



## Resurrection-Faith and the ‘Historical’ Jesus

Larry W. Hurtado

University of Edinburgh, UK

lhurtado@ed.ac.uk

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### Abstract

It is clear that a remarkable Jesus-devotion, in which Jesus was accorded unprecedented kinds of reverence, was central in early Christian faith from its earliest extant expressions, and represents a significant escalation from the kinds of reverence that followers expressed during Jesus’ earthly ministry. This devotion seems to have been prompted by the conviction that God had raised Jesus from death and given him heavenly glory. The impact of Jesus’ own activities was certainly a factor, but experiences of the risen Jesus were crucial in generating this belief. Moreover, Jesus’ resurrection meant a resounding vindication of the earthly Jesus. Belief in Jesus’ personal resurrection, thus, contributed strongly to interest in Jesus’ own activities and teaching, the formation and circulation of Jesus-tradition, and the composition of narrative accounts of his career. In short, the earliest ‘quest for the historical Jesus’ was prompted by the conviction that he had been resurrected.

### Keywords

devotional practices; historical Jesus; miracles; resurrection

### I

A remarkable devotion to Jesus, involving both christological claims and a constellation of devotional practices, quickly characterized earliest Christianity soon after Jesus’ crucifixion. More specifically, this Jesus-devotion emerged consequent upon, and in connection with, the astounding conviction that God had raised Jesus from death and exalted him to heavenly glory. I have contended that this Jesus-devotion appeared quickly and very early, more like a volcanic eruption than an incremental

process.<sup>1</sup> This devotion to Jesus involved convictions about him uniquely sharing in God's glory, as the defining figure by whom believers identified themselves, as the chosen vehicle of divine redemption, and (most remarkably) as the one whom God has exalted and designated as rightfully and programmatically included in the cultic devotion to be offered to God. These convictions were linked with a larger pattern of devotional practice as well. In a number of previous publications I have discussed the key practices that comprised a constellation or pattern of devotion in which Jesus held a central place and for which we have neither precedent nor analogy in Jewish tradition of the time.<sup>2</sup> I have also explored the question of how this devotional pattern compares with the reverence that appears to have been accorded to Jesus during his ministry.<sup>3</sup> Prominent in the Jesus-devotion that we see in earliest texts is an emphasis on Jesus' resurrection. In this essay, I focus on the presentation of Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament writings, considering historical and theological connections with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

## II

Let us commence with some general observations about how Jesus' resurrection is portrayed in the NT texts. Unavoidably, these observations will involve some contested issues, but the available space here requires me to be brief in engaging such disagreements.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.g., L.W. Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 31-55, esp. 32-38.

<sup>2</sup> Initially, in L.W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; 2nd edn, Edinburgh and London: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 99-114; thereafter, e.g., 'The Binitarian Shape of Early Christian Worship', in Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila and Gladys S. Lewis (eds.), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 187-213, which appears also in L.W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), pp. 63-97.

<sup>3</sup> L.W. Hurtado, 'Homage to the Historical Jesus and Early Christian Devotion', *JSHJ* 1 (2003), pp. 131-46, reprinted with minor changes in Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?*, pp. 134-51.

<sup>4</sup> There is an enormous body of scholarly literature on Jesus' resurrection, and I cannot pretend to be familiar with it all. The most recent (and perhaps largest) book-length publication is N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003).

We begin by noting that, as affirmed in the New Testament writings (which include the earliest extant Christian texts), the resurrection of Jesus comprises both the major intersection of the earthly ‘historical’ Jesus and the divinely-exalted Jesus of early Christian devotion, and also the major turning-point in the way he featured in the religious life of his followers thereafter. By all accounts, the conviction that Jesus has been raised from death and given glory was the initial stimulus and inception of the astonishing claims and devotional practices that identified and distinguished the earliest Christian circles thereafter. What followed was a devotional pattern in which Jesus of Nazareth was thematic and central in ways that surpassed both the reverence given by his followers during his ministry and also the types of reverence given to other figures in Jewish tradition of the time.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in some NT texts Christians are identified simply as those who ‘call upon/invoke [ἐπικαλέω]’ Jesus (1 Cor. 1.2; Acts 9.14, 21), reflecting how widespread this practice was.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, although the Gospel narratives portray Jesus as acting with divine authorization and accompanied by divine/miraculous power, e.g., in casting out demons, healing, and other miracles (e.g., Lk. 4.14-21), the resurrection is a fully distinguishable event. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus is very much the active and cooperating vehicle through whom God’s power is displayed, and he is the active agent in these narratives. Through Jesus’ words and actions divine power works miracles. Jesus touches the sick and pronounces them healed, commands demons to depart, rebukes the wind and waves, and summons the dead back to life. Jesus’ words and actions generate interest in him and criticism/opposition against him, the

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*JSHJ* 3.2 (2005) features critical engagement with Wright’s book by several scholars. Among earlier studies by NT scholars, one of the best is by PHEME PERKINS, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984). Among studies of a more reflective-theological orientation, see Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Other publications are cited in notes elsewhere in this essay.

