

THE MYTH OF THE METAPHORICAL
RESURRECTION:
THE RESURRECTION IN THE FIRST CENTURY,
THE EARLY CHURCH, AND HER OPPONENTS
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Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved . . .

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

. . .

. . . 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. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. . . . If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.² (1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 13-17, 19-20)

Christianity is a uniquely historical religion, inextricably tied to

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² 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 13-17, 19-20. This and further biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise indicated.

the person and work of Jesus. The Christian faith has always professed (among other doctrines) the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.³ However, as a naturalistic worldview gripped the 'Enlightened' West and the New Testament came under the skeptical scrutiny of critical scholarship, belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus was replaced by alternative understandings.⁴ A common understanding of Christ's resurrection today is that of a 'metaphor' or 'myth'—Jesus was not literally raised from the dead; rather, resurrection faith indicates that the mission, teaching, community, or vision of Jesus Christ lives on.

In this paper, I will critique the modern metaphorical reconstruction of the resurrection on historical grounds. Proponents of the metaphorical resurrection generally argue that their interpretation of Christ's resurrection is reflected in the early Church itself, particularly in 'Gnostic Christianity'. I will demonstrate that, to the contrary, the metaphorical view of the resurrection is itself a purely modern construction, with no historical precursors or support. I will first outline the

³ While I do not propose to outline a full body of historically core Christian doctrines, it seems that a minimalist account would include at least a) the deity; b) the atoning death; and c) the resurrection of Christ.

⁴ The 'swoon' theory holds that Jesus never actually died on the cross, but merely fainted, and was revived in the tomb. Various 'fraud' theories figure the disciples stole the body and then invented the resurrection, or someone else stole or moved the body and the disciples then mistakenly believed Jesus had risen from the dead. 'Hallucination' or 'vision' theories claim that the disciples had subjective personal experiences which they believed were encounters with the risen Lord, but that Jesus was not bodily raised from the dead. A critical analysis of these explanations is beyond the scope of this paper, but can be found in many places. E.g. William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1981), pp. 23-44; Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), pp. 81-165.

metaphorical resurrection as explained by John Dominic Crossan. I will continue by surveying the relevant first-century pagan and Jewish understandings of 'resurrection,' showing that it was universally understood (by believers and non-believers alike) as a bodily resurrection of the dead at the time of God's eschatological judgment. I will argue that the early church professed, and its earliest recorded opponents attacked, Jesus' literal bodily resurrection. I will examine the second-century 'Gnostic Christian' spiritual understanding of resurrection,⁵ arguing that 'Gnostic Christians' redefined the resurrection to reconcile orthodox Christian creedal affirmations with their gnostic worldview presuppositions. I will further insist that the Gnosticized resurrection of Jesus has nothing in common with the metaphorical conception of the resurrection, except that both reject the orthodox Christian doctrine of Jesus' bodily resurrection in favor of a redefined resurrection which better fits their contemporary prevalent worldview. Finally, I will conclude that the modern metaphorical reconstruction of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has neither precursors in nor support from first century conceptions of resurrection, the early church and her opponents, or the 'Gnostic Christian' spiritualization of Christ's resurrection. Thus, the metaphorical resurrection is itself a myth with no historical support.

The Metaphorical Resurrection in Contemporary Christianity

The modern reconstruction of Christ's resurrection proclaims it as a metaphor or symbol, not a referent to a historical event.

⁵ A spiritual understanding of resurrection is not the same as a metaphorical understanding. 'Gnostic Christians' affirmed the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a literal, though spiritual, event in which his soul was freed from his physical body. Metaphorical proponents remove Christ's resurrection from history altogether. Nothing happened to Jesus after his death; resurrection is simply a symbol for what the disciples experienced. See section V for further development of this distinction.

John Dominic Crossan, a leading proponent of the metaphorical resurrection, defends several theses concerning the resurrection of Jesus.⁶

First, the disciples experienced visionary appearances of Jesus after his death, but these are natural, well-understood phenomena present in other religions and even secular grief settings.⁷ Second, the ‘bodily’ appearances of the resurrected Jesus were invented by the Gospel-writers to demonstrate Jesus’ continued presence with the Christian community and to establish the authority of one individual or group over another individual or group.⁸

⁶ Some of Crossan’s theses are not shared by all proponents of a metaphorical perspective of Christ’s resurrection, but are worth mentioning to show the radical nature of his scholarly project. (1) Following Jesus’ arrest the disciples fled Jerusalem and returned to Galilee without knowing anything of Jesus’ fate beyond the fact of his crucifixion. [See John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 392; John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), pp. 145-54.] (2) After his death on the cross Jesus was *not* buried in a private tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. Rather, his body was either dishonorably buried in a common grave by the Romans or tossed into a shallow ditch and subsequently consumed by wild animals, and Joseph is invented by Mark to have Jesus properly buried in accordance with Mosaic law. [See Crossan, *Jesus*, pp. 154-58; *The Historical Jesus*, p. 393.] (3) Thus, there is no tomb to be found empty—the narratives of the empty tomb are invented by Mark.

⁷ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. xiv-xix.

⁸ “In my thesis, therefore, it was originally another symbolical, resurrectional validation of apostolic authority. None of the three was an illusion, hallucination, vision, or apparition. Each was a symbolic assertion of Jesus’ continued presence to the *general community*, to *leadership groups*, or to specific and even competing *individual leaders*.” Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 407. See also in N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p. 19.

Third, the resurrection of Jesus Christ need not be discarded, merely redefined.⁹

Easter means for me that the divine empowerment which was present in Jesus, but once upon a time limited to those people in Galilee and Judea who had contact with him, is now available to anyone, anywhere in the world, who finds God in Jesus. As far as I'm concerned, it has nothing to do, literally, with a body coming out of a tomb, or a tomb being found empty, or visions, or anything else. ... The heart of resurrection for me is that the power of God is now available through Jesus, unconfined by time or space, to anyone who believes and experiences it.¹⁰

The metaphorical resurrection does not refer to an actual historical event, or anything that happened to the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth; rather, it is a metaphor for the continuing power of Jesus' ministry and community.¹¹

Resurrection in the First Century: Jewish and Pagan Conceptions

⁹ "Just to make it accurate, I am not denying the resurrection. You [William Lane Craig] just don't like my definition of resurrection." Crossan in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?*, p. 58.

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan and Richard G. Watts, *Who is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions about the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), pp. 127-28.

¹¹ While this presentation of the metaphorical resurrection has focused on Crossan, his position has significant academic company, both historical and contemporary. Other scholars who deny the historical bodily resurrection but maintain the significance of the proclamation 'Jesus is risen' include Rudolf Bultmann (*Faith and Understanding, Kerygma and Myth*), Marcus Borg (*The Last Week*), and Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*). Such scholars do not agree with every element of Crossan's reconstruction, but would assent to the broad strokes. Nothing happened to Jesus' corpse, but resurrection remains central to the Christian faith.

