

APPENDIX B: BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND THE RESURRECTION: DID HE OR DIDN'T HE?

Anyone who wishes to propose a hypothesis for “what really happened” on Easter is taking on a difficult challenge. Besides the fact that this is an emotionally charged subject, we have no evidence except for accounts written down fifty or more years later by people who had a particular point to prove. Nevertheless over the past couple of decades “form criticism” has been able to learn much about the pre-Gospel sources that contributed to the New Testament, and scholars have put forth a number of hypotheses.

Let us state right here at the beginning that any hypothesis about the resurrection or the resurrection appearances must meet several criteria: (1) First, it must be consistent with the results of modern scholarship; (2) Second, if it is proposed as a conclusion based on the evidence, and not just as speculation, the evidence must in fact be persuasive enough to lead to this conclusion; (3) Third, it must be consistent with the Biblical evidence about the post-Easter Church; that is, it must explain the dramatic turnabout in the disciples and it must fit with the proclamation of the very early Church.

The purpose of this appendix, then, is to summarize the results of modern Biblical scholarship concerning the resurrection, to look at the conclusions reached by those whom I will call the “minimalists”, and to evaluate their arguments and proposals.

Who are the minimalists? First of all, we must say that *no* serious exegetes propose that the resurrection accounts as we have them in the Gospels are accurate representations of events that took place two thousand years ago in Palestine. It is generally acknowledged that the post-Easter appearance narratives are the end result of much elaboration. Some would maintain that these accounts point to after-death appearances of Jesus to the disciples, the precise nature of

which is lost to history. The minimalists are those who do not think that these narratives point to any analogous historical event, who maintain that in fact there were no post-mortem appearances of Jesus at all, no experiences of Jesus after his death by the apostles.

We need to note that these people are not necessarily enemies of the faith. Some of them are exegetes and theologians who after careful consideration have felt compelled to conclude that this is what the weight of the evidence points to. As representatives of the minimalists I will consider Edward Schillebeeckx's *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (Crossroad Publishing Co., 1979), a long and weighty study of current New Testament scholarship, and Thomas Sheehan's *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (Random House, 1986), a more accessible argument based on the results of Schillebeeckx and a number of others. (Perhaps we should note a warning here, however, that another of Sheehan's views—that Jesus' purpose was to end religion by preaching that God is in our midst—is an idiosyncratic position not representative of modern scholarship. However, I confess a strong sympathy for what I see as his underlying purpose: to get people away from the teachings *about* Jesus and back to the teachings *of* Jesus.) Before we examine their arguments, though, we should remind ourselves of what the Gospel record is.

The Resurrection Appearances in the Gospels

All the Gospels agree that on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene, either alone (John) or with another woman named Mary (Matthew) or with her and also one or more other women (Mark and Luke), went out very early to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. They may have been taking spices with which to anoint the body (Mark and Luke). She (they) encountered either one angel (Matthew and Mark) or two (Luke and John). In the Synoptics the angel(s) tell them that Jesus has risen, and in Matthew and Mark that they should tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them to Galilee, where they will see him. Mark then says that the women "said nothing to anyone"—and this is the end of what we have of the original version of this Gospel. (More on this later.)

Matthew alone mentions that guards had been posted at the tomb and that they were bribed to spread the story that Jesus' disciples had stolen his body.

Then Jesus appeared to the women (Matthew) or apparently did not (Luke) as they went to tell the disciples, or else appeared to Mary Magdalene after she told Peter (John). The disciples either responded by go-

ing directly to Galilee where Jesus appeared to them once, though some still doubted (Matthew), or they experienced appearances of him in Jerusalem (Luke and John), perhaps not leaving for Galilee because they did not believe the women (Luke).

So only Luke and John report appearances to the apostles in Jerusalem. Luke tells of Jesus walking to Emmaus with two of his followers, who do not recognize him during the journey but only when he breaks bread with them, at which point he disappears. They return to Jerusalem and find the eleven gathered together, are told that Jesus has appeared to Simon, and then Jesus appears among them. He eats a piece of fish to prove that he isn't a spirit, preaches to them, and then goes out with them to Bethany from where he ascends into heaven. (In the Book of Acts, though, Luke says that Jesus appeared among them for forty days.)

In John, Jesus also appears to the disciples, passing through locked doors, then appears again a week later to a group which this time includes Thomas, who previously doubted but now believes. Then John (unlike Luke) also includes a detailed account of an appearance in Galilee. Seven of the disciples were out fishing and were directed by a person on the beach to try on the other side of the boat, at which point they made a great haul of fish and realized that this person must be Jesus. Returning to the shore, "none of the disciples dared ask, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord." (John 21:12) (This strikes one as a strange way to describe *recognizing* someone as familiar to them as Jesus). Then Jesus passed out bread and fish and gave instructions to Peter.