<sup>5</sup> For comparison with Jewish reverence of other figures, see esp. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> In the LXX and NT ἐπικαλέω (especially middle voice) is used mainly in sentences involving invoking/worshipping a deity: e.g., Gen. 4.26; Deut. 4.7; 33.19; 1 Sam. 12.17; 2 Sam. 22.4, 7; 1 Kgs 18.24-27; 2 Kgs 5.11; 1 Chron. 16.8; Ps. 85.5; 98.6 (MT 99.6); 104.1 (MT 105.1); Jud. 3.8; 16.1; Acts 2.21; 7.59; 22.6; 2 Tim. 2.22; 1 Pet. 1.17. I return to this practice later in this essay.

unavoidably central question being whether he is the valid spokesman and vehicle of divine purposes.

It is significant, therefore, that, although there are statements about Jesus ‘rising’ from the dead (active forms of ἀνίστημι), in the overwhelming majority of NT instances Jesus is referred to as ‘raised’ (passive forms of ἐγείρω), either explicitly or implicitly by the act of God, Jesus the recipient and beneficiary of God’s power.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the statements commonly regarded as reflecting earliest proclamation tend to present Jesus as raised by God (e.g., Rom. 4.24–25; 10.9–10). In the Gospel narratives people are recipients of and respond to Jesus’ actions, but in the early proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection he is usually the object of divine action. Jesus’ resurrection certainly generated christological claims concerning him and a remarkable devotion to him, but we must note that NT discourse about the cause and agency effecting Jesus’ resurrection is also rather equally *theological* and even *theo-centric*. To underscore this point, I note that the NT texts do not typically ascribe Jesus’ resurrection to some inherent invincibility to death, or to Jesus’ own power.<sup>8</sup> Instead, God’s power is exercised upon the truly-dead-and-helpless Jesus. As Gerald O’Collins put it, ‘God was the resurrector, Christ the resurrectee’.<sup>9</sup> I shall return to this point later.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Brown referred to ‘some twenty passages’ in the NT where God (the Father) raised Jesus (but did not list them), including all of what are usually regarded as the earliest traditional formulae: *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), p. 79. I count, however, some forty-eight NT references to Jesus as ‘raised’ (passive forms of ἐγείρω or transitive forms of ἀνίστημι), in twenty of which the action is explicitly ascribed to God (Acts 2.24, 32; 3.15; 4.10; 5.30; 10.40; 13.30, 34, 37; Rom. 6.4; 8.11; 10.9; 1 Cor. 6.14; 15.15; 2 Cor. 4.14; Gal. 1.1; Eph. 1.20; Col. 2.12; 1 Thess. 1.10; 1 Pet. 1.21). In the remaining ones, though not explicitly named, God is quite obviously the one by whom Jesus’ was raised. Mt. 16.21; 17.9, 23; 20.19; 26.32; 27.64; 28.6, 7; Mk 14.28; 16.6; Lk. 9.22; 24.34; Jn 2.22; 21.14; Rom. 4.24, 25; 6.9; 7.4; 8.34; 15.4, 12–14, 16–17, 20; 2 Cor. 5.15; 2 Tim. 2.8. By contrast, I count seven NT references to Jesus as rising (intransitive forms of ἀνίστημι) from the dead. Mk 8.31; 9.9, 31; 10.34; Acts 10.41; 1 Thess. 4.14.

<sup>8</sup> There are statements in the Gospel of John where Jesus appears to be presented explicitly as the agent of his own resurrection (2.19; 10.17–18), and in 11.25 Jesus is himself ‘the resurrection and the life’. But, again, reading these statements in context it is clear that Jesus (‘the Son’) is understood to have such resurrection-power by the will and gift of God (‘the Father’), as, e.g., in 5.21–23, 25–29. Cf. also some statements in second-century texts, e.g., Ignatius (*Smyrn.* 2.1), who insists Jesus ‘truly raised himself; and *Ep. Rheg.* 45.17–18 (cited also by Brown, *Virginal Conception*, p. 80).

<sup>9</sup> Gerald O’Collins, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1973), p. 109. In 1 Cor. 15.3–5, cf. ‘Christ died’ (ἀπέθανεν,

A second observation is that Jesus' resurrection is presented as a unique event, categorically distinguished even from other miraculous demonstrations of divine power. This includes particularly the accounts of dead people being miraculously restored to life, e.g., Lazarus (Jn 11.1-44), Jairus' daughter (Mk 5.21-24, 35-43), and the widow of Nain's son (Lk. 7.11-17). In contrast to the figures in such narratives, Jesus is not pictured as *brought back* to mortal life, but as *catapulted forward* into *eschatological* life, becoming thereby the first to experience this new eschatological embodiment. The claim of the witnesses in the NT is not that Jesus has been restored to them as he was before but that he has been raised to new and glorified life. To reiterate a distinction often made, the other stories portray miraculous *resuscitations*, whereas Jesus was *resurrected*.<sup>10</sup> So, as presented in the NT texts, Jesus' resurrection is without true precedent. It is not another example in a series of essentially similar events already known, but instead a *novum*. It is not simply another miracle, or even a grander miracle, but instead *sui generis*, an exercise of divine power and purpose that comprises a unique manifestation of eschatological reality.<sup>11</sup> More typically, biblical 'miracles' involve restoring and putting things back into an ordered state as defined by this world (e.g., healings, exorcisms, calming the wind and sea). By contrast, Jesus' resurrection is portrayed as involving his unique

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active verb), 'he was buried' (ἐτάφη, by others, passive verb), and 'he was raised' (ἐγήγερται, passive verb indicating God's action here). Other illustrative statements include 1 Cor. 6.14; 15.15; 2 Cor. 4.14; Rom. 4.24-25; 6.4; 8.11; 10.9; Gal. 1.1; Acts 2.32-33. Even in the statement, 'Jesus died and rose again' (1 Thess. 4.14), both the immediate and larger contexts make it clear that Jesus 'rose' through God's resurrection-power (1 Thess. 4.14b; 1.10).

