

ALIVE

HOW *the* RESURRECTION *of* CHRIST
CHANGES EVERYTHING



GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER

“If Christ is not raised from the dead, then our faith is worthless (1 Cor. 15:14). However, Christ is risen and lives today! Surprisingly, few good books have been written on the vital subject of Christ’s resurrection, so Dr. Gabe Fluhrer’s work is all the more welcome. This gripping, well-written book argues from the Holy Scriptures and from careful reasoning that Christ’s resurrection is both true history and the ground of our hope both objectively and subjectively.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation
of Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Dr. Gabe Fluhrer upholds the historical faith of Christianity in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Its historical reality, for him, is the culmination of a much larger narrative, and its theological significance is inseparable from God’s redemptive plan since the resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection of the dead are distinct episodes of the same event. From this perspective, Dr. Fluhrer examines and rejects the arguments raised by scholars against the physical resurrection of Jesus, explains the Old Testament promises that point to the resurrection, and shows how the resurrection was understood and applied by the New Testament authors. In addition to its apologetic character, this book has a pastoral and practical dimension, where it explores the implications of Christ’s resurrection for the lives of believers. In a time of skepticism like ours, this book comes as a ray of faith and hope in the central event of Christianity.”

—DR. AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES

Vice president of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil
Assistant pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Recife, Brazil

“The resurrection of Jesus Christ sits at the very heart of the gospel. What does it mean that Jesus was raised from the dead? How do we know that the resurrection is true? How does the resurrection help me face death? How does the resurrection help me to live my life today? With the mind and heart of a pastor and theologian, Dr. Gabe Fluhrer deftly walks us through the Bible to see the centrality, beauty, and glory of the resurrection. Indeed, he rightly says, ‘For believers, the reality of Jesus’ resurrection means that everything has changed.’ Take up *Alive* and begin to see with fresh eyes what a difference the resurrection makes.”

—DR. GUY PRENTISS WATERS
James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament
Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss.

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INTRODUCTION

We have been told, over and over again, that life in the West has never been more secular. Pundits insist that what remains of our Christian heritage resembles the now-vacant cathedrals that haunt our urban centers or the fast-emptying rural churches sprinkled throughout the so-called flyover states: irrelevant, crumbling, and abandoned.

Despite this well-worn narrative, a closer look reveals that secularism's victory dance is premature. A strong argument could be (and has been) made that never before have we lived in a more spiritual age.¹ Modern man tolerates and even embraces the supernatural. From horoscopes to omens to fate to fascination with ghost stories to a vague deistic hope that the "big man upstairs" is looking out for us, the atheistic dream of a world shorn of belief in the sacred is dying more rapidly than the Christian worldview it sought to replace.

On a popular level, people remain stubbornly committed to the reality of a world beyond nature. Even the best efforts of a bloated and biased scientific establishment to disabuse them of such antiquated fantasies have not changed their minds.

But this entrenched commitment to the reality of the beyond

should not cause the Christian to rejoice. Rather, it should be a source of great sadness. Although Christians can celebrate the long-overdue rejection of the cold, hopeless, antisupernatural worldview of the atheistic establishment, they must simultaneously mourn the corresponding rise of the nebulous spiritualism of the present.

We must mourn this “spiritualism” because not all spiritualism is created equal. In other words, the supernatural world described by the Bible—in which God is sovereign—is not the same as horoscopes, fate, or deism.

The modern secularist may tolerate some form of spiritualism, at least in a general sense, but he will presumably never accept a supernaturalism that claims absolute authority over his life. In fact, as has been the case throughout the woeful history of our fallen race, the worldly mind will consistently take up arms against this kind of claim. It will march proudly into an ideological battle against any demand for its unqualified allegiance.

The resurrection of Christ represents just such a claim of absolute authority. As luminous as the first beams of sunshine that brightened Jerusalem the first Easter morning two thousand years ago, the light of Christ’s victory over the grave scatters the drowsy pagan gloom of the present. Jesus’ resurrection represents the highest sort of supernaturalism, but in a *supportive* fashion (more on this below).

By stating the matter this way, I am not at all claiming that the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus is thereby unimportant—far from it, as I will argue at length in what follows. It is of supreme importance. But the biblical writers did not share the skepticism of miracles that has anesthetized the West since

the Enlightenment. Therefore, they did not encounter the same hurdles to belief in the resurrection that might cause someone today to stumble.

For the writers of the New Testament, at least two astonishing, revolutionary, world-changing facts emerged from the empty tomb of Christ. First, according to the Apostles, the resurrection of Christ as a physical miracle in the space-time continuum was simply the culmination of a series of miraculous interventions by the Creator of the universe, going all the way back to the dawn of history. We will discuss this statement in more detail in chapter 2. For the moment, we only wish to point out that the *physical fact* of the resurrection was *supportive* of a far greater narrative. Therefore, in the second place, the God-intended *meaning* of the resurrection of Christ was paramount for the Apostles. The *historical reality* thus plays a supporting role to the *theological meaning* of that first Easter morning. Both, however, are indispensable: the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection and its theological meaning are inseparable and essential parts of God's redemptive plan.