The metaphorical conception of Christ's resurrection does not fit the first-century context in which it was first preached. In his magisterial work, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, N. T. Wright traces the contours of resurrection belief in Jesus' religious-cultural milieu in exhaustive detail. He surveys Greco-Roman pagan thought, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the intertestamental period of Second-Temple Judaism.¹²

One major stream of Greco-Roman afterlife thought was represented in Homeric literature. For Homer and those who read him devoutly, the dead are "shades," "ghosts," or "phantoms"—"they are in no way fully human beings."¹³ Some type of conscious existence beyond death is universally presumed, but Hades (the underworld, the realm of the dead) "holds no comforts, no prospects, but only a profound sense of loss."¹⁴

Conscious existence beyond death is presumed also in Plato's dualistic philosophy. Whereas Homerists lamented the finality and sadness of death, Platonists welcomed it as "the moment when, and the means by which, the immortal soul is set free from the prison-house of the physical body."¹⁵ The soul is the essential self; the body serves only as a shell, or even a prison.¹⁶ "Nobody in their right mind, having got rid of it [their body], would want it or something like it back again."¹⁷ Death brings release from the physical prison, and if one has

¹² See, respectively, Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 32-84 (Greco-Roman paganism); pp. 85-128 (Old Testament); and pp. 129-206 (Second-Temple Judaism).

¹³ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 43.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 44, 81-83.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁶ Plato's anthropological (body/soul) dualism reflects his cosmological dualism, wherein the eternal realm of the forms is spiritual and perfect, while the created physical world is material and corrupt.

¹⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 60.

lived well and rightly, eternal disembodied bliss in the heavenly realm of the forms.

These two major perspectives on the afterlife dominated Greco-Roman thought, and significantly for our purposes, both of them absolutely denied the second-Temple Jewish concept of two-stage bodily resurrection.¹⁸ The Homerist might want a body back, but they knew they would not get one; the Platonist did not want a physical resurrection, knowing that such was impossible anyway. Both alike denied the possibility of bodily resurrection.¹⁹ Jewish belief in bodily resurrection “was strange and repellent, if not incomprehensible or abhorrent, to the contemporary pagan mind.”²⁰

The Hebrew Bible makes scant reference to resurrection, generally presenting death as “sad, and tinged with evil.”²¹ The Old Testament lacks a consistent doctrine of rewards and punishments after death,²² instead assuming that

¹⁸ See part B of the current section of this paper.

¹⁹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 60, 81-83.

²⁰ Russ Dudrey, “What the Writers Should Have Done Better: A Case for the Resurrection of Jesus Based on Ancient Criticisms of the Resurrection Reports,” in *Stone-Campbell Journal* 3.1 (2000), 65. Wright notes, with his typical clarity and rhetorical force, that “The ancient world was thus divided into those who said that resurrection couldn’t happen, though they might have wanted it to [Homerists], and those who said they didn’t want it to happen, knowing that it couldn’t anyway [Platonists].” Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 82. Echoes of the Greco-Roman ridicule of the Jewish perspective are evident in Acts 17:32, where Paul’s preaching meets with interest *until* he mentions the resurrection of Christ, and Acts 26:24, where the pagan Festus interrupts Paul to call his resurrection faith ‘insane’.

²¹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 85-91. Wright notes numerous Old Testament passages which speak of the finality of death, and the lack of hope for anything positive beyond *Sheol* – Ps. 6:5; 30:9; 88:3-12; 115:17; Gen. 3:19; Is. 38:10f; 2 Sam. 14:14; Ecc. 3:19-21; 9:5f; Job 3:13-19; 14:1-14; 19:25-27.

²² Richard A. Muller, “Resurrection,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume Four* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 145.

“upon death, one’s shade descends to *Sheol*, where one remains forever, cut off from God’s presence.”²³ The ‘translation’ of Enoch, Elijah, and perhaps Moses are unique examples of men who do not traverse physical death, but they represent “unexplained exceptions to the otherwise universal rule.”²⁴ After death, Hebrews could expect only a lifeless, purposeless, joyless existence in *Sheol*, the grave.²⁵

However, key Old Testament doctrines stood in tension with this outlook: (1) God’s covenant relationship with Israel; (2) God’s justice and righteousness; and (3) God’s sovereignty. In the absence of a robust afterlife, God’s sovereign covenantal justice for Israel would have to “take place here and now”—hence Job’s demand (Job 14:1-14) that Yahweh judge Job righteously now, not after Job’s death.²⁶ Tension between these theological themes eventually spurred the development of post-mortem hopes within Israel. The emerging hope of Old Testament authors is focused upon both individual Israelites *and* the nation of Israel, particularly her Promised Land. Generally speaking, the national hope took precedence over visions of individual vindication—hence the importance of

²³ George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Resurrection (Early Judaism and Christianity),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 5* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 685.

²⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 95.

²⁵ Muller makes the important point that this does not represent “extinction of the human being at death,” but rather passage to “a shadowy, underworld existence.” Muller, “Resurrection,” p. 145.

²⁶ Nickelsburg observes: “As creator, God is the Lord of life, who effects and nourishes a covenantal relationship with God’s people. As judge, God rewards the faithful and punishes those who rebel against the covenantal commandments. As the Almighty, God can effect what divine justice requires. *The tension arises when premature death frustrates this justice.*” Nickelsburg, “Resurrection (Early Judaism and Christianity),” p. 685. Emphasis mine.

family lines and genealogies.²⁷ Nonetheless, during and after the Babylonian exile, expectations grew that at least some righteous Israelites would be raised to a new bodily life after death. Intimations of a glorious afterlife for God's faithful children are found in the Psalms²⁸ and the prophets.²⁹

Intertestamental Jews held one of three beliefs about life after death. First, some categorically denied life after death.³⁰ Second, a few adopted Platonic dualism and held to "a

²⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 99-102. In fact, as belief in the resurrection developed, the themes of national restoration and personal resurrection were strong and often difficult to distinguish. Wright notes that Jewish faith in the future 'resurrection' of Israel—a metaphorical resurrection embodied in a literal and glorious return from exile—was more frequently and powerfully expressed. Approaching the first century, however, the two themes (return from exile and eschatological re-embodiment of faithful Jews) were thoroughly intertwined, and difficult to disentangle. Given the primary focus of this paper upon the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I will focus exclusively upon the expressions of resurrection hope in the personal eschatological sense. This does not mean that I reject or do not acknowledge the corporate national resurrection hope of Israel. Rather, I seek to draw attention to the concrete personal resurrection hope within 1st-century Israel and the early Church.

²⁸ E.g., "Man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the fate of those who trust in themselves . . . Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them. The upright will rule over them in the morning; their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions. But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself." (Ps. 49:12-15)

²⁹ "But your [God's] dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead." (Is. 26:19) See also Hos. 6:1-2; 13:14; and Ez. 37.