<sup>10</sup> Brown likewise proposes a similar distinction in, *Virginal Conception*, p. 73. Even though the same Greek word (ἐγείρω) is used in the stories of Lazarus and the others (e.g., Mt. 11.5; Jn 12.1, 9, 17), it is clear that the NT makes a sharp distinction between these miracles and Jesus' resurrection. As Perkins put it, 'Thus, the disciples' immediate experience of [Jesus'] resurrection is not that of a "mighty act of God" in the course of history but of the dawn of the new age' (*Resurrection*, p. 95).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the analysis of NT references to Jesus' resurrection and Jewish traditions of resurrection of key figures: Klaus Berger, *Die Auferstehung des Propheten und die Erhöhung des Menschensohn: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Deutung des Geschickes Jesu in frühchristlichen Texten* (SUNT, 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976). Berger shows that resurrection was a lively hope in the time. He does not, however, address the point I make here about the difference between Jesus' resurrection and the Gospel miracles of resuscitation.

transformation from mortal/this-world life into the new mode of existence of the world to come.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, thirdly, in the NT Jesus' resurrection is not a freakish event, a marvel unconnected to anything else in God's actions and plan. Instead, the raising of Jesus is linked with the eschatological resurrection affirmed as the hope of the elect, serving both as the paradigm and the guarantee of that hope (e.g., 1 Cor. 15.20-23, 49; 1 Jn 3.1-3). The NT reflects convictions that God has power to raise the dead and that God will do so, in keeping with Jewish eschatological hopes of the Second Temple period (e.g., Dan. 12.1; Macc. 7.9; 4 Ezra 2.16; Mk 12.24-27).<sup>13</sup> The second of the 'Eighteen Benedictions' (*Shemoneh Esreh*) expresses this faith: 'Blessed are you, O Lord who gives life to the dead'.<sup>14</sup> So, in one sense, Jesus' resurrection must be seen in the context of this view of God's power and purposes.

On the other hand, although many Jews expected God to raise the dead (or righteous dead) collectively in the last day, there is no trace of any

<sup>12</sup> Paul affirms this in a series of contrasts between the qualities of the resurrection body and the mortal body: perishable/imperishable, dishonor/glory, weakness/power, 'soulish'/spiritual (1 Cor. 15.42-44). In the last pair of contrasting terms, ψυχικός seems to derive from the characterization of Adam as a 'living soul' (ψυχή ζῶσα), and thus designates (biological) life of this creation. The adjective 'spiritual' (πνευματικός) here must derive from the Holy Spirit as the agency of resurrection (e.g., Rom. 1.4; 8.11), and so essentially designates the resurrection body as empowered and animated by the Spirit.  
<sup>13</sup> Of course, not all Jews held to such hopes, particularly the Sadducees (e.g., Mk 12.18/Mt. 22.23/Lk. 20.27; Acts 23.8). But the LXX translation of Isa. 26.19, which makes more explicit the hope of the dead being raised, surely reflects a widescale acceptance of this idea: ἀναστήσονται οἱ νεκροὶ καὶ ἐγερθήσονται οἱ ἐν τοῖς μνημείοις (cf. the MT: 'your dead shall live, my corpses shall rise'). See the discussion of the various ancient ideas of post-mortem options in Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 288-91, who note clearly that the Jewish and Christian ideas of bodily resurrection are not really paralleled in pagan cults of the day.

<sup>14</sup> Although codified later, the Eighteen Benedictions likely preserve features of Jewish piety of the time of Jesus and the earliest Christian developments. We probably have reflections of the view of God reflected in this Benediction in NT passages such as Rom. 4.17 and 2 Cor. 1.9, as noted by Gerhard Delling, 'The Significance of the Resurrection of Jesus for Faith in Jesus Christ', in C.F.D. Moule (ed.), *The Significance of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1968), pp. 87-88 (77-104). The Palestinian form of the Eighteen Benedictions (less developed than the Babylonian version) is given by Gustaf Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1898), pp. 299-301, the Babylonian version, pp. 301-304.

expectation that God would single out one individual for this eschatological resurrection apart from, and as the pattern for, the rest. So, although Jesus' resurrection partially reflects Jewish hopes and ideas of the time, it also represents a significant modification or 'mutation'. The risen Jesus is presented, not simply as one among many to be raised, or even simply as the privileged first one (though he is that). He is acclaimed as the one whom God has made the paradigm and pathfinder for the elect, his resurrection the model and basis for their future hopes. Indeed, the resurrection hope espoused in the NT has been specifically (re)shaped by the understanding of Jesus' resurrection (e.g., Phil. 3.20-21; 1 Cor. 15.49).<sup>15</sup> This means that the NT presents Jesus' resurrection as more than a particular instance of the general hope for the eschatological resurrection of the dead. Jesus' resurrection confers upon him, and signals that he holds, a unique significance in God's eschatological programme of redemption.