All of this, of course, leaves one puzzled. Did he appear to the women or not? Did he appear to the disciples only in Galilee, only in Jerusalem, or in both? Why do the disciples have trouble recognizing him at times? Why does Mark mention no appearances at all? And why are we told nothing about the specifics of his appearance to Simon Peter when this is generally credited with being the formative event of Christianity?

While the defenders of a resurrection can point to a unanimity that Mary Magdalene discovered an empty tomb and (including Mark by inference) that Jesus appeared to the apostles, those who argue against it can point to all these inconsistencies. And while some discrepancies should perhaps be expected in descriptions of very unusual events that were written down in the form we have them some fifty years after these events, this can hardly serve as an argument for their accuracy.

At this point we will look at the arguments based on (1) the empty tomb; (2) the absence of appearance narratives in Mark; (3) the testimony of Paul; and (4) the evidence of the oral traditions. We will attempt to evaluate the various arguments as we proceed, before summarizing the evidence and then examining the hypotheses put forward by the minimalists.

1. The Empty Tomb

Even the minimalists grant there may very well be a historical basis to the account of the discovery of the empty tomb. There seem to be two separate traditions that point to Jesus' body being put in a grave by Joseph of Arimathea. If it were a new tomb (Matthew, Luke and John) this would have met the requirements of Jewish law that the body of one who had been hanged on a tree not be buried with anyone else. Even Sheehan admits (p. 148) that the women may have seen where this was and that Mary Magdalene (either alone or with other women) visited the tomb early on Sunday morning and found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. Schillebeeckx further acknowledges what is to me the obvious conclusion about Matthew's story about the guards being bribed: if Matthew is refuting a story that Jesus' body was stolen, then even the Church's enemies who spread this story acknowledged that the tomb was empty.

But it is generally accepted that an empty tomb didn't prove anything. It certainly didn't prove or even imply a resurrection in first century Palestine. The picture of Mary weeping outside the tomb because "they have taken away my Lord" is the kind of reaction one would expect. In fact, the disappearance of the body wasn't even *necessary* for a resurrection according to many of the contemporary ideas.

Some scholars suggest that the account of the empty tomb was passed down by the early Christian community in Jerusalem, who may have known the location of the tomb and used it as the focal point in periodic commemorations, perhaps as a shrine. It is further suggested that the empty tomb was not even originally connected with the appearance narratives. Sheehan uses this to argue that Mark knew about the empty tomb but not about the appearances (see below), and that Paul may not have known of the empty tomb.

There is an interesting aspect to the minimalists' argument here. Because the empty tomb is the most historically defensible element of the resurrection narratives, they point out all the reasons why this would *not* imply a resurrection. But this also deprives them of one anticipated hypothesis—that the fact of the empty tomb gave rise to the appearance stories—and it also explains very well why Paul would not bother to mention it when he had resurrection appearances to point to. It also corroborates the reactions related in the Gospel accounts.

Meanwhile we are left with no answer as to who rolled the stone away and why the body was missing. Did Joseph change his mind and want his tomb back? Did grave robbers or enemies of Jesus steal the body? Did his disciples? (This seems unlikely as it seems to have been only the women who knew where it was.) We shall never know. But since an empty grave does not a resurrection make, it doesn't really matter.

2. The Gospel of Mark: No Appearances?

It is generally accepted that Mark 16:8 is the end of what we have of the original version of this Gospel and that verses 9 to 20 were added sometime in the middle of the second century AD to compensate for the lack of appearance accounts. It is also generally accepted that Mark is the oldest of the Gospels, dating from around 70 AD. Sheehan argues that the lack of resurrection appearances in the oldest Gospel indicates that in fact there *were* no resurrection appearances (pp. 98, 131–146). That is, the stories in the later Gospels (15–25 years later) are not just accounts that have become more specific, more physical and more elaborate over the years (which all scholars would admit), but they are in fact mythical stories not based on real events at all. While we cannot prove this one way or the other, there are several serious problems in arguing this based on Mark.

First of all, even though it is the oldest ending we have, we cannot be sure that 16:8 was the original ending of the Gospel of Mark. The majority opinion seems now to be that it was. I suppose one might ask, how does one lose the end of a book (or scroll)? However, I can see some strengths in the persistent minority view that what we have is *not* the original ending of Mark: even for a Gospel that tends to be abrupt in nature, the ending is *very* abrupt. The women told no one? It ends that way? It doesn't make sense. And as for losing the end of a book—I have done this myself, and with bound books, so I am sure that it is possible to lose the last piece of a scroll. (But see Schillebeeckx's argument below and Sheehan's on narrative structure.) In any case, one must be somewhat tentative in making conclusions based on the end of a Gospel that may not have been its end. We shall never know.

