not place the resurrection in any such central role, and does not use it as an interconnecting theme for its doctrines. It is almost secondary in importance to other doctrines concerned with the law and prayer.

Once again, Wright finds himself as an historian in the position of having to ask for a necessary and sufficient explanation of these radical mutations in Second Temple Judaism's doctrine of the resurrection. A responsible historian cannot simply say that there was no reason for this universally accepted change within early Christianity, because this position runs counter to the fact that Christianity remained faithful to Judaism except for when Jesus (or some historical event connected with Jesus) changed it.

So what could explain this radical change? The preaching of Jesus? This is not tenable because Jesus does not put the resurrection at the center of His doctrine, but rather the arrival of the kingdom. Furthermore, He does not connect the resurrection to His Messiahship, and He certainly does not talk about the resurrection being transformed embodiment (or spiritual embodiment, or glorified embodiment), which is evident in the early Christian doctrine. The obvious explanation would be that the many witnesses (e.g., Peter, the Twelve, the 500 disciples, James, the early missionaries to the Gentile Church, and Paul himself) saw the risen Jesus in a transformed embodied state (manifesting at once a spiritual transformation which had the appearance of divine glory and power, *and* some form of embodiment which was continuous with Jesus' embodiment in His ministry). This would easily explain all five of the above-mentioned mutations.⁴¹

Rigorous historical method requires more than leaping to the obvious explanation. The historian must eliminate all other plausible explanations for the same phenomena. In order to do this, Wright sets out five other possible explanations for the above-mentioned mutations: (1) paganism, (2) early Christian interior visions or experiences, (3) the empty tomb alone, (4) cognitive dissonance, and (5) Schillebeeckx's conjecture of a new experience of grace.

³⁹ See Wright 2003, p. 274. Paul makes it so central that he claims that if Jesus is not risen from the dead, “our preaching is in vain, and your faith useless.”

⁴⁰ See Wright 2003, pp. 401-584.

⁴¹ See Wright 2003, pp. 205, 272-274, and 401-584; and Spitzer 2010(a), Chapter 4, Section II.

1. *Paganism.* Paganism offers virtually no possibility of explaining the Christians' view of resurrection, let alone the mutations of Second Temple Judaism. Paganism generally held that the soul would be separated from the body, that the body would die and never be restored, and that the soul was very likely destined to be in Hades, manifest as a mere shadow of its former self.⁴² The contrast between paganism and early Christianity is so stark that the attempt to derive the latter from the former is not coherent.
2. *Early Christian interior visions.* Given that the unique, uniform, early Christian view of resurrection did not come from either Second Temple Judaism or paganism, might it not have come from an interior vision of Jesus after His crucifixion? Wouldn't a vision be *sufficient* to produce a whole new viewpoint on resurrection which became the central integrating theme of Christian doctrine and missionary activity?

In response, Wright shows that visions of the dead in the ancient world were quite commonplace and that these visions were never interpreted to be a resurrection of the body:

The more "normal" these "visions" were, the less chance there is that anyone, no matter how cognitively dissonant they may have been feeling, would have said what nobody had ever said about such a dead person before, that they had been *raised from the dead*.⁴³

Recall that "raised from the dead" refers to a resurrection of the body, and that this occurred with respect to Jesus, and that this grounded the early Church's belief in the initiation of the final age. There is no reason to believe that a vision of Jesus after death would have had any more effect than the frequently occurring visions of other dead people.

There is another related objection to the sufficiency of the vision hypothesis. The resurrection of Jesus had three verifiable effects: (a) it created a new, unique doctrine of the resurrection, (b) this doctrine became the central, integral theme of Christian doctrine, and (c) it provided the main force for the belief in Jesus' Messiahship and Lordship. Given that visions of the dead were quite normal in the ancient world, it is highly unlikely that a vision would produce these unprecedented effects.

3. *The empty tomb alone.* Some exegetes have contended that the empty tomb alone was sufficient to motivate early Christian belief in a bodily resurrection. They believe that the stories about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were mere add-ons either to enhance the empty tomb story or to redress the polemic that Jesus' disciples had stolen the body. This hypothesis is also insufficient to explain the five Christian mutations for two reasons: (a) it suffers from the same problem as interior visions, namely, that empty tombs and grave robbery were quite normal in the ancient world; and (b) an empty tomb does not explain four out of five of the above Christian mutations. Let us take each in turn.