Before proceeding, let me briefly discuss our terms. The resurrection refers, first and foremost, to the resurrection of Christ from the dead (see Matt. 28:1ff; Mark 16:1ff; Luke 24:1ff; John 20:1–10). The word can also refer to a more general event that will take place at the end of time, namely, the reunion of body and soul for all who have ever lived, for good or for ill (see Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:25–29). As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15:20, our Lord's victory over the grave was the "firstfruits" of a general resurrection harvest. His resurrection is thus the precursor to a more general, future occurrence.

In thinking about *resurrection*, the term *event* may be too

generic, resulting in an unhelpful ambiguity. As one scholar explains, Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of all people at the end of time should not be construed as two separate *events*. Rather, they are two *episodes* of the same event, even if they are separated by thousands of years.² Stated more simply, Christ's resurrection, as *the* resurrection, is the guarantor and beginning of *our* resurrection, to our everlasting delight or terror. Because these are distinct yet inseparable episodes,³ the firstfruits implies and guarantees the harvest. More on this in chapter 6.

With this in mind, we cannot think about the resurrection of Christ without also seeing the more general resurrection on the horizon. To deny one is to deny the other. To affirm one is to affirm the other. This book will focus primarily on Christ's resurrection.

In addition, the argument here is not that other religions or worldviews do not affirm a resurrection of some variety. There are a handful that do. But they are nothing like the biblical view. This is because, again, the resurrection of Christ as a *historical* reality has a deeply *theological* meaning, one that is incomprehensible apart from the worldview to which it is connected.

In what follows, I will begin by demonstrating the historical fact of Christ's bodily resurrection. This will occupy our attention in the first and second chapters. We will examine some objections raised by scholars who deny that Jesus rose from the grave. I think the resurrection of Christ is so well attested historically that the objections raised against it are persuasive only to those who have already made up their minds. In other words, the faith of those who reject the resurrection, while mistaken and misplaced, is every bit as firm as that of those who embrace the resurrection.

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The bulk of our study will concentrate on the biblical materials themselves. We will explore the promises and foreshadowings of Christ's resurrection in the Old Testament. Admittedly, the resurrection was only whispered to the saints who lived before Jesus' first coming. What was a whisper to those living under the old covenant becomes a deafening roar for the New Testament authors.

Accordingly, we will spend a few chapters exploring what the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the rest of the New Testament teach concerning Jesus' resurrection and therefore our resurrection. Finally, we will conclude by drawing some (I hope, practical and pastoral) conclusions regarding what the reality of resurrection means for our day-to-day lives.

My goal is for the reader to gain an appreciation for, a wonder at, and an enjoyment of the stupendous truth that sets Christianity apart from other world religions, namely, the reality that Jesus Christ is alive. Yes, as the Apostles' Creed confesses, He was buried. So were Muhammad, Buddha, and countless other religious leaders. But the next line of the ancient creed, simple in expression yet enormous in implication, is what I hope to expound, examine, and, most importantly, adore along with you in the pages that follow: "The third day he rose again from the dead."

One of the scholars whose arguments we will scrutinize in chapter 1 is Bart Ehrman, best-selling author and professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He fancies himself unshackled from the restrictive fundamentalism of his naive youth, and he wants the reader to join the agnostic exodus with him. Hence, he begins his popular-level books with his *deconversion* testimony. If he, as a secular intellectual, is permitted to do

that, then I will offer my conversion testimony without apology.

During my senior year at the University of South Carolina, I found myself in a familiar place for a soon-to-be college grad. As my undergraduate days drew to a close, I was unsure of what I believed, but I was certain that what I had labeled “fundamentalist Christianity” (which I have since come to understand was simply the historic Christian faith) was unworthy of being taken seriously by thinking people. Sure, we went to a mainline church growing up (who didn’t go to some kind of church in South Carolina?), but I had given myself to the study of philosophy. I read the great texts, tried to think critically, and shut myself up to the fact that I was on my own in the quest for truth.

Indeed, the very quest for *truth* with a definite article was something I needed to abandon as a mark of intellectual maturity. An inerrant book? The leftovers of a modernist, quasi-adolescent yearning for certitude. Better to live with ambiguity than sacrifice the intellect on the altar of a naive certainty. Only one way to heaven, through the blood sacrifice of Jesus? An arrogant, bigoted claim that is not only repulsive in its exclusivity but laughable to anyone who has lived outside the confines of a comfortable, Christian-influenced culture.

Rather, I had concluded that the world was a complicated, big place. I still believe this, perhaps more so since I became a Christian. However, I thought, exclusive claims like those I had heard from “fundamentalist” Christians could be dismissed safely.