³⁰ The Sadducees are the best-known resurrection-deniers, but Sirach (11:26f; 14:16; 17:27; 38:21-23; 41:4) and parts of the Mishnah and

future blissful life for the righteous, in which souls, disencumbered of their attendant physical bodies, would enjoy a perfect life forever.”³¹ Significantly, proponents of future disembodied bliss did *not* use ‘resurrection’ language to describe their views.³²

Most second-Temple Jews, however, rejected those positions, and hoped for a bodily resurrection on the great Day of the Lord when all peoples would be judged and the righteous of Israel would be vindicated and raised to new bodily life in a renewed heavens and earth.³³ Prophetic passages like Isaiah 2, Isaiah 13-14, Ezekiel 30, Joel 1-2, Amos 5, and Malachi 4 provided the righteous remnant of the nation with the hope that God would intervene at the end of the age, vindicate his righteous remnant, and punish evildoers.³⁴ Combined with Old

Talmud also deny the resurrection of the dead. See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 135.

³¹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 140. This perspective is represented in, e.g., 4 Macc. 3:18; 6:7; 10:4; 13:13-17; 14:5; 16:13; 17:12; 18:23; *Pseudo-Phocylides* 102-114; and the *Testament of Abraham* 20. See Wright, pp. 140-42.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 140-45.

³³ Wright notes: “As we have seen, the Bible [OT] mostly denies or at least ignores the possibility of a future life, with only a few texts coming out strongly for a different view; but in the second-Temple period the position is more or less reversed. The evidence suggests that by the time of Jesus, . . . most Jews either believed in some form of resurrection or at least knew that it was standard teaching.” Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 129. Wright traces the emergence of resurrection belief through the intertestamental apocryphal literature (pp. 150-75), Josephus (pp. 176-81), the Essenes (pp. 182-89), and the Pharisaic tradition of the post-70 A.D. era (pp. 192-200).

³⁴ “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established . . . The Lord Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty . . . The arrogance of man will be brought low.” (Is. 2:2, 12, 17) “Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty . . . a cruel day, with wrath and fierce

Testament passages that hinted at personal resurrection, second-temple Jews found great hope for the execution of God's justice after their physical death. The clearest indication of such resurrection faith in the Old Testament is unquestionably Daniel 12:1-3, which combines the personal hope for bodily resurrection with the great coming Day of the Lord.

At that time Michael, the great prince, who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Second-temple Jews, then, did not create resurrection belief out of whole cloth; rather, they found echoes, intimations, and promises contained within their Scriptures that

anger . . . The Lord will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land." (Is. 13:6, 9; 14:1) "The day of the Lord is near – a day of clouds, a time of gloom for the nations." (Ez. 30:3) "Declare a holy fast; . . . Alas for that Day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. . . . Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing." (Joel 1:13, 14; 2:13-14) "Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light." (Amos 5:18) "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire. . . . Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall." (Mal. 4:1-2)

presented future resurrection as a compelling belief. Such Jews spoke of bodily resurrection using “what became the standard ‘resurrection’ language,” the verbs *anastemi* (and its derivative noun *anastasis*) and *egeiro* (and its derivative noun *egerxis*).³⁵ Thus, “anyone who used the normal words for ‘resurrection’ within second-Temple Judaism would have been heard to be speaking within this strictly limited range of meaning.”³⁶ Furthermore, this predominant resurrection belief was *always* a two-stage process.

Those who believed in resurrection believed also that the dead, who would be raised in the future but had not been yet, were alive somewhere, somehow, in an interim state. ... Resurrection ... meant life *after* ‘life after death’: a two-stage future hope, as opposed to the single-stage expectation of those who believed in a non-bodily future life.³⁷

Conclusion: Resurrection Belief in the First Century

The first century context contained a myriad of beliefs about what happened to human beings after physical death. Most ancients believed in conscious existence after death. Some

³⁵ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 147. Critics rightly note that both ἀναστειμι and ἐγείρω and their cognates have broader usage; the former in particular does not always refer to resurrection. Nonetheless, when they are applied to the dead, these ‘resurrection terms’ *always* refer to bodily resurrection. See also Muller, “Resurrection,” p. 147.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 204. Hence, Wright notes in footnote 311, “The NT references to Jesus’ resurrection cannot be ambiguous as to whether they mean bodily resurrection, because there was no other kind of resurrection.”

³⁷ Ibid., p. 130. Wright repeatedly emphasizes this notion. E.g.: “Resurrection, the ‘making alive of the dead’, was not simply about ‘life after death’; it was about a new, embodied life *after* ‘life after death’. Nobody supposed that . . . anyone else had yet been given this resurrection life.” (p. 199)

Greeks believed that post-mortem existence in Hades would be shadowy, incomplete, and lamentable. Other Greeks and a few Jews longed for the soul's post-mortem liberation from the physical body. In contrast, the majority of Jews embraced belief in a two-stage resurrection—intermediate existence after death followed by eventual bodily resurrection at the judgment of the Lord on the last day. However, whether affirming or denying the future resurrection, the Greek resurrection terms were *always* used “to refer to a hypothetical concrete event that might take place in the future, namely the coming-to-life in a full and bodily sense of those presently dead.”³⁸ The modern metaphorical reconstruction of the resurrection thus finds no contextual precedents within Greco-Roman thought, the Old Testament, or second-Temple Judaism.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., p. xix.

³⁹ Contemporary proponents of a metaphorical resurrection often point to Greek myths concerning dying and rising gods as evidence that Jesus' resurrection was modeled after pagan legends. This suggestion has a long and illustrious history, being first raised (in extant literature, at least) by the Roman anti-Christian Celsus, writing around 177 A.D. See Graham Stanton, “Early Objections to the Resurrection of Jesus,” in *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden* (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 81.

Leon McKenzie draws attention to eight proposed pagan parallels (Tammuz/Ishtar, Adonis, Attis, Marsyas, Hyacinth, Osiris, Dionysus/Bacchus, Demeter/Persephone) and shows that they are not analogous to the Jewish expectation of resurrection (or to the Christian proclamation of Christ's resurrection). First, the pagan stories were acknowledged by their proponents as being mythical, whereas Jews expected a literal historical rising from the dead. Greeks did not expect what had happened to the gods ‘once upon a time’ to occur to them after their own death. Second, the dying and rising gods of Greco-Roman paganism were intimately associated with agricultural cycles and fertility, whereas Jewish expectation of resurrection was associated with God's righteousness and judgment. The lack of analogous parallels between the pagan dying and rising gods and the Judeo-Christian resurrection hope is striking. McKenzie concludes: “The use of the term ‘resurrection’ in reference to pagan

They all understood the Greek word *anastasis* and its cognates ... to mean ... new life after a period of being dead. Pagans denied this possibility; some Jews affirmed it as a long-term future hope; ... Christians claimed that it had happened to Jesus and would happen to them in the future.⁴⁰

Resurrection in the Early Church and Its Opponents

Resurrection language in the first century, when applied to what will happen to a human being after death,⁴¹ always and only

deities ... exemplifies equivocation at its worst. ... Certainly the notions of resurrection or revival in the myths did not connote the same reality as the gospel meaning of the resurrection.” See Leon McKenzie, *Pagan Resurrection Myths and the Resurrection of Jesus: A Christian Perspective* (Charlottesville, VA: Bookwrights, 1997), pp. 21-40.