Wright addresses the first point as follows:

⁴² See Wright 2003, Chapter 2 – particularly pp. 78-82.

⁴³ Wright 2003, p. 690.

An empty tomb without any meetings with Jesus would have been a distressing puzzle, but not a long-term problem. It would have proved nothing; it would have suggested nothing, except the fairly common practice of grave-robbery. It certainly would not have generated the phenomena we have studied in this book so far. Tombs were often robbed in the ancient world, adding to grief both insult and injury. Nobody in the pagan world would have interpreted an empty tomb as implying resurrection; everyone knew such a thing was out of the question. Nobody in the ancient Jewish world would have interpreted it like that either; “resurrection” was not something anyone expected to happen to a single individual while the world went on as normal.⁴⁴

Wright addresses the second major problem by showing that an empty tomb alone would not be able to explain four of the Christian mutations:

Had the tomb been empty, with no other unusual occurrences, no one would have imagined that Jesus was the Messiah or the lord of the world. No one would have imagined that the kingdom had been inaugurated. No one, in particular, would have developed so quickly and consistently a radical and reshaped version of the Jewish hope for the resurrection of the body. The empty tomb is by itself insufficient to account for the subsequent evidence.⁴⁵

4. *Cognitive dissonance*. The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance begins with an expectation (arising out of a deep longing or yearning) for some particular state of affairs which is followed by a disappointment of that expectation. The group cannot reconcile itself to the fact that its deepest yearning has been disappointed, and so it perpetuates a state of denial which then provokes it to reorganize its view of *reality* to conform to this denied state of affairs. The group attempts to increase its numbers in order to help justify its interpretation of the denied state of affairs.⁴⁶

The application of this theory to the early Christian Church might at first glance provide an alternative explanation to that of St. Paul and the gospels. Suppose the early Christian Church experienced cognitive dissonance – that is that they *really* wanted Jesus to be the Messiah, and they were *very* disappointed when Jesus was crucified. Being unable to reconcile themselves to this fact, they reorganized their reality to resolve their dissonance and disappointment by projecting His resurrection into their reality. They further reinforced their perspective by adding converts to their ranks.

There are several problems with this hypothesis. As the reader will by now surmise, this explanation does not explain four out of five of the above Christian mutations of Second Temple Judaism. Why would cognitive dissonance have caused the early Christians to believe in a

⁴⁴ Wright 2003, pp. 688-689.

⁴⁵ Wright 2003, p. 689.

⁴⁶ See Wright 2003, pp. 697-698.

completely unique notion of the resurrection (i.e., spiritual embodiment)? Why would it have led them to believe that the resurrection would begin with a single individual (and not a group)? Why would cognitive dissonance have caused the early Christians to believe in a completely unique view of the final age (while earthly life continued as quasi-normal)? Why would cognitive dissonance have caused early Christians to make their unique doctrine of the resurrection so central and integral to all other doctrines? Cognitive dissonance explains neither the need for nor the content of these mutations. Wright sums this up as follows:

The real problem is something that any first-century historian should recognize: that whatever it was that the early Christians were expecting, wanting, hoping and praying for, this was *not* what they said, after Easter, had happened.⁴⁷

The early Christians did not expect anything like spiritual embodiment, the initiation of the final age, the resurrection of a single individual, or the doctrinal centrality of the resurrection, and it is difficult to see how cognitive dissonance would have enabled them to change their expectations. So it seems that cognitive dissonance is not a sufficient explanation of the highly unusual facts.

5. *Schillebeeckx's "new experience of grace."* Edward Schillebeeckx's proposal may be summarized as follows: Peter (and some other disciples, apparently through his influence) had a wonderful experience of forgiveness and conversion which led him/them to believe that Jesus was still alive. This led to cultic practice which then began to develop stories about the empty tomb (perhaps in light of veneration of the tomb), and even stories about post-resurrection narratives. Each Evangelist approaches the stories differently (from the context of the faith community in which they were writing), which not only explains the origin of the stories, but also their seeming differences.