Then, after I graduated, I began to examine some of the evidence for the resurrection because of a book I came across called *The Case for Christ*. In my arrogance, I argued that this was a book for a popular audience, not a scholarly work, so I could still keep

it at arm's length. But the thinkers to whom Lee Strobel introduced me revealed a side of Christianity I had never encountered, both because of my ignorance and because of my own love of sin.

Strobel's book featured serious Christian scholarship presented at a popular level. So I read rebuttals to Strobel's work. And I continued reading Christian scholars who defended one doctrine on which I knew the whole system turned: the resurrection of Christ.

Like most students and graduates, I was agnostic about the miraculous. But the more I studied, the more I realized that if Jesus is alive (that is, if His resurrection is a historical fact), then I could no longer ignore Him. Therefore, I examined the evidence for the resurrection and Christianity with something of a single-minded devotion. I looked at different denominations. I spoke with whomever I could about my questions. I read and reread, all the while making notes in the margins.

Two things happened during this time, both unforgettable to me. First, I was overwhelmed by the evidence for Christ's resurrection. I realized that my bias toward the miraculous was just that: a bias, not a solid argument. As we will see in chapter 1, I have since come to realize that, despite the hand waving and posturing of the scholarly establishment, an unwarranted antisupernatural bias infects academia.

But once that bias was overcome, one fact became as plain as the fall sunlight that warmed my neck as I studied: the resurrection of Christ happened. It wasn't a hallucination. It wasn't the deepest spiritual longings of man realized in some sort of "Easter event," as some biblical scholars in the twentieth century argued. It was real.

I was ruined. If the resurrection was true, and I had come to see that it was, then the skepticism of my college years was unfounded. But I wasn't ready to commit myself wholeheartedly to Christ yet.

So, in the second place, I began to listen to Dr. R.C. Sproul's radio program *Renewing Your Mind*. I had no idea what the Reformed faith was; I had just started to believe that miracles like the resurrection could happen. But I listened to Dr. Sproul every morning in my old truck tooling around the Upcountry of South Carolina.

He explained the gospel to me, not in broad strokes but in specifics that at once both wounded and cured my soul. What was a vague ache of conscience crystallized into radical depravity. I knew that I was enslaved to desires and habits and that I was, in sum, in rebellion against the living and true God.

At that point, it all came together for me. Jesus is alive, but I was dead in my trespasses and sins. The only hope I had was for the living Jesus to save my soul by His sheer grace. Dr. Sproul explained that this grace I desperately wanted is precisely what Jesus offers. I went from ruined to reconciled by God's grace alone!

I was newborn in the faith, and everything looked different. I had tasted a wonder that I had never known. To be sure, my understanding was dim. I had a lot of questions. But something had changed. I wanted to read the Bible. I wanted to know more about Jesus. So I sought out pastors who believed the Bible and asked them to study God's Word with me. I logged on to Ligonier's website constantly. And I continued to study the resurrection.

Now, almost seventeen years later, I have had the faith of my early twenties challenged, both in the mundane affairs of daily life

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and in the unsympathetic courts of academic work. I've buried loved ones and heard the spade scattering dirt on some of my dreams as well. I am a husband and father and pastor, and I've been astonished at my incapacity and ineptitude in all three.

In a word, life—in all its beauty and knotted ugliness—has happened. But the radiance of the resurrection faith I came to believe in almost two decades ago has lost none of its luster. Indeed, as I enter middle age, it becomes more precious to me daily. Therefore, this book is not simply a detached study of evidence and exegesis. It is an act of worship by a grateful sinner who, by God's grace alone, believes that Jesus was buried but is now alive. And because of that simple yet beautiful historical fact, nothing will ever be the same for any of us.



Chapter One

A FOOL'S ERRAND?

KNOWING THE TRUTH OF THE RESURRECTION IN AN AGE OF UNBELIEF

The American industrialist Henry Ford was known for his quick wit. One of his more memorable statements was “History is bunk.” I suppose if your life’s work changes the world, your witticisms get less scrutiny. In contrast to Ford’s skepticism, Christianity has as one of its outstanding features its intractable commitment to history. Far from considering the past “bunk,” the Bible prioritizes history. On every page, we read the evidence of the Spirit-inspired writers using careful documentation when they described historical events.

The resurrection of Christ from the dead is one of these historical events. As we will observe in later chapters, the Apostles never once imply that Jesus’ resurrection was anything other than a historical fact. It was not a metaphor or a symbol. It was not

a mass hallucination. Yet, despite the Bible's teaching that Jesus actually rose from the dead, skeptics insist it didn't happen.

But this kind of doubt is nothing new. In fact, the first skeptics of the resurrection were contemporaries of Jesus and the Apostles. Matthew records an agreement between the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers who were charged with guarding Jesus' tomb that, for a tidy sum, the guards would tell everyone that the disciples stole Jesus' body (Matt. 28:11–15). The folded graveclothes of Jesus had barely been creased when unbelief reared its cynical head.

