

1992

# The Early Christian Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus: A Response to Thomas Sheehan

Gary R. Habermas

*Liberty University*, ghabermas@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts\\_fac\\_pubs](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs)

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Habermas, Gary R., "The Early Christian Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus: A Response to Thomas Sheehan" (1992). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 401.

[http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts\\_fac\\_pubs/401](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/401)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu).

## The Early Christian Belief In The Resurrection Of Jesus:

By Gary R. Habermas

### ***A Response To Thomas Sheehan***

In the introductory issue of the new journal *Faith Works*, Thomas Sheehan provided an outlined summary of his thesis that Jesus was not literally raised from the dead in any sense. Because an important portion of his article was largely aimed at my published works on the resurrection of Jesus, the journal invited me to respond in the second issue. My initial response was to ignore the opportunity. However, I later decided to reply, not so much to “defend my honor,” but in order to attempt to show that those who accept the literal resurrection appearances of Jesus have an excellent and early basis for so doing. However, I was later told by an editor that the journal had been discontinued and no further issues or articles would be forthcoming. Therefore, this present article is, in large part, the content of my original rejoinder to Professor Sheehan which was never published.

In brief, Sheehan holds “that the Easter victory of Jesus was not a historical event — it did not take place in space and time — and that the appearances of Jesus did not entail anyone visually sighting Jesus’ risen body in either a physical or a spiritual “form.”<sup>1</sup> Sheehan’s chief argument is that those who hold that Jesus literally rose from the dead ignore the development of the early Christian belief in the resurrection. Sheehan holds that this

---

belief rose in a layered fashion, with the first proclamation being that Jesus was exalted. Only later does the “gradually developed position” arise that Jesus literally rose and appeared to his disciples.

However, purposely highlighted in Sheehan’s agenda is a secondary contention: A not so carefully concealed disgust for conservative research. This does not deserve to be treated as a separate critique, so I will mention it only here. Sheehan’s disdain for conservative scholarship which takes the Bible literally is manifest in well over a dozen comments. I am referred to (tongue in cheek) as “the *doyen sans pareille* of Fundamentalist apologists of the resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> Some literalists “insist on riding Balaam’s ass to their scripture classes.”<sup>3</sup> In spite of his view of the “resurrection,” Sheehan responds (*Ibid.*, p. 12) to fundamentalist research as follows: “If this were done intentionally, we would call it blasphemy.”(!)

Sheehan refers to literalists and their work as “naive and misleading,” “pseudo-scholarship,” “nonsense,” “fantasies,” “supinely ignorant,” “ignorance,” “pernicious,” “naive, backwater interpretations,” “sleight of hand exegesis,” “fudging the facts,” and “the self-imposed ghetto of unscholarly literalism” (*Ibid.*, pp. 5, 12-13). Lastly, Sheehan ends his article (*Ibid.*, p. 13) with these words against literalists: “And God is not served by telling lies on His behalf.”

I am not quite sure what the purpose of the ad hominem rhetoric is; perhaps Sheehan thinks that his overt denigration of such research disproves its conclusions. But it should be obvious by the end of the essay that such abusive bravado does not take the place of carefully reasoned arguments for ‘his position. In this article I will only be able to pursue the briefest outline of my disagreement with

---

Sheehan’s thesis. I will state where the question lies today, because Sheehan largely responds on this same level. Several reasons for my defense of the resurrection appearances of Jesus will also be given, but those

who wish more details of the positive case should consult other sources which are more directly concerned with these data.<sup>4</sup>

I will begin in the first section by addressing Sheehan's notion of a layered approach to the development of the early resurrection tradition, where I think he commits grave errors. Next, I will list numerous reasons for holding, against Sheehan, that Jesus literally appeared to his disciples after his death in an actual body. Lastly, I will attempt to point out what I think are some of the most serious of a much larger number of problems in his position.