So, fourthly, we must note that in the NT Jesus' resurrection also typically involves his exaltation and designation as the one who holds a unique status, both in relationship to the elect and to God. One of the earliest confessional formulae (Rom. 1.3-4) portrays Jesus' resurrection as involving his designation as 'the Son of God'.<sup>16</sup> Acts 2.32-36 declares that God raised [ἀνέστησεν] Jesus and exalted him to his 'right hand', thereby appointing him 'Lord and Messiah'. Another text that is widely thought to preserve an early Christian hymn refers to God's supreme exaltation of Jesus and conferral upon him of 'the name that is above every name', for the purpose of Jesus receiving universal acclamation as *Kyrios* (Phil. 2.9-11). This universal acclamation of the exalted/resurrected Jesus was practiced corporately already in the early Christian worship setting, as reflected in Rom. 10.9-13, which explicitly refers to the confession of the resurrected 'Lord Jesus' (v. 9). The contextual appropriation of the OT expression which connotes worship, 'call upon [ἐπικαλέω] the Lord' (vv. 12-13), clearly indicates that

<sup>15</sup> Note also Ignatius (*Trallians* 9.2), who after affirming that God raised Jesus from the dead, then declares, 'In the same way his Father will likewise also raise up in Christ Jesus us who believe in him.'

<sup>16</sup> 'Designated the Son of God' translates τοῦ ὀρισθέντος υἱοῦ θεοῦ, the definite article here, as elsewhere in Paul, signalling Jesus' unique status as *the* Son of God *par excellence*. Other texts suggest that Jesus' divine sonship held a special significance for Paul. E.g., in Gal. 1.16, Paul refers to God's revelation of 'his Son' to/in him, thereby encapsulating the cognitive force and content of the experience. For further discussion, see Larry W. Hurtado, 'Son of God', in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G.F. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 900-906.

this confession of Jesus' exalted status was a liturgical action that carried this meaning.<sup>17</sup>

### III

With these few observations as a basis, I turn now to address the main task of this essay, which is to consider Jesus' resurrection as a case study for exploring how the intense Jesus-devotion of earliest Christian circles is related to, and also a significant new development beyond, the ministry of the 'historical' Jesus.

#### *Jesus' Resurrection and His Ministry*

The first point to note is that the NT claim is that it was Jesus of Nazareth in particular who was resurrected. The resurrection of anyone would have done adequately to confirm eschatological hopes for a resurrection of the elect. It is important, therefore, that the firm and consistent claim of the earliest witnesses is that *Jesus* has been raised. This means that the event is very much, and from the outset, imbued with christological meaning. In the early testimony to the event, by singling out Jesus for resurrection God has made him the central figure in the divine redemptive plan.

Bultmann's famous epigram, that in the early post-Easter *kerygma* 'The proclaimer became the proclaimed', is true but by no means the whole truth.<sup>18</sup> As I have insisted in previous publications, one of the key factors shaping earliest Christian devotion was the impact of the activities of Jesus himself and the effects upon his contemporaries.<sup>19</sup> There is more phenomenological continuity between Jesus' ministry and resurrection-faith than Bultmann granted.<sup>20</sup> Although Jesus' message was focused on the kingdom

<sup>17</sup> W. Kirchschräger, 'ἐπικαλέω', *EDNT* 2: 28-29; K.L. Schmidt, 'ἐπικαλέω', *TDNT* 3: 496-500; and, for a full discussion of NT data, C.J. Davis, *The Name and Way of the Lord* (JSNTSup, 129; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (ET; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> See esp. L.W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 53-64.

<sup>20</sup> Bultmann's whole (somewhat convoluted) treatment of 'the earliest church' (*Theology*, ch. 11, pp. 33-62) is trapped within the procrustean framework inherited from

of God, it is clear that very quickly within the period of his own activity he became ‘the issue’ on which people unavoidably had to decide. It was impossible to separate completely the question of his validity from the question of the validity of his own message. His teaching and other actions were sufficiently noteworthy and even controversial that people were required to judge whether he was or was not the valid spokesman for God, whether his actions represented the divine agenda to which assent must be given.

In a previous discussion, I have emphasized the polarizing effect of Jesus’ activities, some individuals drawn to follow him and others who set themselves against him.<sup>21</sup> In the circle of those aligned with Jesus, he was unquestionably the leader (the ‘Master’) and the others *his* followers, *his* word authoritative for them, and some of them even willing to give up their livelihoods to join *his* itinerant ministry. It is reasonably clear that his followers (and wider circles of the Jewish populace) regarded him as bearing prophetic authority, at the very least comparable to one of the biblical prophets.<sup>22</sup> He was for his followers not simply one inspiring, eloquent teacher, prophet and holy man among others. Instead, even within the time of his own ministry, Jesus’ followers clearly defined themselves as a circle gathered *around him*, and regarded him as *the* eschatological person in whom God’s kingdom was heralded and signaled.