Therefore, in this chapter, I have three goals. First, I critique the philosophical bias against the supernatural that dominates objections to the resurrection. This bias assumes certain principles that do not disprove the resurrection but reject the idea of such an event ahead of time. These assumptions, however, are fatal to this bias. Second, I look at some alternative theories put forward to explain (or better, to explain *away*) the reality of the empty tomb. Finally, I analyze and answer the arguments of two prominent scholars who are hostile to the resurrection.

THE FAITH OF DOUBT

When we moved to Mississippi, we were invited to a dinner party, which eventually turned into a supper club with dear friends. At our first meeting, we asked each other the usual get-to-know-you questions: where we were from, where we went to college, how we met our spouse, and other such pleasantries. Eventually, one of the guests asked me, "What did you study in college, Gabe?" I answered, "I did my undergraduate degree in philosophy." After a puzzled look, she responded, "Do they still have those?" I suspect

many people share the viewpoint of my friend. Studying philosophy seems quaint, if not eccentric. The very mention of the word *philosophy* conjures images of long beards, obtuse arguments, and irresolvable debate.

But everyone is a philosopher, believe it or not. Philosophy is more or less asking and answering the most foundational questions of life. For example, queries like “Why am I here?” “What is the meaning of life?” “Why should I do this rather than that?” “What is true?” and “Why do LEGOs always seem to be in my path when I get up at night?” dominate philosophical speculation (especially the last one). And although we may not be professional philosophers, we are doing philosophy every time we think about matters like these. Therefore, the issue is not *whether* we will do philosophy but *how* we will do it.

Unfortunately, arguments against the resurrection display a lot of poor reasoning. In the face of overwhelming evidence that Jesus rose from the dead (evidence that we will explore later), why do so many people nevertheless reject its truth?

First and foremost, we reject God’s truth because Satan has blinded our eyes (2 Cor. 4:4). Satan does this in various ways, but one common tactic is false philosophy through which the evidence is sifted. Such theorizing begins with the assumption that the human mind is competent to solve life’s problems. In other words, this view rejects *at the outset* the need for divine revelation to think correctly. It rebels against the uniform testimony of the Bible that for man’s mind to function as God intended, it must bow the knee to His Word. In sum, bad philosophy discards God’s Word in favor of its own supremacy.

When we approach objections to Jesus’ rising from the dead

on the third day, it becomes apparent they are controlled by one of these false philosophies called *naturalism* or *materialism*. We could further distinguish between *metaphysical* and *methodological* naturalism (but we'll keep things simple for the moment). Basically, naturalism teaches that nature is all there is. In this view, the God of the Bible—a tripersonal spirit who exists outside of nature—does not exist. In fact, proponents of this view argue that His existence is impossible because evidence and reason combine to prove that there is nothing beyond nature. Given this understanding of reality, the resurrection is ruled out before the evidence is even considered.

But that's the problem. It's not as though naturalism wins the ideological day because of its explanatory power or intellectual strength. Instead, it claims that it wins because of its assertion that nothing exists that cannot be sensed. That means that the philosophy of naturalism is adopted before the evidence for or against supernaturalism is examined. More than twenty years ago, Harvard biologist and committed atheist Richard Lewontin illustrated this bias when he wrote:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods

and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.¹

Lewontin's frank admission to the deliberate prejudice of the scientific establishment is both shocking and refreshing. It is shocking because scientists like Lewontin portray themselves as the epitome of detached, objective thought. As he said, they are not. Lewontin's admission is refreshing because it reveals what we all know implicitly. We are not as objective as we think we are; all of us are reading the evidence we come across with an implicit bias.

The last statement seems to lead us from the arms of naturalism like Lewontin's into the waiting embrace of woozy postmodernism, where truth is up for grabs and each person can have his "own" truth. But we don't have to make that choice. We have a better way. We can acknowledge that we are biased. We can grant that we are prone to distorting the evidence to meet our preconceived notions, as Lewontin admitted.

Still, these concessions don't mean that truth with a capital *T* doesn't exist. Instead of either rationalism or postmodernism, we can embrace the Bible's teaching that we are all sinners (Rom. 3:9–18), God's Word is true (John 17:17), and Jesus is the perfect incarnation of truth (John 14:6). Therefore, although we are all

biased (because of sin), we can know the truth (because God has revealed it to us). In the biblical understanding, we avoid both naturalism and postmodernism.

How does this discussion pertain to the resurrection? Many of the resurrection's critics embrace the philosophy of naturalism, sometimes without confessing it (or even being aware of it). As a result, these opponents haven't actually refuted the evidence for the resurrection. They have simply read it through the lens of a different *faith*, a faith in naturalism.

Not only have these naturalists done nothing to disprove the resurrection, but they also often ignore the flaw in their own philosophy (though I'm certainly not the first to notice these weaknesses). As we will see, no one can prove the truth of naturalism. Moreover, naturalism actually undermines the very concept of truth.

