

## POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE RESURRECTION STORY.

BY FRANK R. WHITZEL.

THERE is no fact in early Christian history more certain than that the disciples, within the lifetime of men who were adults when Jesus was crucified, believed universally and confidently in the resurrection. It is attested by Paul's letters and preaching, by the Gospels and by constant tradition. Yet great is the difficulty of finding any rational basis for this steadfast belief, great, that is, to those who cannot accept the literal story and who yet agree with Paul that "these things were not done in a corner."

The several accounts of the resurrection, in respect both to the central incident and to the details, are not merely extraordinary, they are frankly contradictory; and any explanation, to be plausible, must take cognizance of the contradictions as well as of all other salient features in the narratives. Ernest Renan's conjecture, as unsatisfactory to himself as to his readers, is but one of the many melancholy failures to find a rational explanation. A new one is herewith hazarded.

Our authorities are of course primarily the four Gospels, with hints from other sources like the Acts or Paul's Epistles. But it should be remembered that the first three Gospels, the Synoptics, are merely variants of a single tradition, hence are but one authority. These Gospels certainly give us a vivid idea of the man Jesus. He lives before us, and few can doubt the historicity of the man therein depicted. But with his death the bright outlines of this portrait fade. All is vagueness and confusion. Jesus, not a spirit, not a living man, flits in and out like a dream image. The accounts of his appearances are wholly irreconcilable, having all the aspect of myth or legend. The disciples are commanded to go to Galilee, to stay in Jerusalem. Jesus is recognized or not at his pleasure, passes locked doors, vanishes; yet he eats food like a living person.

His ascension is unmentioned, or it takes place the night of the resurrection Sunday, or forty days later. There are no consistencies.

The fourth evangelist, more liberal of details, is equally tantalizing in his vagueness. Whether John's Gospel was composed by the evangelist or by the elder, or, as is now widely believed, was written after the apostle's death by a young and ardent follower from recollection of his preaching aided perhaps by his literary remains, it at all events embodies a second tradition. John as well as the Synoptics paints a lifelike picture of Jesus, though naturally a different one. But his story of the resurrection is not the variant account of an equally trustworthy historian. All four narratives have divergencies so great that under ordinary circumstances we would be compelled to say that if any one of them is correct the others must be downright fabrications.

But a careful examination of the four Gospels will suggest to most students that the resurrection story, though it could not have been veridical, must yet possess some element of truth to serve as a basis for all these mutually contradictory legends. Of these legends consider but two.

The ascension of Jesus is not mentioned in any way by Matthew or John, or by Mark in the authentic part of his Gospel. In the closing verses, rejected by practically all critics, Mark says, "He was received up into heaven and sat at the right hand of God." The time is indefinite and the fact metaphorical, or it happened the night of the resurrection. Luke alone gives a definite account, and he generously gives two. In his Gospel, if the plain meaning of the words be accepted, he places the ascension at Bethany on the evening of the resurrection. In Acts he makes it at Mount Olivet forty days later.

Again, Matthew and Mark report the angel at the empty tomb as instructing the disciples to go to Galilee there to meet Jesus, the former adding that they did so. Luke knows nothing of this, though his angel repeats words Jesus spoke "when he was yet in Galilee." On the contrary he asserts that Jesus issued a specific command to the disciples to remain in Jerusalem. John notes no instructions of any kind but does relate an incident which he says happened in Galilee after the resurrection.

Consider the contradictions or unaccountable omissions in this list, remembering too that the accounts purport to be of the central and most vital incident of Christianity, the one incident where precision and certainty are indispensable if thinking men are to be convinced. A religion based upon a resurrection from the dead

should certainly offer a history of that resurrection full, explicit and concordant, no historian making an assertion which, if true, absolutely negatives the assertions of all its other historians, even

## APPARITIONS OF JESUS.

TIME	WRITER	ACCOUNT
Day of Resurrection	Matt. Mark, John Luke	To women leaving sepulcher. To Mary Mag. near sepulcher. No mention.
Day of Resurrection	Mark, Luke Matt., John	To two disciples going to Emmaus No mention.
Day of Resurrection	Mark, John, Paul Luke Matt.	To eleven at supper. Same, and the Ascension. No mention.
Eight days later	John Matt., Mark, Luke	To eleven, to convince Thomas. No mention.
Indefinite	Matt. Mark, Luke, John	To disciples in Galilee. No mention.
Indefinite	John Matt., Mark, Luke,	To disciples at Lake Tiberias. No mention.
Indefinite	Paul only	To Peter, no details.
Indefinite	Paul only	To above 500, no details.
Indefinite	Paul only	To James, no details.
Indefinite	Paul only	To apostles, no details.
Indefinite	Paul only	To Paul, no details. Probably meant as subjective experience.