Aside from the fact that Schillebeeckx makes no less than eight significant errors in his exegesis of the Gospel texts,⁴⁸ his interpretation of the resurrection fails to explain all five of the above Christian mutations of Second Temple Judaism. Peter's experience of forgiveness and conversion (no matter how graced) does not explain the uniform Christian view of resurrection as spiritual embodiment. Furthermore, it does not explain why the Church held that the final age had been initiated (when Rome still occupied Jerusalem). Schillebeeckx's explanation for this is no more efficacious than those of the visions and empty tomb (alone) mentioned above. The same holds true for the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and Lord (with lordship having divine implications). How in the world did Peter's experience of forgiveness and conversion lead the early Church to

⁴⁷ Wright 2003, p. 699.

⁴⁸ Schillebeeckx exegetical errors are so prolific that Wright ridicules him: "This view is ingenious and subtle, but demonstrably wrong on almost every count. ... His invention of a supposed "Jewish-biblical way of speaking", in comparison with which stories of the risen Jesus appear crude and naively realistic, stands the truth on its head. His picture of the cultic practice of visiting Jesus' tomb, upon which he bases his reading of Mark, is without foundation. He is right to say that Matthew tells stories which assume that "resurrection" means bodies, but wrong to imply that this is an odd innovation in the tradition. His analysis of a "rapture" tradition is unwarranted, and does not in any case apply to Luke (when Jesus disappears in Emmaus this hardly constitutes a "rapture", since he reappears in Jerusalem shortly afterwards). His account of Paul is inaccurate in its reporting both of the Acts stories and of Paul's own evidence." Wright 2003, p. 703.

proclaim Jesus to be what was, in Second Temple Judaism, unthinkable – namely, that Jesus is the Lord? Finally, how did Peter’s experience of forgiveness and conversion cause the primitive Church to put the resurrection at the integrating center of all its doctrine? The Schillebeeckx alternative proposal (like all the others) fails the test of sufficient explanation.

Aside from their failure to explain most Christian mutations of Second Temple Judaism, the above five alternative explanations of Jesus’ resurrection reveal inadequacies in their authors’ knowledge of first century paganism, Second Temple Judaism, social and religious customs in first-century Palestine, and proper exegetical method.⁴⁹ For this reason, Wright legitimately eliminates them from the realm of plausibility and concludes that the only reasonable and responsible explanation is the one given by St. Paul and the gospel narratives – namely, that Jesus really appeared to multiple witnesses in a transformed corporeal state (manifesting at once spiritual transformation in the glory and power of God, and continuity with his former embodiment).

V. The Empty Tomb

The empty tomb does not give direct evidence of Jesus’ resurrection and spiritual transformation as do His risen appearances; however, it gives *indirect* corroboration of His resurrection and an indication of His continuity with His former *embodiment*. Some scholars have suggested that the empty tomb is a tenuous datum because we cannot be sure about where Jesus’ body was placed, and therefore whether the tomb was in fact, empty. However, the majority of mainstream scholars do not share this skeptical opinion for the following reasons.

It is unthinkable that Matthew would have reported the unflattering and embarrassing accusation of the Jewish authorities (that Jesus’ disciples had stolen his body) unless the accusation had in fact been made. Why call attention to an accusation capable of undermining faith in Jesus’ resurrection unless it was already widely known by Church members and required a response. Why did the Jewish authorities make this accusation? They must have needed an explanation for *a real missing body*. If Jesus’ body had been present where they laid Him, the polemic would be ridiculous (i.e. how could the apostles have stolen His body if it were still there?).

Some contemporary scholars have speculated that Jesus was not placed in a tomb, but instead, a mass grave or, in the case of Crossan, left in an unknown place.⁵⁰ Aside from the *unlikelihood*

⁴⁹ See Wright 2003, Chapter 2, particularly pp. 78-82 (with respect to paganism); pp. 689-690 (with respect to Christian interior visions); pp. 688-689 (with respect to the empty tomb alone); pp. 697-699 (with respect to cognitive dissonance of early Christians); and pp. 699 and 702-703 (with respect to Schillebeeckx’s new experience of grace).

⁵⁰ Dominic Crossan has proposed this on the basis of his interpretation of the Gospel of Peter. He holds the highly contested position that Matthew’s Gospel is reliant on the gnostic Gospel of Peter – rather than vice-versa. John P. Meier responds to Crossan with a far more plausible contention: “When it comes to who is dependent on whom, all the signs point to Matthew’s priority.... The clause [concerning the empty tomb in the Gospel of Peter] is a tissue of Matthean vocabulary and style, a vocabulary and style almost totally absent from the rest of the Gospel of Peter” (Meier 1991, p. 117).