First, if, as naturalism affirms, nature is all there is, then the concept of truth is meaningless. There is only what has been determined by natural selection. Stated another way, if our minds are simply our physical brains and nothing more (which is what naturalism teaches), then we have lost our minds. If every one of our thoughts is produced by the interaction of chemicals, then nothing is true or false; it simply *is*.

But if that is the case, why write books attempting to convince people that religion is false? The very act of writing a book to persuade someone assumes that minds can be changed. But minds, even assuming they exist in some sense, cannot be *changed* if they are chemically *predetermined* by some bioevolutionary mechanism. Therefore, naturalism is self-refuting from the outset. It shoots itself in the foot while claiming to run the race of intellectual freedom.

Second, if naturalism is true, morality disappears. To be clear, I am not saying that people who subscribe to naturalism are not moral. Far from it. Oftentimes, atheists can live “better” lives than professing Christians!

But whether someone *acts* morally is a separate question from whether they *should be* moral. In other words, just because you *are* moral does not mean you *should be*. The same principle from the first objection applies equally here. If nature is all there is, right and wrong do not exist. To repeat, if we are chemically predetermined to behave a certain way, then we are no longer accountable for our actions. We are just chemical machines doing what chemicals in reaction to one another do. Morality is meaningless if the naturalist is consistent.

Alex Rosenberg, professor of philosophy at Duke University, acknowledges this problem. As a committed naturalist, he believes the answers to the questions he poses would make the intellectually honest naturalist proud. When it comes to morals specifically, Rosenberg asks: “What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? There is no moral difference between them.”²

This is the grim conclusion to which consistent naturalism leads. But if Rosenberg is right, then there is no point in trying to disprove the resurrection of Christ, as many critics attempt to do. After all, if morality is just an illusion, then there is no moral wrong in believing the lie the critics make the resurrection out to be. Once more, a foundational principle of naturalism is shown to be self-refuting.

The key takeaway from this discussion of naturalism as an objection to the resurrection is this: before the evidence for the resurrection is even examined, some critics who accept naturalism

have already made up their minds about whatever evidence they encounter. In other words, a naturalistic explanation is preferable for these opponents to *any* supernatural explanation, no matter what evidence exists for the resurrection.

Therefore, we must recognize this position for what it is *not*. It is not rational. It is not superior to the biblical account. It is not viable, philosophically or in daily life. But we must also recognize naturalism for what it *is*. It is a faith position. It is weak intellectually. It is self-defeating. And as an attractive substitute for biblical faith, it is an utter failure.

FANCIFUL ALTERNATIVES

Much to the delight of many readers, we will now move on from philosophy to some alternative theories that skeptics have proposed to explain the empty tomb.

Broadly, we can classify the objections to Jesus' bodily resurrection into two categories: *objective* and *subjective*. When we use the term *objective*, we don't mean that such objections are objectively true. Instead, the word *objective* here simply means "external" or "able to be witnessed publicly." By contrast, when we use the word *subjective*, we refer to something experienced or observed only by the individual. In reality, this distinction is not hard and fast. But it is a useful way to distinguish various objections, so we will look at a popular example of each type.

The first alternate theory, which falls into the objective category, is called the swoon theory (ST). This is an objective theory because it purports to explain the resurrection as something other than a private hallucination or experience. The ST was popular in the nineteenth century as a means of explaining the resurrection

in terms hospitable to the growing naturalism of that time. It enjoyed many advocates before being discarded in favor of other naturalistic theories.³

The ST teaches that Jesus did not really die on the cross but merely swooned, or fainted, only to be revived in the cool of the garden tomb. On the surface, the ST may seem reasonable. After all, history is littered with accounts of people who survive life-threatening injuries. The ST seemed especially plausible in the nineteenth century, when the evidence we have at our disposal was not available. But subsequent research has led to its almost wholesale abandonment today, as it suffers from at least three insurmountable problems.

In the first place, we have few recorded instances of any person surviving crucifixion. Indeed, most of those condemned to the Roman punishment of flogging, such as Jesus endured (John 19:1), did not even survive *that* ordeal, let alone crucifixion. The person sentenced to flogging was beaten with a gruesome instrument consisting of a whip with bits of bone and metal until his flesh was sliced to ribbons. So, this theory asks us to believe that Jesus survived flogging and *then* the horrors of the cross. With what we know today about both forms of punishment, the ST loses plausibility immediately.

Aside from the brutal torture of flogging, the cross was more catastrophic than most people understand—or want to imagine. New Testament scholar Martin Hengel has compiled an impressive array of sources from the first century to help us understand something of the trauma of crucifixion. The testimony of these ancient eyewitnesses bears witness to the impossibility of the ST.

To cite just one example, Hengel references the words of the

great Roman orator Seneca, who described what it was like to see a crucifixion: “Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest, and drawing the breath of life amid long drawn-out agony?”⁴ What Seneca meant was that he could not imagine a more dreadful way to die.