## Early Christian Belief

The crucial center of recent attention on the subject of Jesus' resurrection has been 1 Corinthians 15:3ff., where Paul records material which he had "received" from others and then "delivered" to his listeners. It is agreed by virtually all recent and reputable theologians and other scholars who have studied this text that this data comprises an ancient creedal statement which is actually much earlier than the book in which it is recorded. The pre-Pauline nature of this tradition is indicated by items such as Paul's reference to rather technical terms for receiving and passing on oral tradition, the parallelism and somewhat stylized content, the non-Pauline words, the proper

---

MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 108

names of Peter and James, and the possible Semitic original.<sup>5</sup>

Such facts have contributed to the critical consensus concerning the early origin of this confession. Most scholars who deal with the subject think that Paul received this material from Peter and James when he visited Jerusalem not long after his conversion. The date for Paul's reception of this creed is routinely placed from three to eight years after the crucifixion itself.<sup>6</sup> It should be

---

MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 109

carefully noted that the major conclusions supported here would still follow, even with such a slightly later date. Most of the scholars above also hold that Paul received this creedal material from Peter and James in Jerusalem. Grass prefers Damascus and the even earlier date of Paul's visit there, while Kung and Perrin do not answer this specific question in their immediate contexts.

Sheehan appears to agree with the early nature of Paul's material, dating it "back to at least 32–34 C.E."<sup>7</sup> However, beyond getting a fairly precise date and location for this report, there are at least five indications that the content of this gospel creed is apostolic in nature, and therefore authoritative. (1) Paul recorded very early material which he received at an early date, which recounts the eyewitness appearances of the disciples (1 Cor. 15:4–7). Further, he very possibly received

---

MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 110

the list directly from two of them, Peter and James. (2) Paul is the eyewitness, apostolic source behind his own appearance, recorded in 15:8. (3) Paul affirms that the apostles themselves were currently teaching the same message concerning the resurrection appearances of Jesus (15:11, 14, 15). (4) Paul specifically checked the nature of the gospel message (which included the resurrection 15:1–4) with the apostles and found that what he was teaching was accurate (Gal. 2:1–10). These are strong reasons to conclude that this creedal confession is authoritative and apostolic. As far as I am aware, no contemporary scholar holds that Paul was completely mistaken at all three of these points. (5) But even further, there is additional corroboration from the early passages in the Book of Acts which mention the resurrection.

Probably the predominant scholarly view today<sup>8</sup> is that several of the speeches such as those recounted in Acts 2:14–39, 3:12–26, 4:8–12, 10:34–43, and 13:16–41 contain early *kerygma* from the Aramaic—speaking church at Jerusalem. Besides the Aramaic element, other reasons for these conclusions include the primitive Christology contained in the messages, the difference in language from the bulk of the book, as

well as from other sources, and the agreement with the early tradition reported by Paul in texts such as 1 Cor. 15. The gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is central in these passages, as is the theme that the apostles are witnesses of these events.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Paul's creedal statement is

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 111*

invaluable as a source for the nature of the original eyewitnesses' experiences.

German historian Hans von Campenhausen asserts concerning this pre-Pauline material, "This account meets all the demands of historical reliability that could possibly be made of such a text."<sup>10</sup> So we are justified in concluding that Paul's confession links the content of the gospel message with the original participants themselves and the evidence clearly shows that, at a very early date, they actually claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, both individually and in groups.

Dealing with the nature of the apostle's experiences of the risen Jesus is crucial to any contemporary understanding of this event. The minimal facts thought to be historical by virtually every critical scholar who studies this issue provide further evidence for the certainty that Jesus' earliest followers witnessed literal appearances of the risen Jesus, just as they claimed. One example is the transformation of the disciples into persons who were willing even to die specifically for their faith in the resurrection. The experiences and corresponding transformations of the two skeptics, Paul and James, are also crucially important. The fact that the resurrection was the very center of the earliest preaching is likewise significant.<sup>11</sup>

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 112*

Interestingly enough, Sheehan is among the many who admit the historicity of these same facts.<sup>12</sup> The evidences for the empty tomb,<sup>13</sup> while not admitted by as many contemporary scholars, are also both potent and weighty.

On a more limited scale, the minimal amount of recognized facts is also capable of arguing decisively against the naturalistic theories proposed to counter belief in the resurrection, although details cannot be pursued here.<sup>14</sup> So the critically ascertained historical material includes data which further verify the disciple's claims concerning the resurrection appearances, all in the absence of viable alternative schemes.