CHART I.

if we grant that in minor matters the story might show discrepancies. The best attested apparition in the list is the appearance to the women, or at least to Mary Magdalene, at or near the sepulcher

## COMMON DETAILS OF THE RESURRECTION.

		SYNOPTICS		ALL FOUR GOSPELS	
		AGREED DETAILS	ADDITIONAL MENTION	AGREED DETAILS	ADDITIONS BY JOHN
Crucifixion		Time, Friday, 15th Nisan Present Mary Magdalene Mary, mother of Jesus	Salome, Joanna Zebedee's wife, others	Time, Friday Present Mary Magdalene Mary, mother of Jesus	14th Nisan Mary, wife of Cleophas
Joseph of Arimathæa		Disciple, influential Begged body of Jesus Wrapped it in linen Laid it in tomb Rock hewn Closed by stone Disappears from story.	Rich. A Counsellor Fine, clean, new linen Tomb never before used	Disciple Begged body from Pilate Wrapped body Laid it in tomb Rock hewn Closed by stone Disappears from story	Secret disciple For fear of Jews Tomb in garden In place of Crucifixion Nicodemus, and a Hundred weight of spices
Women and Resurrection		Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of Jesus Present at Crucifixion and Burial Sunday dawn visited tomb Found tomb open, body gone Saw angel Received command Obeyed command	Salome, Joanna, others To see tomb; anoint body Matt. Earthquake; guards Luke. Two angels, inside tomb Mark. Angel sat on stone Mark. Angel inside tomb	Two Marys at Crucifixion Mary Mag. alone, Sunday dawn Found tomb open, body gone Saw apparition which Announced Resurrection Received command Obeyed. (Mark ambiguous)	Saw two angels (Cf. Luke) Saw Jesus Command from Jesus Not from angels
Angel		Appeared to women Announced Resurrection Bade women tell disciples Said (Matt. and Mark.) He goeth before you into Galilee, there shall ye see him.	Luke. Two angels Luke. Implied only Luke. Told them that Jesus when in Galilee said he must be crucified and rise the third day.	Appeared at sepulcher Spoke to Mary Magdalene	Speaks of two angels (Cf. Luke)
Jesus		Appeared to some disciples but no agreement as to time, place or persons.		Appeared to some disciples but no agreement as to time, place or persons.	Appeared to Mary Magdalene Appeared twice to eleven Appeared at Lake Tiberias

CHART 2.

early on that Sunday morning, and this is one of the signs pointing toward a possible explanation.

The next chart is intended to show the points in agreement, first of the three Synoptics, then of all four Gospels. The columns of additional mention include further particulars given by a single authority in regard to common points, not to points missing altogether from one or more Gospels.

Upon examining this table and comparing it with a table which could be drawn up for each of the four writers, we may at once eliminate certain features from consideration.

1. The command to go to Galilee, or to stay in Jerusalem. Where would the followers of Jesus, all Galileans, flee upon the death of their leader except to Galilee? Yet tradition has the church growing from a nucleus in Jerusalem. Evidently some disciples did not flee or else soon returned. The commands of the angels are plainly made to fit this situation. Hence the contradiction.

2. Matthew's story of the earthquake. This seems a mere device to account for the removal of the stone which closed the sepulcher, taking its origin, like the tale of angels at the tomb, from the improbability that the women could themselves have had the physical strength to roll back the heavy stone. Likewise Matthew's story of the guards is obviously a fiction put forth later for argumentative reasons. The guards would ordinarily have been Roman soldiers, and Roman or Jew could never have confessed either to being bribed or to sleeping on duty.

3. All the apparitions of Jesus. No two accounts are sufficiently alike to warrant study with a view to discovering a substratum of fact. If any one authority be accepted the others must be denied. Compare Matthew with John relative to the very first appearance of Jesus after his death. More than one author speaks of an appearance to the eleven that Sunday night, but aside from the mere assertion all is again mutually contradictory.