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his teacher Wilhelm Bousset. This includes the dubiously strict distinction between ‘Palestinian’ and ‘Hellenistic’ churches, the notion that Palestinian churches confessed Jesus as the heavenly Son of Man (Bultmann incorrectly assuming a well-defined Jewish expectation of this sort, which has now quite clearly been discredited), and the facile view that Paul’s own views were shaped wholly by a ‘Hellenistic’ Christian piety. Over thirty years ago, I noted that these crucial foundations of Bousset’s classic, *Kyrios Christos. Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (FRLANT, NF4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), the key work on which Bultmann depended, had collapsed: Larry W. Hurtado, ‘New Testament Christology: A Critique of Bousset’s Influence’, *TS* 40 (1979), pp. 306-17; German version: Larry W. Hurtado, ‘Forschungen zur neutestamentlichen Christologie seit Bousset: Forschungsrichtungen und bedeutende Beiträge’, *Theologische Beiträge* 11 (1980), pp. 158-71. Cf. my own discussion of ‘Judean Jewish Christianity’, in *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 155-216.

<sup>21</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, esp. pp. 55-59.

<sup>22</sup> Various statements in the Gospels are usually taken as reflecting this view of Jesus: e.g., Mt. 14.5; 21.11, 46; Mk 6.15; Lk. 7.16, 39; 13.33; 24.19; Jn 4.19; 6.14; 7.40; Acts 3.22-23.

Indeed, it seems to me entirely likely that during the time of his own activities at least some of his followers entertained the hope and expectation that Jesus would be revealed and recognized as (royal) messiah. The poignant statement in the Lukan Emmaus story is a dramatized but (I propose) an authentic reflection of this: 'We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (Lk. 24.21). Moreover, this view of Jesus' significance seems to be confirmed by the actions of Jesus' enemies. As Nils Dahl argued decades ago, Jesus' crucifixion must have been based on the charge that he was a claimant to (messianic) kingship.<sup>23</sup> It is significant that Jesus alone, and none of those most closely linked to him, was seized and crucified. Clearly, the authorities (both temple leadership and Roman governor) regarded him in particular as the matter to be dealt with decisively, apparently believing that his execution would be sufficient to dissipate his following. So, the manner of his execution suggests that Jesus' opponents were convinced that he was a royal-messianic claimant (or was intending to make such a claim). They were, thus, either massively and curiously wrong (to put it mildly), or (as I think more likely) were reasonably well informed of the enthusiasm and high expectations circulating among Jesus' followers.<sup>24</sup>

To echo Dahl's point, for early believers the resurrection of the crucified Jesus would have connoted a divine reversal of the punitive judgement against him issued by the religious and political authorities. So, if there were no thoughts of him being (or claiming to be) messiah, if the messianic idea played no role in his execution, it is hard to see how his resurrection would have generated the messianic claim. Yet all indications are that from the outset in the post-Easter *kerygma* this claim was central.<sup>25</sup> The most economical and reasonable explanation for this is that Jesus' resurrection was immediately seen by his followers as the decisive confirmation and vindication of a messianic hope that had been cherished by Jesus' followers already during his ministry. Granted, there is good reason to think

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<sup>23</sup> Nils A. Dahl, 'The Crucified Messiah', in his *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine* (ed. D. H. Juel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 27-47. The essay appeared earlier in Dahl's *The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), pp. 10-36.

<sup>24</sup> I have criticized proposals that Jesus' execution was simply a misguided and hasty police action in *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 57-60. Bultmann's statement, 'Jesus' call to decision implies a christology' (*Theology*, p. 43) is hardly adequate to account for Jesus being crucified, or for the explosion of Jesus-devotion in the post-Easter period.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 98-101, 167-71.

that Jesus was cautious about any such a claim made openly, and may have discouraged open talk about it among his followers, at least until his final, fateful trip to Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> But the most likely reason that Jesus would have felt any such caution and concern about his followers openly acclaiming him as messiah is that they were all too ready to do so.<sup>27</sup>

In short, for his followers, Jesus' resurrection had the effect of validating him powerfully, drawing all his own activities under the mantle of this uniquely affirming act of God. In other words, as well as signifying his newly exalted status, Jesus' resurrection also had a strong retro-active effect, vindicating Jesus' earthly ministry and teaching, and giving to him and his activities a strong continuing significance for his followers. This is reflected in the clear indications that Jesus' sayings and stories of his activities were transmitted from an early point as Christian tradition, and even seem to have acquired a still greater significance for his followers than they may have held during his own mortal life. The sayings-collection commonly referred to as 'Q' is one important reflection of this. The sayings that make up the 'Q-material' are widely accepted as stemming from very early circles of believers, probably based in Roman Judea, and they comprise a substantial body of material with strong claims of deriving from Jesus' own ministry.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> E.g., this reserve is reflected in Mk 8.27-30; Mt. 16:20; Lk. 9.18-22. That it is echoed in all the Synoptics suggests that it was well established in the tradition, which in turn lends weight to it being authentic. Craig A. Evans has argued, however, that Jesus went to Jerusalem to stake a messianic claim, which was rejected by the Temple leadership: 'Did Jesus Predict his Death and Resurrection?' in Stanley Porter, Michael A. Hays and David Tombs (eds.), *Resurrection* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 89-90 (82-97).

<sup>27</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Are You the One Who is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), presents a fully argued case that Jesus both excited messianic expectation and likely saw himself as Messiah. See esp. pp. 73-74 (his critical engagement with Dahl's argument about the title on Jesus' cross), and pp. 136-42, where he argues from Jesus' execution backwards to likely causes in Jesus' own actions.