Accordingly, most critical scholars have concluded that the disciples' experiences were definitely of a visual nature, for no other conclusion satisfies all of the findings. Historian Michael Grant declares that an investigation can "prove" that the earliest witnesses were certainly convinced that they had seen the risen Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Carl Braaten maintains that recent critics and skeptics agree with the conclusion that, at least for the

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 113*

early Christian believers, the resurrection appearances were real events in space and time.<sup>16</sup> Reginald Fuller asserts that the disciples' belief in the risen Jesus is "one of the indisputable facts of history." He adds that we can also be sure that the disciples had some sort of visionary experiences and that this "is a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree."<sup>17</sup>

As Wolfhart Pannenberg asserts, then, "few scholars, even few rather critical scholars, doubt that there had been visionary experiences."<sup>18</sup> But since the hypothesis of subjective hallucinations (or other similar theories) fails badly in its attempt to account for the data,<sup>19</sup> as even critical scholars generally realize,<sup>20</sup> the facts favor the

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 114*

view that the original disciples experienced some sort of appearances of the risen Jesus. In other words, the actual core elements of the disciples' experiences indicate that they witnessed actual appearances of the risen Jesus. Perhaps surprisingly, there is widespread agreement among contemporary theologians of just this conclusion: Jesus appeared to his disciples, and not just as a spirit.<sup>21</sup>

Some important conclusions now follow. Since this case can be established by critical procedures which utilize the minimal amount of historical facts, contemporary scholars should not reject such evidence for the resurrection by referring to “discrepancies” in the New Testament text or to its widespread “unreliability.” Critical claims such as these are problematical on other grounds not discussed here, but this is not the primary issue at hand. It has been concluded that the resurrection can be historically ascertained even when the minimum amount of critically approved historical facts is utilized.

Neither are other options warranted: that “something” occurred which is indescribable due to naturalistic premises, or because of the nature of history itself, or because of the legendary or “cloudy” character of the New Testament texts. Neither should it be held that Jesus is not literally alive, but that he “lives an” through his teachings, as appears to be Sheehan’s view, at least in part.<sup>22</sup> Again, these and other such responses are confronted by the data recognized by virtually all scholars as knowable history and which are adequate to historically demonstrate the literal resurrection of Jesus.

In brief, instead of stating what they

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 115*

believe we cannot know concerning the New Testament resurrection accounts, critics should concentrate on what even they admit can be known about these texts. The factual basis is ample enough to confirm Jesus’ resurrection as by far the best historical explanation of the data. While doubts may exist concerning other issues in the New Testament, the minimal facts are adequate in themselves to show, according to historical probability, that the same Jesus who had died by crucifixion just a short time before had later appeared to his followers. I therefore conclude that evidence such as this demonstrates that the teachings of the earliest eyewitnesses have been vindicated: Jesus was literally raised from the dead and appeared to a number of his followers, both individually and in groups.

## **The Bodily Nature Of Jesus’ Resurrection Appearances**

Since Sheehan insists that the resurrection is not a literal event of any sort, it should be obvious that he does not believe that Jesus was seen by anyone after his death. But further, he denies that Paul even claimed that Jesus appeared physically, or any other way.<sup>23</sup> We have already seen that Sheehan is mistaken in his view that Jesus was not raised from the dead. It is my further contention that he does not come to grips with the clear New Testament position that Jesus appeared bodily from the dead. There are many indications of this fact, even in Paul, whom Sheehan himself uses most frequently. It is important to note that we are not attempting to provide additional evidences for the resurrection here. Rather, I am addressing his charge that Paul, in particular, does not even teach bodily appearances of the risen Jesus. Ten sub—points will be directed to this subject.