The cross’s extreme suffering was by design. Rome employed it to deter any and all criminal action. Before the cross was totally transformed by Jesus’ death into a symbol of Christianity, its message was simple, brutal, and effective: “Do not mess with Rome.” It was the ancient equivalent of the electric chair.

In the second place, the ST asks us to believe (with a straight face) that not only did Jesus survive flogging and the crucifixion, but He also managed to roll away, in a half-dead condition, a stone that weighed thousands of pounds. But that would be impossible for even a healthy man to accomplish!

Third, the ST requires us to further believe that, having rolled the stone away, Jesus then single-handedly defeated the Roman equivalent of a Navy SEAL team or convinced them to let Him go. These soldiers’ survival depended on guarding the tomb, for Roman soldiers took their own lives or were killed if they failed in their assignment. So they would have had zero motivation to release Jesus even if He had managed to roll the stone away.

In light of these problems, the ST reveals itself as a desperate attempt to avoid the biblical account of the resurrection. Again, it

is not so much an explanation as it is an attempt to explain *away* the evidence of Jesus' resurrection in naturalistic terms.

A far more popular view is what is known as the hallucination theory (HT). It comes in many forms; resurrection expert Gary Habermas has written a very helpful article summarizing them.⁵ More recently, Michael Licona's exhaustive treatment of the various naturalistic proposals, including the HT, shows them all to be wanting.⁶ Essentially, the HT claims that Jesus' postmortem appearances were either individual or collective hallucinations. As outlined above, these various alternatives could be classified as *subjective*.

As with the ST, the HT suffers from numerous flaws, which Habermas explains. We'll focus on three difficulties with this theory. First, hallucinations are *private* experiences. A group hallucination—such as that mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6, where Jesus appeared to some five hundred people—is nearly impossible.

Second, Jesus' postresurrection appearances varied widely in terms of location and time. That the known eyewitnesses would have had the same hallucination over many different places and times is not plausible.

Third, if the Apostles were having hallucinations about Jesus' being alive and were preaching this bothersome doctrine, all the officials in Jerusalem had to do was produce the body to put such delusions to rest (no pun intended).⁷ Once again, this theory cannot explain the facts we know about the resurrection.

Whether objective or subjective, alternatives to the biblical record of Jesus' resurrection all lack credibility. To illustrate this point further, we will next look at some authors who hold to these substitute theories. In each case, their objections to the resurrection cannot stand up to investigation.

FIERCE OBJECTIONS

Our first critic is the retired Episcopalian bishop John Shelby Spong. He is a noted popularizer of liberal theology over the past two decades. Like most of those in church history who deny cardinal tenets of the Christian faith, Spong is convinced that Christianity is in danger of becoming extinct. Therefore, for Christianity to survive in the modern age, it must, to quote the title of one of his books, “change or die.”

One of the bishop’s proposed changes is a full-scale denial of the resurrection of Christ. He makes this very clear when he writes: “Angels who descend in earthquakes, speak, and disappear . . . empty tombs . . . these are legends all. Sacred legends, I might add, but legends nonetheless.”⁸

In place of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, Spong proposes a naturalistic explanation, a species of the HT that Habermas calls the illumination theory. This is not to say that Spong is an atheist like Richard Lewontin. Rather, his explanations of the resurrection simply evidence a subterranean commitment to a variety of naturalism.

In his book *Resurrection: Myth or Fact?*, Spong proposes the following scenario: discouraged by Jesus’ violent death and the seeming end of the promised coming kingdom, Peter and the other Apostles went back to their daily lives. But Peter couldn’t forget Jesus.

After grieving and processing Jesus’ death, Peter returned to his work as a fisherman, Spong theorizes. “On a hunch, Simon changed nets from one side of the boat to the other, with strikingly good results.”⁹ This is Spong’s naturalistic explanation for the miraculous catch of fish recorded in John 21:4–7. Peter’s

experience led him to believe that Jesus was alive. Spong explains: “Suddenly it all came together for Simon. The crucifixion was not punitive, it was intentional. . . . It would be fair to say that in that moment Simon felt resurrected. The clouds of grief, confusion, and depression vanished from his mind, and in that moment he knew that Jesus was part of the very essence of God, and at that moment Simon saw Jesus alive.”¹⁰

Not *actually* alive, of course. Spong has already told us that a Jesus who was resurrected bodily is nothing more than pious legend. No, according to Spong, Peter *felt* Jesus to be alive and went on to evangelize *as if* Jesus were alive.

Notice what Spong has done. First, he has assumed that certain parts of the New Testament record (such as breakfast on the beach and Peter’s catching fish) are true. But that assumption militates against the skepticism he advocated earlier in the same book. In chapter 3, Spong argues at length that because God’s Word is such an “unsteady ship” (his words), we must seek the truth *behind* the words of the text.¹¹ In other words, the biblical text is unreliable.