<sup>28</sup> 'Q' is now increasingly judged by scholars, however, to have been composed in Greek (not Aramaic), 'which means that it stemmed from people with some interest in using the lingua franca of the first-century Roman world as the medium in which to disseminate this collection of Jesus' sayings' (Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, p. 229). For my own fuller discussion of Q, including engagement with the work of other scholars on this material, see Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 217-57.

*Jesus' Resurrection as New Divine Act*

As I noted earlier, Jesus' resurrection is predominantly referred to as God's action, with Jesus the recipient and beneficiary of it. Moreover, this divine act involved both the remarkable bestowal of eschatological existence upon Jesus and also the unique exaltation and glorification of him. So, the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection comprises a strong set of christological claims and also an equally robust claim about God. Moreover, Jesus' central importance in earliest Christian discourse and devotional practice is predicated on and framed by the conviction that God has raised and exalted him, and now requires the acclamation of Jesus' exalted status. That is, the christological content of earliest resurrection discourse is linked indissolubly to God's actions. Jesus does not become a second deity, but has been designated by God spectacularly as the Messiah, the Lord whom all creation should now revere, and the divine Son who bears uniquely the favor of, and intimacy with, the one God.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the striking way that Jesus features in earliest Christian devotional practice is justified with reference to God's action. This emphasis that Jesus' exceptional status and significance rests on God's own action and will is indicated, e.g., in Phil. 2.9–11, where God's exaltation of Jesus is to issue in universal acclamation of him, which in turn serves 'the glory of God the Father'. In keeping with the more polemical tone of the Gospel of John, Jn 5.22–23 declares that God now intends 'that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father', and the Evangelist insists that 'Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him'. Equating the honor to be given to Jesus with the honor due to God effectively makes Jesus co-recipient of worship, but this is emphatically so by God's own fiat. In short, Jesus' exceptional significance is rather consistently expressed with reference to God and God's actions and will.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Paul's references to Jesus' divine sonship did not stem from 'Hellenistic' (semi-pagan) influences of divine heroes and demi-gods, and did not function primarily to express Jesus' divine nature. Instead, they are clearly influenced by biblical notions of divine sonship (which does not involve divinization), and express Jesus' unique significance, and his favour and relationship with God. See Hurtado, 'Son of God'; idem, 'Jesus' Divine Sonship in Paul's Epistle to the Romans', in Sven K. Soderlund and N.T. Wright (eds.), *Romans and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 217–33.

<sup>30</sup> As an aside here, this works against ideas that Jesus' death and resurrection draw upon putative myths of 'dying-rising gods'. Aside from the difficulty in finding a

So, although the impact of Jesus' ministry is an important factor, the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection also involves God's further, new action. This means that Jesus acquires a status and significance that surpasses, and cannot be accounted for by, his own earthly activities. The Jesus-devotion of early Christian circles is not adequately explained by, and did not arise simply from, his teaching or even his reported miracles. It was not the predictable or inevitable outcome of his ministry. Even if Jesus fore-saw and predicted his own divine vindication, and even if this vindication involved his own resurrection, this would not have generated the specific conviction that he has been singled out for resurrection *now*, apart from the elect. Moreover, divine vindication of him as prophet, even as royal-messiah, would not automatically have generated the claims that he has been exalted to a unique heavenly status, given to share the divine name and glory, and that cultic devotion to God must now incorporate him as well.

To be sure, there are sayings ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels that present him as foreseeing both his own death (by execution) and also his resurrection (Mk 8.31/Mt. 16.21/Lk. 9.22; Mk 9.31/Mt. 17.22-23; Mk 10.33-34/Mt. 20.18-19/Lk. 18.31-33; Mk 9.9-10/Mt. 17.9; Mk 14.28/Mt. 26.32). These sayings all seem to project Jesus' resurrection as an event on its own, i.e., not simply as him taking part in the final resurrection of the elect. So, do we have in these sayings some indication that Jesus may have contributed to expectations that he would be resurrected?

On the one hand, it is to my mind entirely plausible that at some point Jesus foresaw his death from opponents. If so, it is equally plausible (indeed, more so) that he also trusted that God would vindicate him, and would do so by resurrection.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, it would be much more unusual for Jesus to have foreseen his resurrection happening separately from the general resurrection of the elect. Moreover, the Gospel sayings

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genuine example of a 'dying-rising god' (the alleged parallels are actually often interpreted, by ancients and moderns, through the lens of Christian claims about Jesus), the earliest resurrection-faith does not attribute Jesus' resurrection to his own divinity but to the act of God (the Father). In discussing these alleged parallels, Jan N. Bremmer has noted that 'more recent scholars have reversed the pattern, claiming that the pagan cults adapted themselves to Christianity', citing as examples the Attis cult and Mithras: *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 41-55, esp. 47-55.