4. Minor particulars, such as mention of John's friend Nicodemus, of the women who accompanied Mary Magdalene to the tomb, the purpose of her visit and the like. These may be disregarded as either apocryphal or of no significance.

We are left then with a very few plain statements upon which to build a theory.

Present at the crucifixion and doubtless at the burial were Mary mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and perhaps a few other women. The morning after the Passover Sabbath Mary Magdalene, probably alone, went to the sepulcher and found it empty with the

stone rolled away from the entrance. Puzzled and alarmed she hurried to the disciples with the news. The latter, hastening to the tomb, verified her story and then returned wondering to their rendezvous.

Joseph of Arimathæa, an influential man, rich and a disciple though perhaps not an avowed one, happened to possess a new rock-hewn tomb convenient to the place of crucifixion. He begged the body of Jesus from Pilate, removed it from the cross, wrapped it in linen and laid it away in the sepulcher late in the evening. He then, the proprietor of the tomb, the one figure that stands out in all narratives, disappears most unaccountably from the story.

In searching for the explanation of any mysterious occurrence all authorities agree upon one principle: he is most likely responsible who had both the motive and the opportunity to do the act in question. Let us apply this principle to Joseph of Arimathæa.

That he had ample opportunity to remove the body of Jesus is self-evident. He had hastened to secure its possession. He, by chance or otherwise, owned the tomb, hence was familiar with its surroundings and had access to its site. He had placed the body in the tomb, had himself closed the entrance and could as easily unclose it. If he had not previously formed any design he had still two nights and a day in which to plan and carry out the removal of the body, and he was too high in station to be readily an object of suspicion or the subject of an inquiry. For him and apparently for him alone, the abstraction of the body was both safe and feasible.

The motive is not so evident, yet it too becomes apparent upon consideration. Joseph was undoubtedly a well-informed Jew, hence familiar with Messianic prophēcies. He was likewise presumably acquainted with any remarks Jesus may have made in regard to his inevitable fate, and with the young Rabbi's views of life after death. He was committed to the new doctrine. He no doubt felt all the dislike which a man in his station, rich, educated, influential, would naturally feel of being made ridiculous, of being proved a dupe, and he must have realized keenly what Jesus in his exaltation disregarded, that the Master's ignominious death would overwhelm his sect in contumely and contempt. He had a great affection for Jesus, which implies an antagonism toward his persecutors whose bigotry he probably recognized, had perchance suffered from. He felt that the only hope of relief from the intolerable burden of Jewish orthodoxy was in the success of some such movement as this one promoted by Jesus, and therefore believed that its failure would irretrievably ruin the cause of liberalism. He could easily guess that

the disappearance of the body of Jesus, especially if a few judicious hints were dropped of fulfilment of prophecies, of appearances of the risen Lord, would inflame the disciples, already taught to expect the immediate end of the world and the arrival of the kingdom, with a burning faith which might triumph over every obstacle. The disciples were now depressed and despondent, but not yet ready to surrender all the teachings of their beloved Master and admit that he and they were deceived. One ray of light, one possible explanation offered them and they would blaze into renewed enthusiasm during which at the worst he might gracefully retire. Joseph had all to gain and nothing to risk. It was worth the trial.

Such thoughts as these might easily have passed through his mind and led him to the attempt. That he kept in the background and out of the story but supports this hypothesis. Having started the conflagration he would want no attention directed toward himself. Let matters take their course, his triumph was complete.

If this explanation be conceived as possible, and that is all the claim that is made, subsequent events become understandable. The absence of definite facts about the resurrection combined with an unshakable belief in its reality would most certainly give rise in that uncritical and superstitious age to the many legends of what happened at the sepulcher and of later apparitions of Jesus, legends which infallibly would be in contradiction one with another, having no truth to which they need conform. A story of an ascension would spring up to dispose of the risen Christ, and very likely real incidents, however magnified, in the life of Jesus would be transferred to a time after his death, as for instance John's account of the draught of fishes.

Not only are the legends accounted for but the facts, or what may be accepted as facts, are explained. The depression and despair of the disciples followed so soon by their aggressive and triumphant belief; their willingness to suffer torture and death for their faith; their power in the conversion of both Jew and Gentile; their confident appeal to eye-witnesses of these things "not done in a corner"; all these are so many proofs of their sincerity. The solution here outlined seeks to be a rational explanation of the problem, one that makes of the apostles neither fools nor hypocrites and yet relieves us to-day of any necessity of accepting traditional orthodoxy.