On the relevance of pagan parallels, N. T. Wright concludes: “when Paul preached [the resurrection] in Athens, nobody said, ‘Ah, yes, a new version of Osiris and such like’.” Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 81.

⁴⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 31. “Belief in resurrection is characterized . . . by a two-age cosmic and personal eschatology ending with a new embodiment. . . . The word ‘resurrection’ and its cognates . . . is never used to denote something other than this position. The belief can occur without the word, but never the other way around.” Ibid., p. 181.

⁴¹ The distinction is important. Resurrection language (*anastasis*, *egeiro* and cognates) did have a broader field of meaning, and could be used to refer to what was happening to those who were alive. Hence Romans 6:4 speaks of Christians living a new life just as Christ was *raised (egerthe)* from the dead. We currently experience the benefits of Christ’s resurrection. The argument set forth and defended by N. T. Wright is that when the Greek resurrection terminology was applied to expectations for what happened after death, the terms had a narrow and well-defined field of meaning. Beyond that field of meaning, there was a wide range of metaphorical application which early Christian writers (including authors of the New Testament)

referred to expectation of a two-stage bodily resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament was proclaimed within that second-Temple Jewish framework. The assurance of the Christian's future resurrection was pronounced in continuity with the Jewish resurrection hope. The apostolic Church fathers, apologists, and theologians of the 2nd and 3rd centuries proclaimed the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, when Jewish and pagan opponents critically engaged Christian belief, they attacked belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, not a Platonic conception of the afterlife or a metaphorical or spiritual understanding of resurrection.

A study of the New Testament's presentation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴² It is sufficient to note that the New Testament presents the resurrection of Jesus as a literal, bodily rising from the dead—in continuity with the first-century understanding of resurrection language.⁴³ However, the New Testament's proclamation of the

utilized to express the rich experience of spiritual rebirth they experienced. But, like the notion of the kingdom of God in the New Testament, the understanding of the Christian experience of Christ's resurrection was "already, but not yet"—we *have* experienced a very real spiritual rebirth, but our ultimate resurrection, our bodily rising with Christ through the power of God, will only occur *after* we die.

⁴² See, for example, Wright's exegetical consideration of the New Testament data in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 209-476, 585-683; also William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*. Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, Volume 16 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989).

⁴³ See, for example, Stanton, "Early Objections to the Resurrection of Jesus," pp. 88-89; Muller, "Resurrection," pp. 147-48; William Manson, "Eschatology in the New Testament," in *Eschatology: Four Papers Read to The Society for the Study of Theology. Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers, No. 2* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 13-14; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 209-476, 585-683; Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*; etc. Even J. D. Crossan, who rejects the conclusion that anything actually did happen to Jesus' body, admits that the Gospels and Epistles present (largely) a bodily resurrection.

resurrection contained a significant innovation. Heretofore, resurrection language was used to refer to what *would happen* to believers at the end of the age, when God judged all peoples and nations.⁴⁴ When the earliest Christians proclaimed that Jesus *had been* raised from the dead, they insisted that “something had happened to Jesus which had happened to nobody else.”⁴⁵

Proponents of the metaphorical resurrection suggest that early Christians simply took the prevailing Jewish belief in future resurrection and retrospectively applied it to Jesus, whom they acknowledged as the Messiah. But this does not fit the first-century context. Jewish resurrection hope focused on eschatological judgment—resurrection before the Day of the Lord was inconceivable.⁴⁶ Furthermore, while Jews longed for a coming Messiah and a future resurrection, there was *no* Jewish

However, he detects an original core which proclaimed a metaphorical resurrection, and argues that descriptions of bodily resurrection appearances and other narrative traditions (empty tomb, women, etc.) which support a bodily resurrection are later interpolations attempting to buttress emerging orthodoxy. Crossan’s time line is backwards, however: the first-century usage of resurrection language always and only referred to literal bodily resurrection; it is not until the second century (as we shall see shortly) that resurrection language begins to be used to refer anything other than Jesus’ literal rising from the dead.

⁴⁴ “Nobody imagined that any individuals had already been raised, or would be raised in advance of the great last day.” Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 205.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 83. The resuscitations of the Shunammite’s son (2 Kings 4:8-37), Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:21-43), Lazarus (John 11:1-44), Tabitha (Acts 9:32-43), and Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12) belong to a different category. The dead were indeed raised back to life, but would still suffer eventual physical death—resuscitation was a reprieve from death, while Jesus’ resurrection was a conquering of death itself. He rose to eternal life. See Wright, pp. 404-05.

⁴⁶ John Muddiman, “I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body,” in *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden*, p. 133.

hope or expectation for a suffering and rising Messiah.⁴⁷

The early church proclaimed the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as a concrete event wrought by the covenantal God of the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴⁸ Wright traces the proclamation of Christ's resurrection through the apostolic fathers, the early Christian apocryphal literature, the 2nd-century apologists, and the 'Great Early Theologians.'⁴⁹ The early church fathers countered docetic arguments that Jesus' humanity (and therefore also his passion and resurrection) was only apparent,

⁴⁷ "Nobody would have thought of saying, 'I believe that so-and-so really was the Messiah; therefore he must have been raised from the dead'." Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. Rev. 5th Ed. (Peabody, MA: Prince, 2004), pp. 482-83. Again, the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus as a 'concrete historical event' does not downplay or deny that the concrete nature of Christ's resurrection had immediate and primarily metaphorical application to the current lives of his followers. Christians experienced being raised from death to life because of their union with Christ in the waters of baptism. But the future hope of Christians' bodily resurrection (as well as the current experience of spiritual rebirth) was based on the concrete past event of Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead.

⁴⁹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 481-527. On the apostolic church fathers, Wright discusses Clement's first and second epistles, written around A.D. 90; Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 30-107); Polycarp (A.D. 69-155); the *Didache*; the *Epistle of Barbanas* (c. A.D. 80-120); the *Shepherd of Hermas* (c. A.D. 150); and Papias (A.D. 60-130). On the early Christian apocryphal literature, Wright briefly discusses the *Ascension of Isaiah* (c. A.D. 70-170); the *Apocalypse of Peter* (c. A.D. 132-135); 5 Ezra (c. A.D. 135); and *The Epistle of the Apostles* (c. A.D. 150). On the 2nd-century apologists, Wright discusses the works of Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165); Athenagoras (A.D. 110-175); Theophilus (A.D. 140-200); and Minucius Felix (c. A.D. 170-230). On the early theologians, Wright discusses Hippolytus (A.D. 170-236) briefly, but covers Tertullian (A.D. 160-225), Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200), and Origen (A.D. 185-254) in more depth.

not genuine.⁵⁰ Beginning about A.D. 150, they also defended the bodily resurrection against ‘Gnostic Christian’ proponents of a spiritual resurrection,⁵¹ usually with an appeal to the biblical doctrine of creation.⁵²

⁵⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 484. Thus Ignatius stresses “the bodily and ‘fleshly’ resurrection of Jesus without differentiating the risen body from the present corruptible one.” Ibid., p. 494.