(1) The predominant view in Judaism, especially among first century Jews, is that the

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 116*

body would be raised in the last days. More than one view of the afterlife was taught in intertestamental and first century Jewish literature. An existence such as that in Sheol appears to be taught in Ecclesiasticus (14:16; 22:11; cf. 17:30). While it is difficult to be certain, immortality of the soul may be the view favored in The Wisdom of Solomon (2:23; 3:110). The same idea appears in 1 Enoch 103:4, but an early portion of this writing also teaches that the spirits of the departed dead would later reassemble (9:3). On the other hand, the resurrection of the body (sometimes glorified) is additionally taught in a number of writings, such as 2 Maccabees (12:43–45; 14:46), the Apocalypse of Baruch (50:2ff., 51:1–10), 1 Enoch (51:1–2; 62:13–16), 4 Ezra (7:97), and in The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (Test. Judah 25:1–4; Test. Benj. 10:6–9; Test. Zeb. 10:4).

During the time of Jesus (and afterwards), the Pharisees held to the resurrection of the body, while the Sadducees denied it (Acts 23:7–8) and the Jewish Talmud clearly taught it, while the view of the Essenes is

debated. So while different views are represented in the literature of this general time period, the resurrection of the body (expressed either in very physical terms with organs intact, or as a transformed state) appears to be the more frequent position. This provides some relevant background concerning how the teaching about Jesus' resurrection would most frequently be understood in the context of the times.

(2) Further, the term for resurrection (ἀνάστασις) is best translated as referring to the body. On at least one occasion (Phil. 3:11), Paul specifically chose another word (ἐξανάστασιν), which literally means the "out-resurrection from among the dead." The body is even more clearly in view here, being brought back to life, thereby fitting the predominant view of the day.

(3) Sheehan tries to argue that Paul's term for Jesus' appearances (ὄραω) depicts revelatory

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 117*

encounters rather than actual sight.<sup>24</sup> We will discuss this in more detail below. However, ὄραω is far more frequently utilized for bodily sight in the New Testament. While this does not fully determine the issue, at the very least it ought not be argued that this term indicates spiritual perception only; rather, it appears to vindicate our initial two points concerning the resurrection of the body.<sup>25</sup>

(4) It is held by virtually all New Testament scholars who study this subject that the disciples' experiences with the risen Jesus were visual in nature, for reasons such as those given above. Again, Dunn insists that this is so well established that it "is almost impossible to dispute."<sup>26</sup> While such a view does not require a resurrected body, such visual experiences certainly militate against Sheehan's view that interprets the resurrection as the inner experiences of Peter and the other disciples.

(5) This visual data cannot be explained by hallucinations (or other subjective hypotheses), and this is also granted by the great majority of scholars, as we pointed out above. Sheehan himself has even apparently rejected this alternative hypothesis, as well.<sup>27</sup> While bodily appearances are not required by the failure of such suppositions, when coupled with the previous point, in particular, these facts argue that the disciples actually saw something. When viewed in conjunction with the earlier evidence for Jesus' resurrection, we have no better explanation than the disciples having seen Jesus.

(6) Paul's early creedal list of

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 118*

appearances includes three groups of persons who saw the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:4, 5, 6). This is a further indicator that certain persons actually saw Jesus, in that it does not do justice to Paul's account to say that 500 persons all arrived at a simultaneous, internal conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead! Sheehan claims to be interested in Paul's teaching, yet his position does not involve the most natural reading of the text at each of these three junctures.

(7) Further, a crucial problem is that Pauline anthropology requires the resurrection of the entire person, including the physical body. While details cannot immediately be provided in the context of this brief article, in an intricate and decisive study on this subject, Robert Gundry concluded the following, specifically on the issue of Paul's concept of Jesus' resurrection body: "it is a physical body renovated by the Spirit of Christ and therefore suited to heavenly immortality the raising of Jesus from the dead was a raising of his physical body."<sup>28</sup> John A.T. Robinson came to this conclusion concerning Jesus' resurrection body after his own detailed study of Paul's anthropology:

All the appearances, in fact, depict the same phenomenon, of a body identical yet changed, transcending the limitations of the flesh yet capable of manifesting itself within the order of the flesh. We may describe this as a "Spiritual" (1 Cor 15:44) or "glorified" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:43; Php. 3:21) body so long as we do not import into these phrases any opposition to the physical

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 119*

as such.<sup>29</sup>

So to construe Paul's statements in 1 Cor. 15:3ff. in terms of the completely subjective, internal experiences of the earliest Christians does great violence to Paul's anthropology. One is of course able to take such a position as one's own, but it cannot legitimately be said to be the apostle's view.