<sup>31</sup> This sort of trust/hope in resurrection is ascribed to Jewish martyrs (e.g., 2 Macc. 7.9), and certainly a more general confidence in divine vindication is also typical of the Psalms (e.g., Pss. 16; 22).

in question all obviously serve the devotional purposes of the Evangelists and the early church more generally in presenting Jesus as foreseeing his death and resurrection, and so striding toward his death confidently. So, it is understandable that scholars often surmise that the sayings either have been created (perhaps by the Evangelists) or that authentic sayings in which Jesus expressed confidence in divine vindication have been adjusted to express a more specific prediction of his resurrection.<sup>32</sup>

In any case, the consistent emphasis in all the passages is that Jesus' disciples did not understand Jesus to be predicting his own personal resurrection (e.g., Mk 9.10). That is, whatever Jesus may have said about the matter, there is scant indication that his disciples were expecting what they experienced in their encounters with the risen Jesus (e.g., Lk. 24.9-12). So, we have little basis for seeing Jesus' teaching as directly contributing to the belief that he had been resurrected.

To underscore the point, the resurrection-faith attested in the NT reflects the conviction that God has acted in a novel way that gives a new direction to history and redefining Jesus also in a remarkably more exalted way. However central Jesus was in early Christian faith, that centrality was not simply based on what Jesus did and said, but was also heavily based on what God was believed to have done. I reiterate an emphasis from earlier in this essay: early Jesus-devotion was profoundly *theo*-logical as well as *christo*-logical in content. It involved claims about God, about divine actions and purposes, as well as claims about Jesus' significance.

### *New Religious Experience*

So, in addition to the impact of Jesus himself (and tradition about him) upon his followers, we also have to think of something additional, and also powerful in its impact. We must posit something sufficient to account for the strong specific convictions that God has raised Jesus from death to new eschatological existence, that God has exalted Jesus to share in divine glory,

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<sup>32</sup> E.g., among recent commentaries on Mark, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), who judges Mk 8.31 (and by extension the other sayings) as likely 'a Markan composition' (p. 405). Cf. the more hesitant view of Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 402, that Mk 8.31 is 'dependent on tradition', and goes back to an authentic saying of Jesus, granting, nevertheless, that the actual events probably 'shaped the subsequent retelling of the prediction(s)'.

that Jesus' name now bears divine authority and power, and that Jesus is now the Lord to whom all must offer acclamation. These convictions cannot be traced back convincingly to the teaching of the earthly Jesus alone. They are, at the least, radical escalations and extensions beyond the implicit and explicit claims that most scholars would judge can be attributed to Jesus.

In several publications over the last twenty years or more, I have argued that these convictions were also prompted and decisively shaped by powerful religious experiences that struck the initial recipients with revelatory force.<sup>33</sup> The resurrection of Jesus is a case-study in this phenomenon of experiences generating innovative religious convictions. So, let us consider what earliest information we have about the experiences that generated the claim that he had been resurrected.

The first and most obvious thing to note is that these experiences are portrayed as encounters with Jesus himself, the same figure who had been crucified and buried (e.g., 1 Cor. 15.1-8). That is, there is a strong emphasis on a personal continuity between the historical figure nailed to a cross and then buried, and the figure encountered in these experiences. Contrary to any idea that reports of these appearances of Jesus should be understood as dramatic ways of saying that Jesus continued to be meaningful for his followers even though he was dead, that is *not* what the reports of these experiences assert.<sup>34</sup> Instead, they rather emphatically claim to be reports of real encounters with Jesus, who robustly engages recipients of these experiences (whatever we make of these experiences).<sup>35</sup> According to the reports of these experiences, the cognitive content was not simply that the recipients were consoled, or felt forgiven cathartically of some sort of guilt-complex for having abandoned Jesus, or felt encouraged to continue Jesus' cause though he was dead. Instead, the main cognitive content concerns Jesus, not his followers, the reports positing that something astounding happened to Jesus, not simply that something happened in the mental life of his followers.

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<sup>33</sup> I have sought to develop this proposal by drawing upon NT texts and also comparative data from other major religious innovations. See esp. Larry W. Hurtado, 'Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament', *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), pp. 183-205, reprinted in Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* pp. 179-204. See also Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 64-74.

<sup>34</sup> Such a view might well be preferred by some Christians today for engaging the resurrection claim, but we must avoid importing modern views into the ancient texts.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., J.E. Alsup, *The Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories of the Gospel-Tradition* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1975).

Moreover, unlike the various kinds of things reported by grieving relatives and friends, the reports of resurrection experiences present significant differences. These do not portray sighting or visitations of the dead Jesus, but encounters with the *resurrected* Jesus. That is, these are not experiences that simply allow grieving disciples to maintain for a while attenuated contact with their beloved master though he was dead. He is not portrayed as communicating with them from the realm of the dead and as a dead person, but instead as confronting followers in a new and more powerful mode of existence and a more august status, delivered from death, divinely vindicated and glorified. Also, the experiences seem to have involved a sense of new commissioning of the recipients by the risen Jesus and/or God. They are convinced by their experiences that God has glorified Jesus exceptionally, and that they are now required to proclaim this.

Paul refers to his own experience as having strong revelatory force, saying that God ‘revealed his son to/in me’ (Gal. 1.15-16). It was, in other words, a ‘christophany’, in which Jesus was revealed to Paul as having divine approval and exalted status. In his case this would certainly have been a revelation, for Paul had been forcefully opposing the early Jewish church, and also must have regarded Jesus as totally unworthy of any reverence (to say the least).<sup>36</sup> But even for Jesus’ own followers, the cognitive effects of their encounters with the risen Jesus were likely jolting and in to some degree disruptive to their previous beliefs.<sup>37</sup> Even for his followers, these experiences escalated their previous convictions about Jesus to a wholly new level.