See also Quarles’ response to Crossan’s contention that the Gospel of Peter is the source for the canonical Gospels in Quarles 2006 pp 106 – 120. See also Brown’s response to Crossan’s contention that the apostles didn’t know much about Jesus’ crucifixion and burial: “It is inconceivable that they showed no concern about what happened to Jesus

that the followers of Jesus would have lost track of His body, one must return to the above argument – why would the Jewish authorities have charged the apostles with stealing His body unless there were a *provably* missing body? If there were any ambiguity about where the body lay (e.g., in a mass grave), then there would be no problem about a missing body. They would not have had to explain why it couldn't be found. But the fact is that the authorities feel compelled to charge the apostles with stealing the body, which implies that a body is gone from a *known* place – presumably a tomb (the most identifiable burial place).⁵¹

We are now in a position to reconstruct the events surrounding the Jewish authorities' accusation of the apostles' theft of Jesus' body. The moment the apostles started preaching that Jesus had appeared to them (and began making converts on the basis of that preaching), their adversaries would have likely made every attempt to produce a body that would disprove (or undermine) the apostolic claim. Apparently, they could not do this. We might infer from this that the authorities made every attempt to find out where the body was laid, located the site of the grave/tomb, and found the body gone. If the body had not been put into an identifiable place, the charge of theft would not have been necessary. Now, if the authorities could have identified where the body was, we must suppose that His followers could do the same. Given this, it is likely that the women and other apostles witnessed the empty tomb, and shortly thereafter, Jesus appeared to them transformed – spiritually transformed.

When we combine the *spiritual* dimensions of Jesus' risen appearances with the implications of His *corporeality* from the empty tomb (as well as His risen appearance), we see why St. Paul was so careful to call Jesus' risen state “a spiritual body” (*pneumatikon soma*), and why the majority of scholars think that Jesus appeared as a spiritually transformed body (see Habermas' survey above in Section I).

VI.

Correlations between the Resurrection of Jesus and Near Death Experiences

The above evidence is sufficient to show the likelihood of Jesus' resurrection in glory. The Gospel and Pauline accounts of this are sufficient to explain Wright's five historical mutations (see above Section IV). Furthermore, St. Paul claimed that our resurrection would be like Jesus' – a transformed spiritual, glorified body (1Cor 15:42-46). This partially corresponds to the descriptions of near death experiences (see “Science & Near Death Experiences” -- <https://www.magiscenter.com/science-medicine-and-near-death-experiences/>).

A significant percentage of people having a near death experience described a transphysical dimension of their “new” form (outside of their physical bodies). This new transphysical form is not subject to physical laws and structures such as walls and gravity. Patients would hover above their physical bodies, pass through the walls of waiting rooms and hospitals, ascend multiple floors of the hospital, and frequently “go to the other side.”

after the arrest... The crucifixion itself was public, and nothing suggests that the burial was secret” (Brown 1994(b) p 14). See the explanation in Chapter 3 (Section IV.B).

⁵¹ Recent archaeological evidence at the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher shows details about the placement of the crucifixion and *burial* of Jesus in the Gospel of John to be remarkably accurate. See the research of Charlesworth 2006(b) and von Wahlde 2006.

Though Jesus' appearance is *different* from those of near death experiences in its *power and glory*, it does bear a resemblance to them in its transphysicality (e.g. Jesus appearing like a spirit – Lk 24:37, passing through closed doors – Jn 20:19). Recall that Jesus arose not only in spirit, but also in power and glory (see Mt 28: 16-20 – the disciples worshiped him; the use of “*ho Kurios*” – the Lord in Jn 20 – 21; and Paul's testimony that Jesus' body is raised in power and glory – 1Cor 15: 40-44). Though near death experiences indicate a transphysical state, they do not by themselves indicate a further transformation in power and glory. Christian revelation however does indicate this, and St. Paul promises it (1Cor 15: 40-44).

The new transphysical form of near death experiences is not only transphysical, it also frequently has continuity with embodiment – patients can not only see and hear, but also frequently have a sense of being extended. When patients pass to the “other side” they see their relatives and friends as embodied, but in a transformed way. They are visible, extended, and recognizable (from their former physically embodied state), but they are also transformed – appearing spiritual, beautiful, and somewhat luminous. This correlates with St. Paul's and the Gospel accounts of Jesus' continued embodiment (Lk 24:39-40 and Jn 20:19-20 and 1Cor 15:42-46).

