

# The Resurrection

David Morgan investigates natural and supernatural accounts of the Easter story.

## 1. Introduction

When issues such as this are discussed, and where feelings run high, there is sometimes an unfortunate, but all too human, tendency to present the best example of the option you prefer, and the worst of the one with which you disagree. The more firmly a conviction is held, the more tempting it is to do this. In order to avoid this tendency, I have taken two examples, from the two ‘camps’, which I have found to display the issues most lucidly.

The supernaturalist account can be found in Tom Wright’s *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, published in 2003. This is a big tome (800 pages!); if you are in a hurry, just concentrate on part V, particularly chapter 18: ‘Easter and History’, although I will also touch on issues discussed in part IV (‘The Story of Easter’). The naturalist account comes towards the end of an essay entitled ‘Jesus, The Man of Universal Destiny’, by Michael Goulder, and can be found in a collection of essays in a book entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick. The first edition was published in 1977, and a second in 1993. This essay is somewhat shorter (16 pages).

Both authors work on the principle that any hypothesis about a historical account should aim at a coherent inclusion of as much of the data as possible. I do not wish to get drawn into either a description, or a detailed critique, of each of these works; my contention is two-fold:

- a) both need to be listened to, even though they are saying contrary things;
- b) it is my experience that it is possible to have a full, rich and meaningful participation in Christian community life *without necessarily resolving the naturalist / supernaturalist issue*.

In considering theological questions such as this, how objective can one be? I suspect that the answer is, ‘not very much’. For example, I have for a long time had a natural inclination towards Wright’s arguments, and have therefore felt very uneasy about the prospect of embracing Goulder’s. But, my critics will say, this is because from my earliest memories, I was relentlessly indoctrinated with traditional evangelical Christian dogma, long before my ‘cognitive immune system’ was working (as Jonathan Miller puts it).

This immune system is now working well, and so in order to attempt at least a partial corrective to my long-held views, I will seek out the *weaknesses* of the supernaturalist account, and emphasise the *strengths* of the naturalist one.

## 2. The supernaturalist’s case

In parts IV and V of Wright’s book, he makes a distinction between the *stories* of the resurrection, and the *history*. He describes, in part IV, the narratives in each gospel, including those which most people (including Wright, I suspect) consider totally ludicrous, e.g. Matthew 27: 51-54 – a whole collection of corpses waking up, waiting three days, then calmly walking into the city. Page 633 certainly implies scepticism of this on Wright’s part.

My inference from part IV is that, as most of these incidents are only recorded by one gospel, they are not ‘core’, and can be discounted without denying the historicity of the Resurrection itself; this is dealt with in part V, where he concentrates on the two incidents reported by all four gospels: the empty tomb, and the post-crucifixion appearances. His case rests upon the proposition that, both of these taken together, *but not singly*, give necessary and sufficient reasons for the *disciples’* conviction that Jesus was alive. He further argues that they are sufficient for us, too, seeing that the gospels were written fairly soon after Jesus’ death – and that there was therefore little time for embellishment.

But the earliest versions of Mark’s gospel (considered by almost all scholars to be the first gospel to be written) do not include appearances, only the empty tomb. So the appearances in the alternative ending to Mark do seem to be a later embellishment. Furthermore, many scholars consider even the empty tomb stories to be a late tradition. In which case, the distinction between the mere ‘stories’, side-lined in part IV, and the empty tomb plus appearances made so much of in Part V, is not so strong.

Few people who read part V of Wright’s book can fail to be impressed by the careful historical analysis he gives. However, as he readily admits, historical investigations can only go so far (page 718). Post-enlightenment people (as we all are) know that dead

people stay dead.

Wright tackles this problem by a systematic assault throughout the entire book on what he terms the ‘post-enlightenment world-view’; indeed, every mention of the term, in this and other of his works, is pejorative. There are two ways of looking at this attitude of Wright’s:

On the one hand, in reading Tom Wright, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that in the enlightenment, science brought us ‘out of darkness into its marvellous light’. For example, science-based Western medicine visibly *works*; praying for miraculous cures does *not*. Of course, Tom Wright vigorously endorses the many benefits that modern science has brought; but we must be consistent. ‘You cannot hold the scientific attitude part-time.’

On the other hand, perhaps it is healthy to challenge what is such a deeply-entrenched paradigm as the post-enlightenment mind-set. Why is it so deeply-entrenched? Because our teachers believed it, as did theirs, etc. Maybe we have all accepted it too unthinkingly.

### 3. The naturalist’s case

My former conservative advisors constantly warned me, ‘don’t read any liberal theology – you’ll find it very woolly’. ‘Wooliness’ is in fact a charge which can be made against many traditional doctrines: in his book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (1993), for example, John Hick contends that the ‘two-natures’ doctrine, as stated in the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, is not only woolly but incoherent.

However, Goulder’s essay, mentioned above, resoundingly gives the lie to the wooliness charge. One is struck by the clarity of his arguments: he is *clear* about his criteria for historical reliability; unmissably *robust* in his refutation of traditional atonement theories; and quite *specific* concerning his naturalist account of the resurrection experience.