Despite the unreliable nature of Scripture, Spong has nevertheless treated some of it as true. In reality, he has taken the liberty to choose which parts of the biblical account are reliable and has then explained them in terms of naturalism. From the perspective of logical consistency, Spong’s exercise is viciously circular. He has assumed what he sets out to prove.

Second, Spong’s far-fetched explanation of the resurrection ignores much of the specific evidence that the New Testament is trustworthy. Textual criticism is the discipline that studies the development of the biblical text in its original languages to

determine the most accurate reading for translations. One scholar summarizes the evidence this way: “It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable word of God.”¹² In other words, the results of textual criticism reinforce our conviction that we can trust our Bibles.

A third problem with Spong’s work is his fallacious appeal to authority. He laments: “If the resurrection of Jesus cannot be believed except by assenting to the fantastic descriptions included in the gospels, then Christianity is doomed. For that view of the resurrection is not believable. . . . If that were a requirement of belief as a Christian, then I would sadly leave my house of faith. With me in that exodus would be every ranking New Testament scholar in the world.”¹³ Spong then goes on to list a host of scholars who also reject Christ’s resurrection.

His list of “ranking scholars” does not, however, disprove the resurrection. Instead, it exemplifies the informal logical fallacy *argumentum ad populum*, or appeal to the majority. This is the mistaken notion that because a majority of people believe something, it must be true.

I like to call this “Your Mother’s Favorite Fallacy.” Most of us can remember wanting to go with friends to a concert or movie that was probably not the best thing for us to see. When denied the opportunity, we argued, “But Mom, everyone is going!” The response was as swift as it was predictable. “Just because everyone else is doing it doesn’t make it right.” Case closed, fun denied!

Mom’s reasoning is irrefutable, though, as a closer examination of Spong’s appeal to the “majority” of New Testament scholars

demonstrates. He overlooks the impressive list one could easily compile of scholars with similar accomplishments who argue that the resurrection did in fact happen as the New Testament records.

Therefore, the question is once again not about which side is more scholarly; both sides have doctorates and accolades. Nor will the question be settled by an appeal to the majority of scholars, for majorities can be wrong and scholars read evidence differently. Ultimately, Spong's attempt to disprove the resurrection by an appeal to the majority of experts is little more than a hollow claim that is exposed with an appeal to Mom's reasoning.

Having addressed Spong's claims, we move on to those of Dr. Bart Ehrman, a prolific author, an agnostic, and an expert in textual criticism. His books are regular best sellers on the *New York Times* list. In addition, he's built something of a cottage industry around his work, the central focus of which is to cast doubt on the reliability of the New Testament. Since he believes the New Testament was changed on purpose, it is a short step for him to deny the resurrection, which is exactly what he did in a debate with Christian apologist William Lane Craig.

Ehrman's arguments against the resurrection are straightforward. First, as mentioned above, he believes that the New Testament manuscripts were changed during their transmission by the scribes who copied them, to the point that the original reports of what actually happened are lost forever. Here's how he articulates his position:

[The Gospels] are not historically reliable accounts. The authors were not eyewitnesses; they're Greek-speaking Christians living 35 to 65 years after the events they

narrate. The accounts that they narrate are based on oral traditions that have been in circulation for decades. Year after year Christians trying to convert others told them stories to convince them that Jesus was raised from the dead. These writers are telling stories, then, that Christians have been telling all these years. Many stories were invented, and most of the stories were changed.¹⁴

Because Ehrman considers this difficulty insurmountable, we will start with it. Ehrman argues that events recorded by those who knew the eyewitnesses should be rejected out of hand. The first problem with this view is that carried to its logical end, all of ancient history becomes unreliable.

Moreover, it's pure speculation to say that the eyewitnesses changed their testimony. The evidence indicates quite the contrary. The New Testament text was copied largely by scribes who were not from Israel and would not have had firsthand knowledge of distinctly Jewish customs. Yet the New Testament abounds in "local knowledge," from geography to town names to Jewish traditions. Textual critic and New Testament scholar Peter Williams explains: "Our Gospel manuscripts mostly come from outside of Palestine, from countries such as Egypt, Italy, Greece, or Turkey. We can hardly suppose that scribes in these countries were responsible for introducing accurate Palestinian cultural knowledge into the Gospels."¹⁵ If anything, the more we discover, the more the New Testament proves itself to be one of the most trustworthy ancient documents that we possess today.

The sheer number of New Testament manuscripts is a major reason why we can establish its dependability. For example, it is

not fashionable to argue that Plato's major works are in doubt. Yet the manuscript data for his writings is small, limited to a handful of late copies. In stark contrast, we have *thousands* of early copies of the New Testament. It is far and away the most well-attested ancient document there is, and there is a remarkable amount of agreement between these manuscripts. This means that Ehrman's contention that evidence of textual corruption disproves the resurrection is false.