In sum, there is *partial* correlation between the new transphysical form of near death experiences and Jesus' risen appearances. Jesus' risen appearance differs from near death experiences in its powerful and glorious manifestation. St. Paul states that we will one day undergo this transformation (1Cor 15:49 – “we shall bear the image of the heavenly man [the risen Jesus]”). However, there is no indication of this from near death experiences.

There is yet another partial correlation between Jesus' revelation and the accounts of near death experiences – namely the overwhelming presence of love. When patients cross over to the other side, they frequently encounter an overwhelmingly *loving* white light. The adjective “loving” is almost always part of the spontaneous description of the light – as if it were integral to the light's being and nature. Its love is just as obvious as the light itself. Patients frequently go on to describe the love of the light – not just its affirming and affectionate quality, but also its compassion, its desire to fulfill us, and to bring us to its own state of love. Patients frequently say that they are overwhelmed by this love. Yet their identities are not taken away from them (absorbed by this love). Furthermore, many patients who see deceased relatives and friends notice that they are loving – unselfishly displaying goodness, concern, and care not only for the deceased, but also their families. The children who see Jesus almost always indicate that He loves them.⁵²

The *central* revelation of Jesus about Himself and the Father is their unconditional love. Jesus manifests this in everything He does from befriending sinners to performing miracles, to the Last Supper and His death on the cross. He also reveals that this unconditional love expresses the essence of His Father -- calling Him “Abba” (“Daddy”), who he identifies with the Father of the

⁵² In a recent popular account of a four year old boy's near death experience, *Heaven is for Real*, a father tells the story for his son which has the prominent feature of Jesus' love for children. Many children indicate that they have seen Jesus, and that He has expressed His love for them.

Prodigal Son. This view of God's unconditional love is unique in the history of religions prior to Christianity.⁵³

Once again we see a partial correlation between near death experiences and the Christian revelation of God – both sources indicate that God and heaven are loving – even overwhelmingly loving. However, near death experiences do not indicate the unconditional love of God or how to understand “unconditional love” (*agapē*).

As can be seen, the evidence of near death experiences corroborates part of the Christian account of Jesus' resurrection, but Christianity goes further in revealing the power and glory of the spiritual body, the *unconditional* love of God, and the definition of love as “*agapē*.” There are two other areas in which Jesus' revelation goes beyond the evidence of near death experiences – the *eternity* of the afterlife and God's *universal* salvific will.

With respect to the first area, near death experiences show only that a transphysical body can survive clinical death, and in so doing, show that we are more than our physical embodiment. They do not and cannot reveal the eternity of that transphysical state. To know this would require knowing the will of the Creator, which requires, in turn, a revelation from that Creator. If we grant that Jesus Christ is “the unconditional love of God with us,” then His revelation of God's will to give us eternal life is more than sufficient to do this. This theme is central in the writings of Paul, particularly 1Cor 15, as well as Rom 5:21 and 6:23 and Gal 6:8. It is also central to the synoptic gospels in which there are eight distinct mentions of it (see for example Mk 8:35 and 10:30 and Mt 16:25 and 18:8-9, and Lk 9:24. The theme of eternal life is most prevalent in John's Gospel where there are eighteen mentions of “eternal life” (see for example 3:15-16, 5:24, 17:1-11) and another nineteen mentions of “life” which imply eternal life. If we affirm that God is unconditional love (as Jesus teaches), we can also infer His desire to bring us into eternal life because if God truly is unconditional love, and unconditional love entails a desire to be with us in *perfect* empathy, it implies God's desire to be with us eternally.

The second area in which Jesus' revelation goes beyond the evidence of near death experiences concerns God's desire to save *every* human being who seeks him with a sincere heart. We have already encountered this theme with respect to Jesus' Eucharistic words – “poured out for all/the many” and Jesus' selection of Psalm 22 for His dying words (which addresses the universality of salvation). Jesus' intention to save *everyone* who seeks God with a sincere heart” is supported by several passages of scripture throughout the Synoptics, John, and

⁵³ There is no doubt that Judaism viewed God as loving (Deut 4:37, Deut 7:7; Hos 11:1, Hos 14:5; Is 66:13; Jer 31:3; Zeph 3:17), but not in the same way as Christianity – that is, as *unconditional agapē* manifest by the father of the prodigal son and in the name “Abba.” Furthermore, God's love in Judaism is focused on the *people Israel*, but in Christianity God's love is focused on *individuals* – all individuals, particularly sinful and weak individuals (Lk 15:1-7; Lk 15:8-10; Mt 9:13; Mt 11:29; Jn 3:16-17; Jn 15:11-12).