Second, Schillebeeckx argues that the reason that Mark mentions no resurrection appearances is not that he wasn't aware of them, but rather because they didn't fit with his theology. "If the assertion is correct that in associating exaltation with Parousia (thus not with resurrection) Mark does not see the celestial Jesus as presently operative, but affirms the complete absence of Jesus from his sorrowing and suffering Church, it then becomes possible to understand his not accepting the tradition of Jesus appearances: 'appearing' is what Jesus will do at the Parousia, not before" (p. 418). Thus, "he is going before you to Galilee" (Mark 16:7) does not in this understanding refer to a resurrection appearance (either implied or in a missing original ending), but rather to the Second Coming. If this is the correct interpretation of Mark then he may very well have been aware of resurrection appearance accounts.

Third, we have the insightful study of the narrative done by Sheehan himself. He points out that "the rhetorical structure of this narrative is calculated to hold the reader within the tale and, from within the tale, to

confront the reader with the possibility of believing in the resurrection. The narrative effects that purpose in part by allowing the listener to understand more than the subjects of the story do. . . . It would seem, then, that the story is confronting you with a decision and inviting you to do precisely what the women did not do: to believe that Jesus has been raised rather than to flee in confusion." (p. 141)

This may explain how 16:8 could have been the original ending of Mark, but it also points directly to a shared knowledge of the resurrection and so by direct implication to the resurrection appearances. The empty tomb was not enough. Therefore the readers, who know this was not the end of it, are indeed impelled back to their own faith and their knowledge: "we know what happened next, and why this was not the end of it!", they say to themselves.

Sheehan, however, conjectures that the pre-Markan oral version of this account was "content to leave the question unanswered" (p. 145) as to where belief in the resurrection came from. But this is to ask us to believe that Jesus' followers in Jerusalem didn't know about the appearances—with Simon Peter in their midst for a while? And Sheehan also claims that "it is clear that the narrative does indeed point beyond itself"—not, however, to an alleged happening in the past, since "the story's purpose is precisely to show that such past 'events' do not bring about faith" (p. 144). But is not the opposite clear? The story's point may be to show that the specific past event of the empty tomb did not bring about faith. But it then very clearly forces us to ask ourselves, "If the women said nothing to anybody, then how do we know he was raised? Then what happened next to change this, for here we are being told about it? What event transpired?" This is what the structure of the narrative impels us to do.

The minimalists *could* use Mark to argue against any resurrection appearances in Jerusalem, since he points to Galilee if he indeed implies this kind of appearance. In this understanding, Mark may have the women be silent either to explain why the apostles hadn't heard of the empty tomb, or more likely, to emphasize that the empty tomb was not enough, that something else needed to happen. However, we must remember Schillebeeckx's argument that Mark simply wasn't going to admit resurrection appearances, no matter how many he knew of. (One also can't help but wonder—if Mark is so careful to play down any causative role of the empty tomb, are we perhaps being too naïve in agreeing that it played no role in belief in Jesus' resurrection?)

Fourth, the final clincher against using Mark to argue that the appearance accounts were not known at the time of this earliest Gospel is the simple fact that Paul, writing two decades before Mark, makes specific mention of resurrection appearances. Not only that, Paul quotes what is recognized to be an earlier creed in I Corinthians 15:3–5: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, 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 [Peter], then to the twelve.” He then goes on to mention appearances to more than five hundred brethren, to James, and then to all the apostles (which may be part of the creed passed on to him or else may be Paul’s own addition) before adding “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me.” (15:8)

So there can be no doubt that resurrection appearances were known of by about 55 AD, at least fifteen to twenty years before Mark was written. If this creed was passed on to Paul near the time of his conversion then we are talking about a possible dating as early as 32–34 AD, only a couple of years after Jesus’ death.

But there are a number of questions about Paul’s testimony and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. We will turn now to consider this.

3. Paul’s Testimony

“He was raised on the third day . . . and . . . he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” (I Corinthians 15:4)

To judge from Paul’s early formulations of faith, then, the raising of Jesus from the dead has no chronological date or geographical location ascribed to it and no connection with an empty tomb. In fact, the raising of Jesus seems to be no event at all, but only an expression of what Simon had experienced in Galilee. And as regards the appearance to Simon, the text in First Corinthians, upon closer examination, calls into question the notions (1) that such an appearance was an ‘event’ that occurred after Jesus had physically left his tomb and (2) that Jesus was made manifest to Simon in any visible or tangible way. (Sheehan, p. 117–118)

On what basis does Sheehan make these claims, and how persuasive are the arguments that he and other minimalists put forth in regard to Paul? We will look at (A) the question of chronology (does “the third day” mean “the third day?”); (B) the accounts in the Book of Acts of Jesus’ appearance to Paul; (C) inferences from these accounts about the resurrection appearances; (D) Schillebeeckx’s view on Paul’s relation to the classical “conversion model”; and (E) inferences as to location and “event”.

(A) Paul’s Chronology: Does “The Third Day” Mean “The Third Day”?

Paul says (quoting a creed) that Jesus “was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures”. (I Cor. 15:4). Both Sheehan (p. 112) and Schillebeeckx (pp. 526–532) argue strenuously that Paul did *not*