This account is given mainly in pages 59-60 of his essay, but it is well worth reading the whole essay to understand the context. The remarks on cognitive dissonance on page 59 will, I suspect, strike chords with many readers.

### 4. But which version is ‘true’?

In a chapter of *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* entitled ‘Believable Christianity’, John Hick makes an important point when he says, ‘obviously the vital question is not whether an idea is believable to the

modern mind but whether it is true. If it is true, then we must stick with it, whether others find it believable or not.’ He then goes on to say, ‘But are these traditional doctrines rightly believable by us? Or do they need to be re-interpreted, understood in a new way?’

I believe that Michael Goulder has done a good job of this in his essay. He sees the Church as a community of love, not a bastion of ‘correct’ dogmas.

## 5. Cat of the Gaps

Let me tell a story about our cat, Bumble. At night, we always lock our bedroom door to stop the cat jumping on us a 3 am demanding food. One very hot and sultry night, we opened all the bedroom windows for air, and both made sure that the door was locked to avoid nocturnal Bumble-invasion.

In the middle of the night, I was jumped on by the cat. Neither of us remembered going to the loo, and the door was still locked. Now there is a sheer wall from the ground to our bedroom window, and from the window to the roof; a cat could not possibly have climbed it. How do we explain the locked door? Not surprisingly, we rejected the idea that the cat got onto the roof somehow, took a flying leap and amazingly got her paws onto the sill just at the right moment.

We made the alternative hypothesis that one of us went to the loo, and the cat sneaked in and hid under the chair whilst the door was briefly unlocked. The person must have forgotten about their visit. Why do we accept that explanation rather than the first? Because we work on Occam’s Razor principle. If some clever lawyer had managed to prove that neither of us could possibly have been to the loo, what would we have done? Believed the flying cat hypothesis? I don’t think so. Why not? *Because we don’t believe in flying cats!*

I mention clever lawyers, because one such, Frank Morrison, wrote a remarkable apologia for the resurrection in his book *Who Moved the Stone?* This is a very scholarly work; Morrison has consulted not only modern criticism, but also the documents contemporary with the Gospel accounts. He argues with great skill and honesty that all the rational hypotheses that we have come up with just don’t hold water. It has made many people ‘change sides’ on the issue. It is a brilliant ‘counsel for the defence’. *But there is no independent prosecution counsel*, and anyway, taking any issue to a court of law by no means guarantees that the truth will be discovered thereby. Just because we can’t think of an explanation for an event doesn’t automatically imply that ‘God did it’. This would be a ‘God of the Gaps’ fallacy.

It can be seen from Goulder's account that his answer to the question 'Who Moved the Stone?' would be 'nobody'. This suggests the following chronology of New Testament events:

- a) Visions of Peter and early disciples (early 30s);
- b) Paul's conversion (mid-30s) and his instruction by the disciples, narrated in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 1-11; note that there is no reference to an empty tomb. Also note that he does not distinguish between the appearance made to him (which was clearly a vision) and that made to the disciples.
- c) Mark's gospel written (possibly 50s, but generally agreed to be the first). The earliest versions of this gospel, as noted above, mention an empty tomb but no appearances.
- d) Matthew / Luke written (70s / 80s). This contains a lot of copying from Mark, but with embellishments from other traditions. Narratives of the empty tomb are different in all gospels.
- e) John written (90 – 100), with further embellishments, including Peter's being accompanied by 'the beloved disciple'.

As Goulder writes, 'Luke and John added stories that emphasised his materiality... disciples ate with him and doubters touched him'.



'Mary Magdalene sees the risen Christ as a gardener' (1507)  
Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen

## 6. Conclusion

Supernaturalists often say that the rationalists' motivation is that they *don't want* to believe because they know deep down that they'd have to change their life if they did. Rationalists, on the other hand, often say that supernaturalists *want* to believe because they can't face the idea that their little egos won't survive death.

We must beware of such impudence in approaching people with a different persuasion from ourselves; how arrogant it is to suggest to someone that we understand them better than they do themselves! In fact, what we have is two opposed mind-sets, giving rise to the following positions:

- ◆ a thorough-going naturalism leaves no room for any transcendent reality;
- ◆ belief in a transcendental reality entails the possibility of supernaturalism.

Therefore let us show respect for both positions, and, more importantly, not be afraid (*sometimes*) to sit on the fence! Actually, it is more of a broad wall than an uncomfortable fence. I should know, I've been on it most of my life! It has the advantage that it enables one to see *both* positions more clearly than if you are down on one side or the other.

So I should like to reiterate the point made in the Introduction; let us not insist that people should choose between these alternatives in order to take up an active and effective part in the life of any church (whatever the dogmatic views of its clergy), *seen primarily as a community of love*. Positions can change, and people have to start their pilgrimage somewhere. Most people belong before they believe.

## Postscript

Despite my comments about being 'on the wall', you probably suspect that I actually do favour one interpretation or the other. You are correct. Ideas change with time; although I find that Don Cupitt's views, expressed in chapter 3 of his *Taking Leave of God* ('The charge of reductionism'), presents the rationalist position clearly and responsibly, I find the best articulation of my own belief is to be found in the final chapter of Sanders' *The Historical Figure of Jesus*: 'That Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.'

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