The Christians also qualitatively transformed the *idea* of “love” – as McKenzie notes, “Greek uses the word *Eros*, *Philia*, and *agapē* and their cognates to designate love. *Eros* signifies the passion of sexual desire and does not appear in the NT. *Philein* and *Philia* designate primarily the love of friendship. *Agapē* and *agapan*, less frequent in profane Greek, are possibly chosen for that reason to designate the unique and original Christian idea of love in the New Testament. In English also the word “charity” is used to show the unique character of this love and is used in most English versions of the Bible to translate *agapē* and *agapan*” (McKenzie 1965 p. 521). This was explained in detail in Chapter 1 of this volume.

Paul.⁵⁴ Though God's *desire* to save is universal, each person must seek that salvation with a sincere heart.

Since God's universal *desire* to save us may not correspond to *our desire* to accept and seek that salvation, we cannot say that everyone *is* or will be saved. We know only that God's *desire* is to save *every* human being who sincerely wants to be saved.

In contrast to this, near death experiences reveal only that God (represented by the loving white light) expresses a desire to bring certain individuals to Himself. They do not indicate why only 9% - 20% of clinically dead adults have near death experiences (though 85% of children do⁵⁵), and so God's universal salvific will is left ambiguous. It is only through the revelation of Jesus that we know the intention of God to save everyone who desires and seeks His salvation.

What do we know after combining the evidence of Christian revelation and near death experiences?

1. Human beings are not limited to corporeal life or the physical world – they have a transphysical dimension that can survive bodily death (from both near death experiences and Jesus' revelation).
2. The transphysical dimension of human beings has continuity with embodiment – but is not limited by physical laws or structures (from both near death experiences and Jesus' revelation).
3. The transcendent deity (and the “other side”) are overwhelmingly loving (from both near death experiences and Jesus' revelation).
4. Our transphysical embodiment will be transformed in power and glory – like Jesus' (from only the revelation of Jesus).
5. Life after death is eternal (from only the revelation of Jesus).
6. God's and Jesus' intention is to give eternal life to *all* who accept and seek it – still allowing for the possibility of some to freely reject love, a loving God, and loving people (from only the revelation of Jesus).

If this confluence of evidence indicates our destiny, it must also indicate our nature – we are loving beings whose purpose is to love and whose destiny is the fullness of love. Only the unconditionally loving God can satisfy us. As St. Augustine said long ago, “For thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See for example, Mt 18:14 “It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish”, Lk 3:6 “All flesh shall see the salvation of God”, Jn 12:32 “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all* men to myself”, Jn 17: 2 “For you granted him authority over *all* people that he might give eternal life to *all* those you have given him”, and Rom 6:10 “The death [Jesus] died, he died to sin once for *all*.”

⁵⁵ These statistics are reported by the International Association of Near Death Studies, which states that negative near death experiences are rare: “In the four prospective studies conducted between 1984 and 2001 involving a total of 130 NDErs, none reported distressing experiences. This finding seems to confirm that the experience is relatively rare” <http://iands.org/about-ndes/distressing-ndes.html#a>. The 2014 Parnia/Southampton University Study reported that the 9% who had a near death experience indicated that it was overwhelmingly positive. However, some of the 30% who maintained some post-mortem consciousness, but did not have a full near death experience, reported having some feelings of distress (Parnia *et al* 2014).

⁵⁶ Augustine 1955, Bk. I, Ch. 1.