(8) Paul's view of the resurrection of the body is further clarified by his own identification with certain theological views and his repudiation of others. Identifying himself as a Pharisee (Phil. 3:4–6) indicates Paul's former adherence to a specific theological agenda. Further, Luke records Paul's later agreement with the Pharisees on the issue of the resurrection of the dead, in contradistinction to the view of the Sadducees, who denied this doctrine (Acts 23:6–8). Going still further, Luke relates that the Greek philosophers who engaged in dialogue with Paul over this very subject disagreed with him precisely because he taught that the body would be raised (Acts 17:31–34). Yet, such disagreements with the Sadducees and Greek philosophers could still be postulated even if all we had was Paul's own statement that he had been a Pharisee (and "a Hebrew of Hebrews"), especially since he never repudiated his position on this important subject, but confirmed it at several crucial points, as indicated above.

(9) In spite of the doubts of many, numerous scholars still support the presence of eyewitness data in the Gospels and Acts.<sup>30</sup> While

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 120*

some question the passage of 35-66 years before the writing of these books, such is an extremely short time for ancient texts. Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White, in speaking specifically of these five books, has noted that even two generations is too brief for myth to override the historical core of oral tradition.<sup>31</sup>

Since the Gospels and Acts include eyewitness testimony, it is arguably the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection which would contain such because of the centrality of that message. In fact, C.H. Dodd has argued that several of the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances are "concise" reports which contain trustworthy material regarding Jesus' visits to his disciples. After an investigation of each of the gospel appearance accounts, Dodd has argued that several of them contain material which is quite valuable in understanding the nature of Jesus' appearances.<sup>32</sup>

The empty tomb, which Sheehan allows,<sup>33</sup> points to the resurrection of Jesus' body. The most obvious intention of the New Testament teaching is that it was the same body that had died and was buried that had been raised and which appeared to the early believers. Indeed, it would be very difficult to proclaim Jesus' resurrection in the very city where the grave was still occupied.

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 121*

## A Final Critique

Sheehan's view is that nothing literal or historical occurred to Jesus after his death. The gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances are "religious myths" and it is "absurd to take them literally"<sup>34</sup> While Jesus truly died and his tomb was probably empty, he definitely stayed dead. Perhaps Christianity should also die, quips Sheehan.<sup>35</sup> So Sheehan interprets the term "resurrection" not in any literal sense, but merely as a change which happened to the disciples. Perhaps simply reflecting on Jesus' life and its implicit promise of divine rescue caused Simon and the others to come to the conviction that Jesus had been raised by God.<sup>36</sup> Today, Christians are those who claim continuity with Peter's experience, even if they believe that Jesus himself is actually "as dead as a doornail." Sheehan even concludes that "ultimately Jesus is not essential to Christianity."<sup>37</sup>

To bolster his argument that the resurrection "appearances" were originally the inward conclusions or "reflections" of Peter and subsequently the rest of the disciples, we have already mentioned how Sheehan introduces a very crucial element regarding Paul's word for Jesus' appearances in 1 Cor. 15:5f. (ὄραω). In what he calls "the most important element in the formula," Sheehan points out that the Greek term can denote either physical or spiritual sight. But as scriptural evidence, he introduces two Septuagint references

to indicate why he thinks the latter is

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 122*

preferable! His judgment on the matter is that the meaning of a literal visible manifestation “is not the essential meaning of the word in the Bible.”<sup>38</sup> So in conclusion, Professor Sheehan holds that Jesus not only died, but “in the spirit of the New Testament we may add: He never came back to life.”<sup>39</sup>

It is my contention that Sheehan’s position is fatally flawed at several crucial points, even far beyond the difficulties pointed out in the initial section above. I will enumerate five other major problems.