⁵¹ E.g. Justin Martyr “expounds his belief in bodily resurrection, over against some who claim to be Christian but disbelieve it, holding instead that their souls simply go to heaven after they die.” Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 501. Athenagoras’ *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead* responds in large part to the doubts of Christians who spiritualize the resurrection—almost certainly referring to ‘Gnostic Christians’ (Wright, p. 505). Tertullian’s *De Resurrectione* condemns “dualists within the church . . . [who] treat the idea of ‘the resurrection of the dead’ as referring to a moral change within the present life, or even the possibility of escaping from the body altogether.” Ibid., p. 511. For more on the Gnostic spiritualizing of the resurrection, see section V.

⁵² Genesis 1:1 proclaims God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and all within them. Genesis 1:31 concludes: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” The goodness of creation includes the physicality of human beings. The Gnostic worldview, on the other hand, saw both physical creation in general, and the embodiment of the soul in particular, as lesser or evil. To the Christian theologians and apologists, God is both the creator and the redeemer of the human body. Thus, if God is to ‘raise’ us after our physical death, he will inevitably raise us in bodily fashion. See G. W. H. Lampe, “Early Patristic Eschatology,” in *Eschatology: Four Papers Read to The Society for the Study of Theology*, pp. 21-24. Wright concludes that the writings of the early church fathers “confirm that, for the vast majority of early Christians known to us, ‘resurrection’ was the ultimate Christian hope, and was meant in a definitely bodily sense; that this entailed some kind of intermediate state, itself glorious and blissful; and that the future resurrection was dependent on, and modeled on, that of Jesus himself. . . . ‘Resurrection’ remained literal in use, concrete in referent, and foundational to early Christian theology and hope.” Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 494.

Opponents of the early church recognized the centrality of Jesus' bodily resurrection and attacked it accordingly. Matthew 28: 11-15 contains the earliest recorded objection: the accusation that Jesus' disciples came and stole His body from the tomb at night.⁵³

Around A.D. 177, Celsus launched several philosophical and historical arguments against the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of all Christians.⁵⁴ Celsus denigrates the worth of the testimony of mere women at the empty tomb,⁵⁵ evokes parallels from Greek mythology,⁵⁶ suggests that the Christian doctrine of resurrection is derived from the Greek notion of a blessed afterlife,⁵⁷ notes that *not all Christians* affirm the same doctrine of bodily resurrection,⁵⁸ suggests that a risen

⁵³ Matthew notes that "this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day." Critics contend that Matthew created this apologetic appeal in its entirety. Nonetheless, the same objection is found in the mouth of Justin's Jewish opponent Trypho. Either way, it is the earliest objection.

⁵⁴ Celsus, *On The True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*. R. Joseph Hoffman, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 106-15. Celsus' attack against Christian faith and doctrine is preserved by the theologian Origen, who reproduces about 70-75% of Celsus' words in his rebuttal, *Contra Celsum*.

⁵⁵ Stanton, "Early Objections to the Resurrection of Jesus," p. 81; Dudrey, "What the Writers Should Have Done Better," p. 59.

⁵⁶ Celsus, *On The True Doctrine*, 110. See also Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 111-12; Stanton, "Early Objections to the Resurrection of Jesus," p. 82.

⁵⁷ Celsus, *On The True Doctrine*, 109-10. "The latter notion [resurrection] they derive from the ancients, who taught that there is a happy life for the blessed—variously called the Isles of the Blessed, the Elysian fields—where they are free from the evils of the world."

⁵⁸ W. C. Van Unnik, "The Newly Discovered Gnostic 'Epistle to Rheginos' on the Resurrection: II," in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. 15.2 (1964), 157.

Jesus should have appeared to more than just a few friends after his resurrection,⁵⁹ and questions why anyone, particularly a ‘god’, would “need or want a corruptible physical body.”⁶⁰

About a century later, the Neoplatonist Porphyry added two objections against the Christian doctrine of resurrection. First, he asks whether the future resurrection of Christians will resemble that of Christ or of Lazarus, finding both answers philosophically lacking.⁶¹ Second, he questions how God could perform the logically impossible task of recombining the requisite elements of deceased bodies.⁶²

Two significant conclusions need to be drawn from this brief discussion of early anti-Christian polemics. First, ‘modern’ objections to the resurrection are not new. As Stanton writes, “nearly all” of them are present already in the attacks of Celsus and Porphyry.⁶³

⁵⁹ Stanton, “Early Objections to the Resurrection of Jesus,” p. 83; Dudrey, “What the Writers Should Have Done Better,” p. 60.

⁶⁰ Dudrey, “What the Writers Should Have Done Better,” p. 62. Celsus’ logic here is governed by his Platonic dualism—the body is a prison-house for the eternal soul. Once discarded, the body is bidden good riddance.

⁶¹ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, p. 161.

⁶² *Porphyry’s Against the Christians: The Literary Remains*. R. Joseph Hoffman, ed. and trans. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1994), pp. 90-91.

⁶³ Stanton, “Early Objections to the Resurrection of Jesus,” pp. 83-84. The exception Stanton cites (the disciples stealing the body of Jesus) *was* voiced by early Jewish opponents. This conclusion does *not* undermine my thesis that the metaphorical understanding of Christ’s resurrection is a purely modern, post-Enlightenment construct. Scholars like Crossan utilize the same *objections against* the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, but then arrives at a different *conclusion* based on those objections. Whereas Celsus and Porphyry conclude that the resurrection of Jesus is an infantile hoax, Crossan concludes that the resurrection is a metaphorical expression of early Christian faith in the continued power and presence of Jesus Christ.

Second, Christianity's opponents focused upon the literal bodily resurrection. Alternative understandings of Jesus' resurrection (see next section) were *not* the subject of attack by non-Christians. Despite the protests of modern proponents of a metaphorical interpretation of the resurrection, even the church's enemies acknowledged that Christian resurrection faith was belief in a literal bodily resurrection.

'Gnostic Christianity': Resurrection Spiritualized

In the mid-second century, we find profession of something *other* than the bodily resurrection of Christ and the future bodily resurrection of believers. 'Gnostic Christians'⁶⁴ taught that Christ's resurrection was spiritual and could be shared by his followers—not at some eschatological fulfillment, but in the present life. Gnostics were more attuned to the prevalent Greco-Roman worldview than to the Judeo-Christian. Hence, when some Gnostics embraced Christianity (or vice versa), elements of the Christian faith were compromised in a syncretistic Gnostic Christianity. The result was something entirely new—a Gnosticized resurrection.