Following from his argument that the Gospels are unreliable historical accounts, Ehrman claims that a miracle like the resurrection is an unreasonable explanation for what happened to Jesus' body. Instead, the resurrection is part and parcel of the fabricated stories that accrued after Christianity came on the scene.

Instead of a bald antisupernaturalism like we witnessed with Spong, Ehrman strikes a more agnostic pose toward the resurrection of Christ. "I'm not saying it didn't happen; but if it did happen, it would be a miracle. . . . I wish we could establish miracles, but we can't. It's no one's fault. It's simply that the canons of historical research do not allow for the possibility of establishing as probable the least probable of all occurrences."¹⁶ The last sentence is key to understanding Ehrman's position. According to him, historical research only deals with the probable and a miracle like the resurrection is the least probable of all occurrences. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that it happened.

Despite his claims to a cool, detached agnosticism, Ehrman's view of miracles and probability betray a firm naturalistic understanding of both. He asks: "What are miracles? Miracles are not impossible. . . . They violate the way nature naturally works. They are so highly improbable, their probability is infinitesimally

remote, that we call them miracles.”¹⁷ Now, William Lane Craig, the Christian who debated Ehrman, is a skilled philosopher who used probability theory in his reply to Ehrman. Craig’s reply made it painfully obvious that Ehrman was out of his league when it came to probability theory. Craig demonstrated, in exhaustive detail (replete with mathematical equations), that Ehrman’s assertion that miracles are improbable is mistaken.

This is not the place to work through Craig’s reply in an in-depth manner. To keep things simple, let’s go back to our earlier discussion about philosophy. Even before he considers the evidence for the resurrection, Ehrman’s understanding of miracles raises some significant philosophical issues.

Notice his assumption that miracles violate the way nature works. But this simply begs the question in favor of his view. In other words, he defines miracles in a way that excludes the miraculous. Moreover, Ehrman can never prove that miracles violate the laws of nature. He has not observed all of nature to make such a sweeping claim. Indeed, no one has. Nor *could* anyone.

Therefore, Ehrman’s claim that miracles violate the laws of nature amounts to a faith position that is inconsistent with itself and with the actual evidence. As R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley observe: “The biblical miracles need to be considered on their own merits. Their impossibility, or even improbability, has never been demonstrated. We have positive evidence for their occurrence. The reasonable person will believe that they occurred as recorded.”¹⁸

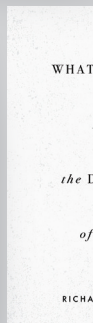
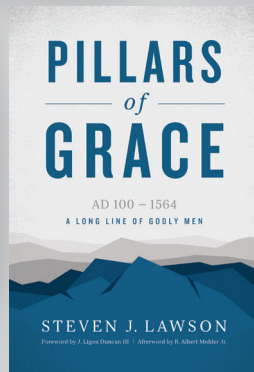
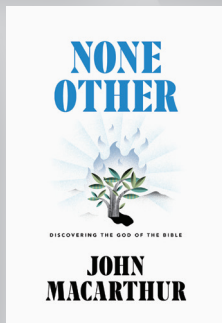
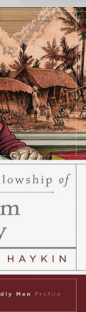
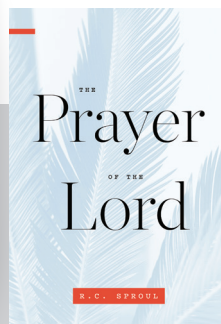
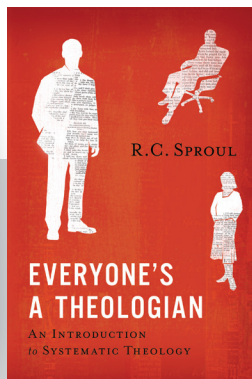
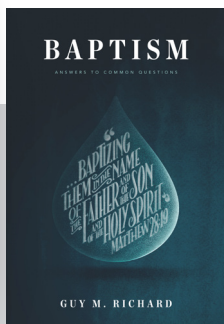
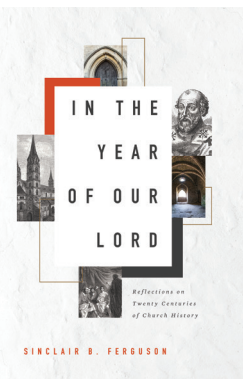
The views of Spong and Ehrman offer us a snapshot of resurrection skepticism. To be sure, others have offered even more sophisticated objections, but believing scholars have answered

them well. As a result, objections of this variety do not disprove the resurrection.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have examined the faulty philosophical basis from which the critics of the resurrection work. We have seen that the alternative theories for the resurrection cannot stand up to careful scrutiny. And we dissected the objections of two accomplished scholars who object to the resurrection and discovered that their claims are little more than assertions that lack careful arguments. But our goal in this book is not just to criticize; it is also to construct. Therefore, in the next chapter, we will argue why the resurrection is true.

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