First, we have already said that his treatment of ὄραω is seriously mistaken. This is one of the most important elements of the pre-Pauline formula in 1 Cor. 15, and thus to miss the meaning of this term is critical. Yet, in the more than 100 occurrences of this word in the New Testament, it refers to physical sight over three times more frequently than it does to spiritual understanding. For example, it is specifically used by both Luke (24:34, 37, 39) and John (20:20, 25) to report the very physical resurrection appearances of Jesus.<sup>40</sup> Neither does Paul’s immediate context favor Sheehan’s view, while we have seen that there are strong contextual and other reasons to hold that Paul is speaking of bodily appearances here. For instance, earlier we saw some indications from Paul’s anthropology that this was the case. So, in spite of Sheehan’s assertions that the essential meaning of ὄραω does not involve physical sight and that he has shown as much, he is simply in error at both crucial junctures.

Second, the nature of Sheehan’s scenario

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 123*

involving Peter is simply bereft of any evidence. On what grounds may we conclude that Peter’s reflection is the basis for the resurrection faith? More pointedly, J. M. Cameron asserts that there is “no text, no primitive record, no known fragment, to which we can appeal to justify this view Sheehan’s interpretation is implausible.”<sup>41</sup> Besides this lack of any evidence, another incredibility is that Peter’s despair (which Sheehan freely admits) could ever give rise to such an all-encompassing, all-conquering faith and hope! Such an effort is strangely reminiscent of nineteenth century liberal attempts to do similarly, but which have now largely been discredited. More specifically, despair does not normally lead to Sheehan’s “ecstatic visions” based on “simple reflection,” especially that which completely changes the individual’s life!

Additionally, it is even more unlikely that Peter could bring all of the other apostles to the same conclusion and life change, even being willing to die for this truth without any record of recanting, all in the absence of any objective evidence!<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, scholars have responded that Sheehan’s thesis is anything from “ridiculous,” to “illusory,” to the employing of a “mythical ‘Simon.’”<sup>43</sup>

Third, a related problem is Sheehan’s hermeneutical position that the “resurrection” denotes something that objectively occurred to the

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 124*

disciples instead of to Jesus. Besides the move from Peter’s despair to his life—transforming ecstasy, there are additional, interpretational concerns here. As Gerald O’Collins insists, attempts such as these are clearly reductionistic, especially when “resurrection” is interpreted as “an expression of the disciples’ inner life a way of talking about the rise of their faith.”<sup>44</sup> In such cases, the meaning imposed on the original texts is foreign to it. As O’Collins expounds again, the “reductionists, however, alter the meaning of the texts and then accept the truth they have fashioned for themselves.”<sup>45</sup>

Another problem is that such a proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection would have confused ancient audiences, even as such redefinition confuses listeners today. Once more it is O’Collins who points out that:

the writers meant just what their words about Jesus’ resurrection said. If they had wanted to write primarily about the rise of their faith, they could have done just that.<sup>46</sup>

But probably the chief problem here is that such reductions ignore all of the many evidences that Jesus appeared visibly to his followers, just as the texts assert. James D.G. Dunn summarizes the state of contemporary research:

It is almost impossible to dispute that at the historical roots of Christianity lie some visionary experiences of the first Christians, who understood them as appearances of Jesus, raised by God

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 125*

from the dead.<sup>47</sup>

But before Sheehan can say that he agrees with this statement (as long as he can define the term “vision”), Dunn specifies what he means: “By ‘resurrection’ they clearly meant that something had happened to Jesus himself. God had raised him, not merely reassured them.”<sup>48</sup> And we should carefully note that this is true not just because Dunn says so, even if he is correct that this is the position of most contemporary scholars who deal with this issue (as Fuller, Braaten, and Grant each agreed earlier). Rather, we have argued that the facts such as those set forth above indicate the point here: visionary experiences are demanded by the data. Yet, hallucinations do not adequately account for these facts, as contemporary scholars, including Sheehan himself, generally acknowledge.<sup>49</sup>

Fourth and perhaps even more crucial, besides the data which favor Jesus’ appearances, Sheehan has failed to answer the other evidences for the resurrection such as those outlined above. Further, he has even admitted some of the decisive information such as the very early date for the pre-Pauline creed in 1 Cor. 15:3ff. and the fact that this confession actually records Peter’s own interpretation of his actual experience, as well as that of the other disciples.<sup>50</sup> But since the passage cannot be made to support Sheehan’s subjective explanation, we are left even by his own summation with a very early report of the disciples’ claim to have seen Jesus. This assessment stands unless Sheehan wants to argue for a naturalistic theory regarding the disciples’ experiences. But he has not, to my knowledge, postulated any alternative theory to account for them. Especially since the

---

*MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 126*

New Testament does not favor a subjective interpretation of ὄραω, he is left to face this evidence squarely.