Gnosticism is a religious expression of a thorough (anthropological, cosmological, and theological) neo-Platonic

⁶⁴ I hesitate to use the term 'Gnostic Christians'. On the one hand, I acknowledge that there is considerable scholarly debate about the value of the label 'Gnostic' to begin with; but I side with those scholars (e.g. Peel, Layton) who identify a core Gnostic worldview worthy of an identifying label. On the other hand, it will become clear that I highly doubt that true Gnostics could be truly Christian. Calling this group 'Gnostic Christians' is therefore somewhat dangerous. Nonetheless, I think it's the best shorthand description available. The underlying worldview of this group identifies them as clearly Gnostic; they self-identified as followers of Jesus Christ and members of the universal Christian Church. Thus, I will hold my nose and continue to apply the label.

dualism.⁶⁵ According to this belief, the essence of the human being is the immaterial, eternal soul which longs to be freed from the prison-house of the body.⁶⁶ The universe is a combination of spiritual beings and physical matter, the latter having been created by a lesser deity (not the supreme God).⁶⁷ Gnostic ‘salvation’ thus consists of the soul’s escape from the physical body and return to the *pleroma*, the ‘cosmic fullness’ which is its proper eternal state.⁶⁸ The means of salvation is knowledge (*gnosis*), particularly knowledge of one’s true identity.⁶⁹

While Marcion (c. A.D. 85-160) likely had some influence upon early ‘Gnostic Christianity’, Valentinus (c. A.D.

⁶⁵ James M. Robinson, “Introduction,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 4th rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 2-4. Bentley Layton writes: “The gnostic, or gnosticizing, aspects of early Christianity [are] a ‘Platonism run wild’: one should not forget that close under the surface of much supposedly gnostic language lies material familiar from the most-read passages of Plato.” Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Treatise on Resurrection From Nag Hammadi*. *Harvard Dissertations in Religion*, Number 12 (Missoula: Scholars, 1979), p. 3.

⁶⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 65; Layton, *The Gnostic Treatise on Resurrection*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ See, e.g. Malcolm Peel, “The Treatise on the Resurrection,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 4th rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 53. In some Gnostic or pseudo-gnostic movements (e.g. Manichaeism), a strict theological dualism was maintained, with the existence of two super-potent deities—one good, one evil.

⁶⁸ Van Unnik, “The Newly Discovered Gnostic ‘Epistle to Rheginos’ on the Resurrection: I,” p. 145; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 539.

⁶⁹ “[Salvation] may be summarized as comprising the recognition of one’s self – one’s origin, who one is now, one’s destiny – and, by corollary, the recognition of one’s relationship with heavenly characters like the Father and the Saviour.” Majella Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 99.

100-160) was the central figure.⁷⁰ In accommodating itself to Christianity, Gnosticism willingly embraced Jesus as the 'author of salvation'⁷¹ and appeared to accept the authority of the apostolic New Testament scriptures.⁷²

However, 'Gnostic Christians' also performed radical surgery to fit Christian doctrine into their underlying Gnostic worldview. First, the conception of a Triune personal God was jettisoned. Second, the doctrine of creation was rejected in favor of the view that "the world of space, time and matter is the evil creation of a lesser god."⁷³ Third, the Hebrew Scriptures were studiously avoided or consciously rejected.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ At one point, according to Tertullian, Valentinus was sufficiently orthodox to be considered for the post of bishop of Rome. See Marvin Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries: The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. 119. Meyer betrays his own bias when he continues: "Had he been appointed bishop of Rome, the subsequent history of the church might have been altogether different. Valentinus, *and perhaps all of us*, lost on that day." The discovery of fifty-two Gnostic Christian documents (the *Nag Hammadi Library*) in 1945 exponentially increased our understanding of 'Gnostic Christianity' and its relationship to the early orthodox Church. See Robinson, "Introduction," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 10.

⁷¹ Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings*, p. 100.

⁷² Hence the author of the *Treatise on the Resurrection* quotes the Gospels and the letters of Paul to support his theological points. E.g. *Treatise* 45:24-28 – "Then, indeed, as the Apostle said, 'We suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him.'" See Bentley Layton, "Vision and Revision: a Gnostic View of Resurrection," in *Colloque International sur Les Textes de Nag Hammadi* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1981), p. 209; Van Unnik, "The Newly Discovered Gnostic 'Epistle to Rheginos' on the Resurrection: I," p. 151.

⁷³ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 537.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 550. Wright claims that "the Gnostic and similar writings avoid the Old Testament like the plague. . . . they certainly do not want to give the impression that the spirituality they are talking about,

Fourth, the doctrine of culpable sin was exchanged for the notion of separation from the *pleroma* (cosmic fullness) through no personal fault; as a consequence, the concept of divine judgment became irrelevant.⁷⁵ Fifth, salvation was redefined. It is not the whole human being which is saved, but rather the (Platonic) soul alone. Finally, while Jesus was acknowledged as the savior, he was not much different from other human beings—he merely understood and exercised the incipient spiritual powers we all have, and pointed others towards a salvation they could then achieve.⁷⁶

With all the changes Gnostic Christians made to Christian doctrine, it is already clear that ‘Gnostic Christianity’ is more ‘Gnostic’ than ‘Christian.’ The Gnostic treatment of the resurrection, exhibited most clearly in the *Gospel of Philip* and *Treatise on the Resurrection*, continues to de-Christianize ‘Gnostic Christianity’.

The Gospel of Philip insists that the resurrection of believers is a present reality, not a future hope.⁷⁷ “Those who say they will die first and then rise are in error. If they do not

or the Jesus in whom they believe, or any events that may have happened to him, or the future hope they themselves embrace, have anything much to do with Israel, the Jews, the patriarchs and the scriptures.”

⁷⁵ Paul Foster, “The Gospel of Philip,” in *The Non-Canonical Gospels* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), p. 82; Van Unnik, “The Newly Discovered Gnostic ‘Epistle to Rheginos’ on the Resurrection: I,” p. 151.

⁷⁶ “Salvation is the acquisition of self-knowledge, but the Gnostic does not have the power to come to that insight by him/herself. Someone is required to alert the Gnostic to the insight that awaits recognition, to wake him/her up. In this way, the Saviour needs to be primarily a revealer in the sense of one who awakens, rather than someone who gives extra knowledge that is not already possessed.” Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings*, p. 100. The similarities between ‘Gnostic Christianity’ and New Age spirituality are striking.