Nevertheless, I repeat for emphasis that the Jesus whom they experienced as powerfully alive, exalted to heavenly status, sharing divine glory, and now designated the regnant Lord to whom all things should now give obeisance, was the same figure whom they had followed in Galilee. He was the very man who had been crucified. This was Jesus, the Jewish male, from Galilee, from an artisan’s family, closely connected with John the Baptizer, who had gone forth proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God. The

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<sup>36</sup>) I share the view that Paul’s intricate discussion in Gal. 3.10-14, in which he applies the statement ‘cursed be everyone who is hanged upon a tree’ (Deut. 21.23) to Jesus, may reflect something of his view of Jesus prior to the revelation that turned around his life. In Gal. 3 Paul presents Jesus’ cursed death as redemptive, but in his days as persecutor of Jewish believers he likely viewed Jesus as cursed by God.

<sup>37</sup>) My point here does not require assent to what earliest Christians made of their experiences. I only stress here what the experiences meant to them.

risen Jesus was, for them, wonderfully taken to a new register, but was also firmly the historically conditioned person who had been executed and entombed.<sup>38</sup> In their experiences, they encountered the ‘historical’ Jesus in resurrected status and form, at once elevated beyond all their previous expectations and yet also genuinely and personally continuous with the Jesus they had known.<sup>39</sup>

I have suggested that these experiences also included visions of Jesus in heavenly glory, perhaps prophetic oracles proclaiming his exalted status, and also sudden new insights about the meaning of biblical passages ascribed to the Holy Spirit, that struck recipients with the force of new revelations.<sup>40</sup> That is, I think that we must posit experiences that had cognitive effects greater than simply that Jesus was alive again/anew. As astonishing as that would have been for those who knew that he had been executed only recently, the earliest testimony to Jesus’ resurrection includes the other remarkable claims that we have noted. In particular, these experiences must also have included features that generated very early the strong conviction that God now demanded that Jesus should be revered in ways that amounted to a ‘mutation’ in what was traditional Jewish devotional practice. I think it is difficult to imagine devout Jews of that time so readily embracing the claims and devotional practices that characterized earliest Christianity unless they felt themselves required by God to do so.

## Conclusion

On the one hand, the NT presents Jesus’ resurrection as a radical new and further act of God, and so not specifically part of an account of the earthly activity of Jesus (the ‘historical’ Jesus, in this sense of the word). On the other hand, in all earliest testimony, this new divine act is emphatically the resurrection of *Jesus of Nazareth*, and so a direct link with the Jesus

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<sup>38</sup>) So, e.g., Paul’s summary of early tradition in 1 Cor. 15:1–7 includes mention of Jesus’ burial (v. 4).

<sup>39</sup>) It is not feasible here to engage adequately questions about how Jesus’ ‘bodily’ resurrection may have been understood, what role the tradition of the empty tomb played, etc. My point here is that the earliest testimony asserts that the historical figure who was executed was then resurrected by God and retained his personal identity and in some manner a bodily integrity (albeit a radically transformed body).

<sup>40</sup>) Most recently, Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 70–74.

of history is asserted. Indeed, one might even posit that Jesus' resurrection actually underscored for early believers the importance of his earthly activities. As I have noted in a previous discussion, the four Gospels that became canonical all firmly depict Jesus as 'a Jew whose life and activities are geographically and chronologically located in a particular place and period of Jewish history in Roman Judea'.<sup>41</sup> Unquestionably, the four Evangelists all wrote from the standpoint of post-Easter faith, and for them all, as well as their intended readers, Jesus was the exalted Messiah, Lord, and Son of God. Their narratives were all prompted and shaped by this faith-standpoint. But, equally, they were concerned to underscore a direct link with the human figure of their narratives. This is reflected in the quasi-biographical literary *genre* that they all followed (albeit in varying ways). In short, these Gospels demonstrate how the conviction that Jesus has been resurrected, personally and bodily, had a profound effect in generating and maintaining a strong interest in Jesus' historic ministry.

By contrast, in versions of early Christianity in which Jesus' death and resurrection appear not to have had such importance, and in some cases were either denied or radically re-interpreted, there seems to have been a corresponding lack of interest in the Jesus of history. For instance, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, we have simply a collection of sayings ascribed to Jesus, with scant indication of their provenance or of his historical setting. Likewise, the *Gospel of Truth* is essentially a theological treatise, reflecting little interest in the specifics of Jesus' life.<sup>42</sup>

We have noted that for earliest believers, Jesus' resurrection was emphatically God's validation of *him*, and this included a powerful reaffirmation of Jesus' specific identity as a known figure of history. I propose that the canonical Gospels, with their narrative form, their quasi-biographical genre, and the abundant specifics of time, place, culture, language, and other matters directly reflect the effects of the conviction that Jesus had been raised bodily from death. Indeed, I submit that they cannot have been written as we have them apart from the conviction that God has raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead and placed him in heavenly glory. In short, the earliest 'historical Jesus' quest was probably fuelled by this conviction about his resurrection.

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<sup>41</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 265–66, quotation from p. 266.

<sup>42</sup> I offer a fuller discussion of extra-canonical 'Jesus books' in Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 427–85, and the *Gospel of Thomas* in particular, pp. 452–79.