Fifth, he needs to counter the reasons for holding that the New Testament teaches the resurrection of Jesus’ body, many of which we mentioned here. These are also most obviously at odds with his treatment.

## **Conclusion**

Without repeating my arguments here, I have postulated that there are certain demonstrable facts which the majority of scholars who deal with this subject (including Sheehan) recognize as historical, which should be accounted for in any discussion of the subject of Jesus’ resurrection. Actually, Jesus’ appearances can be established based on the minimally accepted data, apart from any doubts relative to the New Testament as a whole. There are further indications that these appearances of Jesus are bodily in nature. Sheehan— not only failed to disprove these data in his writings, but he has actually admitted enough historical facts to fall prey to these criticisms. He does not charge that naturalistic hypotheses can explain the resurrection appearances of Jesus, yet he admits that Paul’s reception of the creed dates from 32–34 A.D., and that it contains the interpreted data of Simon Peter’s experience and that of the other disciples. However, Sheehan’s own interpretation of these experiences fails to provide any evidence or to otherwise explain the data.

In conclusion, his version allows too much, for we are left with the’ real experiences of the original disciples which were reported at an extremely early date, but which are not explained naturalistically. Neither can these be rejected on a priori grounds or characterized as just their subjective reports of their own inward experiences. In short, the testimony indicates literal appearances of Jesus in bodily form.

Sheehan thinks that perhaps Christianity as a whole should be scrapped. More specifically, he

MTJ 3:2 (Fall 1992) p. 127

maintains that we need not insist on either a divine Christ or even any special powers for the man Jesus. As he writes, "Jesus is ultimately dispensable. He is not irreplaceable" Further, he believes we ought to learn to live in a state of ultimate uncertainty with regard to any future hope and then makes the simply incredible statement that this the same message which Jesus preached"<sup>51</sup>

But thankfully, Sheehan's thesis is untenable. Cameron notes that many readers will conclude that, although they do not always know what is true or false in New Testament studies, they do know that Sheehan's position is surely false.<sup>52</sup> Tracy adds that it is insufficient to be critical of just one tradition; we also need to be skeptical of skepticism.<sup>53</sup> But Sheehan is mistaken in his thesis not simply because people say he is, but more importantly, because the facts dictate this conclusion.

---

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Sheehan, "Smiling Nihilism vs. the Evidence: A Reflection on the Resurrection," *Faith Works*, vol 1, no. 1, Fall 1990, 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 13.

<sup>4</sup>For examples, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Verdict of History* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1984); Gary R. Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, edited by Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987).

<sup>5</sup>In particular, see Reginald Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), gff.; Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 97–99. See also Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 81, 92; John A.T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 125; Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), 126–27; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, translated by Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 1955), 1:296; cf. Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, translated by Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 80; Joachim Jeremias, "Easter: The Earliest Tradition and the Earliest Interpretation," translated by J. Bowden, in *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 306.

<sup>6</sup>For some critical scholars who accept an early dating, see Hans Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte* (Second Edition; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1962), 96; Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, edited by A. J. B. Higgins (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 65–66; Leonard Goppelt, "The Easter Kerygma in the New Testament," *The Easter Message Today* (New York: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1964), 36; Fuller, 10, 14, 28, 48; C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 16; A. M. Hunter, *Jesus: Lord and Saviour* (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 100; Brown, 81; G.E. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 105. Hans Kung dates this confession from A.D. 35-45 in his work *On Being a Christian* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), 348. Norman Perrin thinks that the date is no later than A.D. 50, but he does not venture a closer approximation. See Perrin's *The Resurrection According to Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 79. Gerald O'Collins asserts that he is not aware of any scholars who place the date for Paul's reception of this material after the A.D. 40s. See O'Collins, *What are They Saying About the Resurrection?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 112.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Sheehan, *First Coming: Now the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986), 110, 118.