⁷⁷ Foster, “The Gospel of Philip,” p. 80.

first receive the resurrection while they live, when they die they will receive nothing.”⁷⁸ Jesus has already risen, so too the believer must rise *before* death.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the resurrection of both Jesus and other Christians is spiritual, not bodily. The soul rises; the body does not.⁸⁰

The Treatise on the Resurrection also insists that the resurrection is a present reality for Christians.⁸¹ Resurrection, like salvation, is self-achieved through knowledge received from Jesus’ teaching.⁸² The human being is essentially a spirit trapped within a corrupt physical body; thus, resurrection “involves the ... laying aside of flesh, first by anticipation, then literally.”⁸³

⁷⁸ *The Gospel of Philip* 73:1-5. This and all further citations of *The Gospel of Philip* are from Wesley Isenberg’s translation in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 4th rev. ed., pp. 141-60.

⁷⁹ *The Gospel of Philip*, 56:15-20 – “Those who say that the lord died first and (then) rose up are in error, for he rose up first and (then) died.” See Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings*, p. 158.

⁸⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 542. *The Gospel of Philip*, 56:25-35 – “Compare the soul. It is a precious thing and it came to be in a contemptible body. Some are afraid lest they rise naked. Because of this they wish to rise in the flesh, and [they] do not know that it is those who wear the [flesh] who are naked.” Later, the author of *Philip* insists that the material world is corrupt. “The world came about through a mistake. For he who created it wanted to create it imperishable and immortal. He fell short of attaining his desire. For the world never was imperishable, nor, for that matter, was he who made the world.” *The Gospel of Philip*, 75:1-10. Such passages betray the utter rejection of the Old Testament doctrine of creation by Yahweh.

⁸¹ Douglass, “The Epistle to Rheginos,” p. 121; Malcolm Peel, “Resurrection, Treatise on the,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary. Volume 5* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 691; Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 540.

⁸² Layton, *The Gnostic Treatise on Resurrection From Nag Hammadi*, pp. 58-59.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 96. *Treatise on Resurrection* 45:25-46:1 – “As the Apostle said, ‘We suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to

On the surface the Gnostic documents affirm the resurrection of Jesus and of all true Christians.⁸⁴ However, the spiritualization of the resurrection is in effect a rejection through redefinition. Resurrection language (*anastemi*, *egeiro* and their cognates) had previously been used solely to refer to a two-stage bodily resurrection at a concrete point in history. The Platonic conception of soul liberation, ascent, or transmigration was common and widespread—but until its appearance amongst ‘Gnostic Christians’, was never referred to using the language of resurrection. Texts like *The Treatise on the Resurrection* represent Platonic philosophy dressed up in Pauline language.⁸⁵ The resurrection of Jesus Christ is no longer the

heaven with him.’ Now if we are manifest in this world wearing him, we are that one’s beams, and we are embraced by him until our setting, that is to say, our death in this life. We are drawn to heaven by him, like beams by the sun, not being restrained by anything. This is the spiritual resurrection which swallows up the psychic in the same way as the fleshly.” Translation from Malcolm Peel, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 4th rev. ed., pp. 54-57.

⁸⁴ Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, p. 136; Van Unnik, “The Newly Discovered Gnostic ‘Epistle to Rheginos’ on the Resurrection: I,” p. 150. Robinson notes that “Christian Gnosticism [was] a reaffirmation, though in somewhat different terms, of the original stance of transcendence central to the very beginnings of Christianity. Such ‘Gnostic Christians’ surely considered themselves the faithful continuation, under changing circumstances, of that original stance which made Christians Christians.” Robinson, “Introduction,” p. 4. Robinson may be correct in saying that ‘Gnostic Christians’ *considered* themselves to be faithful Christians—but that doesn’t mean they were right!

⁸⁵ Layton, “Vision and Revision: a Gnostic View of Resurrection,” p. 213. Earlier, Layton writes: “Not only does our author ignore the problem of sin. He ignores the question of Judaism and the Law, indeed he makes no reference whatsoever to the Old Testament. He does not speak of divine economy or providence, nor of God’s raising of Jesus. Indeed he does not speak of God. The crucifixion and cross are not mentioned. Jesus is not *ho khristos* (‘the anointed’)

culmination of Jewish hope and the firstfruits of the bodily resurrection from the dead. Instead, it is the fulfillment of Platonic philosophical endeavor.⁸⁶ The resurrection has been altered from an eschatological hope of vindication through the righteous judgment of Almighty God, into the achievement of Platonic soul-liberation through self-knowledge.⁸⁷ The resurrection of both Christ and Christians has been redefined out of existence.

But why did Gnostics, with the language of Platonic philosophy readily at hand, choose instead to co-opt Judeo-Christian resurrection language? Van Unnik rightly argues that 'Gnostic Christians' altered their proclamation of the resurrection "to fit the Gnostic conception of the *Pleroma* and the world."⁸⁸ They wanted to maintain both their Gnostic

but *ho kbrestos* ('the excellent') . . . Furthermore, there is no future resurrection. Resurrection for our author is preeminently a category of the here and now; thus there is no problem about delay in the general resurrection, and no concept of a coming *parousia* with judgment. And, as I have already emphasized, there is no concept of a resurrection 'body' in which the self will be reclothed when it reenters the *pleroma*. The author has therefore dressed a quite non-Pauline theology in a thin and tattered Pauline garb." Ibid., p. 211.

⁸⁶ "Resurrection, in the main sense that we have seen the word and its cognates used in the first two centuries of Christianity, is in these texts either *denied* or *radically reinterpreted*. If 'resurrection' is seen as in any sense a return, at some point after death, to a full bodily life, it is denied. If (as in the *Epistle to Rheginos*) the language of resurrection is retained, it is reinterpreted so that it no longer refers in any sense to the bodily events of either ultimate resurrection or moral obedience in this life, but rather to non-bodily religious experience during the present life and/or non-bodily post-mortem survival and exaltation." Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 547.

⁸⁷ Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, p. 136.

⁸⁸ Van Unnik, "The Newly Discovered Gnostic 'Epistle to Rheginos' on the Resurrection: II," p. 165. The alteration could have taken place in two different ways. First, existing Gnostics attracted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ would transform Christian resurrection

dualism and their Christian identity, so they simply applied the Christian terminology to the Gnostic concept.⁸⁹

Conclusion: Gnostics and the Modern Metaphorical Resurrection

The early, strong heterodoxy of ‘Gnostic Christians’ is a boon to modernists’ anti-orthodoxy.⁹⁰ Furthermore, ‘Gnostic Christians’ were the first to apply resurrection language to something other than the historical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and the future two-stage bodily resurrection of believers. Proponents of the metaphorical resurrection seek to do what the ancient ‘Gnostic Christians’ did—apply resurrection language to something other than orthodox resurrection belief.