VII. Conclusion

The above historical analysis validates two conclusions:

1. There is significant reason to believe that Jesus appeared to the apostles (and other witnesses) after the women had discovered his empty tomb. He appeared spiritually transformed – possessing transphysical capacities (such as the ability to pass through closed doors – John 20:19-20), with spirit-like qualities (that caused the disciples to think he was a spirit – Luke 24:37). He was more than a spiritual presence – appearing transformed in power and glory as if he were clothed in the glory of God (1Corinthians 15: 50-56; Matthew 28: 16-20; and references to “the Lord” – “*ho Kurios*” in John 20&21). Though transformed, He maintained continuity with His former embodiment, revealing the wounds of His crucifixion (John 20:20-21 and Luke 24:41). This interpretation explains all five of Wright’s Christian mutations of Second Temple Judaism (see above Section IV.B).
2. After Jesus’ powerful transformed appearance to the witnesses, He imparts the Holy Spirit upon them, and they are able to perform the same miracles as He did (in *His* name).

Jesus’ risen glory and gift of the Spirit substantiated everything He said to his apostles about being “the Exclusive Son of the Father,” and so the early Church declared him to be “the Lord” and “the Son of God”. Recall that the proclamation of Jesus’ divinity was apologetically unappealing, and cost the Church dearly (separation from the synagogue, loss of social and financial status, and persecution). Jesus’ resurrection and glory explains why Church leaders brought persecution upon themselves when they could have avoided it by simply omitting mention of His divinity. It also explains why Christian messianism grew stronger after the public execution and humiliation of its messiah, and why the Christian church grew so rapidly in the midst of persecution.

In view of this, we can see why Paul and the other witnesses were so willing to risk everything in order to proclaim Jesus as risen messiah and Lord. As Paul notes in his dilemma (see above Section III.B) all these witnesses had everything to lose and nothing to gain by their proclamation. It also explains why the Jewish authorities and even the Roman Empire could not arrest the growth of this unique religion within its confines, and why that religion moved beyond Rome and became the most dynamic missionary church in human history. When this historical evidence of Jesus’ resurrection is combined with the data of near death experiences, it further corroborates the case for our ultimate spiritual destiny in Jesus – a destiny of eternal and unconditional love – without suffering – transformed in the very image of the risen Savior.

The historical case for Jesus’ resurrection is significant and it provides an essential part of the foundation for believing that He truly is the “unconditional love of God with us.” There are two other essential elements that con-validate Jesus’ divinity – his miracles (see “Evidence of Jesus’ Miracles” in <https://www.magiscenter.com/historical-evidence-of-jesus-miracles/>) and the gift of the Holy Spirit which enable the apostles to do miracles in his name. These miracles are still prevalent today – manifest not only through the Holy Spirit (in Jesus’ name), but also through the mediation of the Blessed Mother and the saints (see “Contemporarily Scientifically Validated Miracles” in

<https://www.magiscenter.com/contemporary-scientifically-validated-miracles-associated-with-blessed-mary-saints-and-the-holy-eucharist/>). When these three pieces are combined with his unconditionally loving life and death (and His preaching of His Father's unconditional love), we see the solidity of His claim to be the exclusive Son of the Father.

There is yet another remarkable piece of scientifically validatable evidence of Jesus' resurrection – the image on the Shroud of Turin. Though the 1988 carbon dating suggested that the Shroud originated in the 15th century, the sample for that dating has been shown by six scientific tests to have come from fabric that was *not* part of the original linen cloth. Seven other dating tests indicate that the Shroud comes from the 1st century in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the image on the Shroud was very likely produced by an intense burst of light radiation (with a magnitude of 6 to 8 billion watts lasting only one-forty-billionth of a second) emanating from every 3-dimensional part inside and on the surface of a mechanically transparent (spiritual) body. This suggests strongly that the dead body inside the Shroud of Turin was transformed spiritually and luninescently through a supernatural cause – a remarkable confirmation of the gospel accounts of Jesus' transformed appearance. This is discussed in detail in “Science and the Shroud of Turin” (see <https://www.magiscenter.com/science-and-the-shroud-of-turin/>).

Reason alone will not bring us to faith in Jesus Christ. Reasonable evidence can mitigate barriers to faith while providing strong support for its foundations. However, faith requires that we recognize a need for God, and His help to bring us out of darkness and alienation; it requires a recognition that there is something incomplete within ourselves, a recognition that we cannot by ourselves (or even with other people) overcome this alienation and incompleteness, and a recognition that the word, actions, and way of Jesus Christ are the vehicle for doing this. When we see the evidence of the resurrection in light of Jesus' preaching about God's unconditional love, and acknowledge our *need* for that love, the assent of faith begins. The more grace works in our lives, the more we know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.