However, invoking ‘Gnostic Christianity’ in historical support of the metaphorical understanding of Christ’s resurrection is strange at best. We have already seen the stark contrast between the Gnostic and Christian worldviews. More striking, however, is the difference between the Gnostic worldview and the modern naturalistic worldview held by proponents of the metaphorical resurrection. To Gnostics, the material world is corrupt and evil, something to be escaped—to modernists, the material world is all there is. To Gnostics, a human being is an eternal divine soul trapped in a degraded

language to fit their worldview. But also, existing Christians could have been attracted to Gnosticism, and transformed their conception of Christ’s resurrection to fit the language of their new Gnostic worldview. Perhaps it is the latter transformation that happened with Valentinus.

⁸⁹ N. T. Wright emphasizes that “‘Resurrection’ and its cognates never meant, in either pagan or Jewish usage, what these documents make it mean; the only explanation is that they are loath to give up the word, because they want to seem to be some type of Christian, but are using it in a way for which there is no early warrant.” Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 550.

⁹⁰ Smith, “The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism,” pp. 532-33.

physical body—to modernists, one is *only* a physical body. To Gnostics, death results in the liberation of the soul and reunion with the *pleroma*—to modernists, physical death results in utter personal extinction. Most crucially, to Gnostics, the spiritual resurrection of Jesus Christ is a concrete historical event—to modernists, the metaphorical resurrection of Jesus Christ has no concrete referent, but rather is a symbol for the enduring power of his teaching and community. Simply put, a *spiritual* understanding of resurrection is incompatible with a *metaphorical* understanding. The Gnostics affirmed the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a concrete historical event wherein his (Platonic) soul was liberated from its physical body. The metaphorical reconstruction dissociates Christ's resurrection from history altogether. Nothing happened to Jesus after his death; resurrection is a symbol for what his disciples experienced. The only similarity between the Gnostics' spiritual resurrection and the modernists' metaphorical resurrection is an anti-orthodox denial of the bodily resurrection that fits the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection within the prevailing worldview. The metaphorical interpretation of Christ's resurrection emphatically finds no support from the Gnosticization of the resurrection.

Conclusion: Resurrection and Worldview

Proponents of the metaphorical resurrection insist that the resurrection of Jesus was understood symbolically by his earliest followers. It is certainly true that Jesus' earliest followers derived metaphorical applications *from* Jesus' bodily resurrection.⁹¹ However, we have seen that when applied to an individual's post-mortem existence (or lack thereof), resurrection language in the first century always and only referred to a future two-stage bodily resurrection from the dead, even among those who rejected the possibility. Furthermore, the New Testament, the early Church fathers, and early

⁹¹ E.g., Romans 6:1-14 emphasizes that we have been baptized with Jesus into his death and raised to new life through his resurrection.

opponents of Christianity all understood the resurrection in literal, bodily terms.⁹² Furthermore, while ‘Gnostic Christians’ applied resurrection language in a radically new spiritualized sense, they did so in a way contrary to modern metaphorical reconstructionists. Indeed, both the underlying worldview and the reconstructed resurrection of ‘Gnostic Christianity’ are diametrically opposed to that of proponents of a metaphorical resurrection. The inescapable conclusion is that the metaphorical interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a purely modern invention, with neither precursors in nor support from the history of the Church and her ancient opponents.

In conclusion, I would like to explore the interplay between worldview and Christ’s resurrection.

- (1) ‘Gnostic Christians’ redefined the resurrection (of Christ and believers) in order to better fit their underlying worldview presuppositions. The metaphorical reconstruction of Christ’s resurrection represents the same process. Modernists generally adhere to a naturalistic worldview which denies both the possibility of life after death and the active involvement of God in the physical realm. Under such a worldview, a metaphorical resurrection is plausible; a bodily resurrection is not. I propose that the process of redefining or altering resurrection belief in order to fit one’s own worldview is a widespread and natural phenomenon.⁹³
- (2) Altering resurrection belief is considerably more likely when the predominant cultural worldview *does not fit orthodox*

⁹² Again, this does not downplay or deny that the resurrection was *applied* metaphorically to the present experience of believers. But this metaphorical application was only possible because of their belief in the concrete historical *fact* of Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead.

⁹³ Van Unnik seems to agree; see Van Unnik, “The Newly Discovered Gnostic ‘Epistle to Rheginos’ on the Resurrection: II,” pp. 163-64. See also Dudrey, “What the Writers Should Have Done Better,” p. 55.

resurrection belief. The vast majority of the Greco-Roman world rejected the Judeo-Christian worldview that lay behind the Christian proclamation of Jesus' bodily resurrection and the future bodily resurrection of believers. The attacks launched by Celsus and Porphyry demonstrate "why Christians were tempted to abandon the doctrine of the incarnation and the resurrection" and why "Christian Gnosticism simply accepted the pagan antimaterialistic worldview": a spiritual understanding of resurrection "was far more marketable to the pagan worldview."⁹⁴ Today, functional naturalism is the dominant worldview in the Western world.⁹⁵ The metaphorical resurrection is "far more marketable" to this worldview than is the bodily resurrection proclaimed by biblical Christianity.

- (3) Both Gnostic and modern reinterpretations of the resurrection seek to maintain Christian language and hence credibility, even while radically altering or rejecting the Christian worldview in which that language (and credibility) is grounded. It is quite natural, from a biblical Christian worldview, to wish that Gnostics and modern metaphorical proponents would engage in honest intellectual labeling.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Dudrey, "What the Writers Should Have Done Better," p. 67.

⁹⁵ I am not suggesting that Westerners are generally professing atheists (consistent naturalists). Functional naturalism suggests that while Westerners might consciously acknowledge the real or possible existence of a transcendent deity, they operate on a day-to-day basis as if that 'God' is entirely uninvolved in world affairs. Moral therapeutic deism is one popular catchphrase for the dominant Western worldview. All I'm seeking to argue is that the dominant worldview discounts the possibility of God intervening (or interacting) in historical events.

⁹⁶ Ronald Nash writes: "It is important to recognize that disagreement on some issues should result in the disputant's being regarded as someone who has left that family of beliefs, however much he or she desires to continue to use the label. . . . A religion without the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son of God may be a plausible faith, but it certainly is not the *Christian* religion. Much

- (4) Wright notes: “Some events seem to have the power to challenge worldviews and generate either new mutations within them or complete transformations.”⁹⁷ The bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is one such event. When the Jewish disciples encountered the risen Christ their worldviews were radically altered. They began to treat Jesus not only as Messiah but as the proper object of devotion and worship, they gathered for separate corporate worship on the first day of the week, and they altered their resurrection faith to include Jesus as the firstfruits and promise of their own future resurrection.

Whether in the 1st century or the 21st century, the person who comes face-to-face with the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is faced with a decision: “Will I (like the Gnostics, like the modernists) alter, shape, reinterpret or redefine the resurrection so as to fit my pre-existing worldview; or will I (like the apostles and the early Christians) allow the risen Messiah to alter my worldview?”

confusion could undoubtedly be eliminated if some way could be found to get people to use important labels like Christianity in a way that is faithful to their historic meaning.” Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 33.

⁹⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 27.