<sup>8</sup>For details, see Dodd, 19–31; William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 36–38; cf. John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 99.

<sup>9</sup>For this gospel message, see Acts 2:22–24, 29–32; 3:13–15, 26; 4:10–12; 10:39–41; 13:27–31. For the witness motif in specific reference to Jesus' resurrection, see Acts 2:32; 3:15; 10:39, 41; 13:31.

<sup>10</sup>Hans von Campenhausen, "The Events of Easter and the Empty Tomb," *Tradition and Life in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 44, as cited by Ladd, 105. A.M. Hunter echoes the same assessment. Hunter, *Jesus: Lord and Saviour*, 100. C. H. Dodd adds that anyone who would allege the questionable claim that Paul was mistaken regarding the apostolic nature of the gospel message must bear the burden of proof. Dodd, 16.

<sup>11</sup>For more data on what I have termed the "core" or minimal facts for the resurrection, see Habermas, *The Verdict of History*, especially 124–132; Habermas and Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, 23–27.

<sup>12</sup>*The First Coming*, 101–114.

<sup>13</sup>For other defenses of the empty tomb besides that of von Campenhausen (footnote 8), see Edward L. Bode, *The First Easter Morning*, *Analecta Biblica* 45 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 155–75; William Lane Craig, "The Empty Tomb of Jesus," *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, edited by R.T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 11:173–200.

<sup>14</sup>See the first two sources in footnote 11, plus Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976), 114–171.

<sup>15</sup>Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 176.

<sup>16</sup>Carl Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 78.

<sup>17</sup>Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 142.

<sup>18</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Historicity of the Resurrection: The Identity of Christ," *The Intellectuals Speak Out About God*, edited by Roy Abraham Varghese (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1984), 260.

<sup>19</sup>For details, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry*, 127–45.

<sup>20</sup>For examples of such rejections of the hallucination hypothesis, see Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Vol.4, Part I of Church Dogmatics, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), 340; Raymond Brown, "The Resurrection and Biblical Criticism," *Commonweal*, Vol. 87 (November 24, 1967), 233; Pannenberg, *Jesus — God and Man*, trans. by Lewis L. Wilkens and Duane Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 94–97; Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, translated by Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 185; Lapide, 124–126; Neville Clark, *Interpreting the Resurrection* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 100–101.

<sup>21</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 73–75.

<sup>22</sup>Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 164–166, 173.

<sup>23</sup>Sheehan, "Smiling Nihilism," 5–8.

<sup>24</sup>Sheehan, "Smiling Nihilism," 7–8; *The First Coming*, 114–118.

<sup>25</sup>For the importance of ὄραω in this discussion, see Bode, 93–96.

<sup>26</sup>Dunn, 73–75.

<sup>27</sup>Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 262–263, endnote 38.

- <sup>28</sup>For details, see Robert H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 182. Compare Chapters 1, 5–6, 12 and, especially, Chapter 13: “The *Soma* in Death and Resurrection.”
- <sup>29</sup>John A.T. Robinson, “Resurrection in the NT,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by George Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 4, 48.
- <sup>30</sup>For a sample study of the resurrection accounts in the Gospels, see Grant R. Osborne, *The Resurrection Narratives: A Redactional Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984).
- <sup>31</sup>A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 190.
- <sup>32</sup>Specifically, Dodd lists Matt. 28:8–10, 16–20; Jn. 20:19–21 and, to a lesser extent, Lk. 24:36–49 as appearance narratives which rely on early tradition in “The Appearances of the Risen Christ: An Essay in the Form Criticism of the Gospels,” *More New Testament Essays* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968).
- <sup>33</sup>Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 98, 152–155, 173.
- <sup>34</sup>Sheehan, *Ibid.*, 97-98.
- <sup>35</sup>Thomas Sheehan, “On Satan and Catholic Liberals: A Response to David Tracy,” *Commonweal*, September 21, 1984, 498, 502.
- <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 499; Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 108, 112–114, 118.
- <sup>37</sup>Sheehan, “On Satan and Catholic Liberals,” 500.
- <sup>38</sup>Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 114–116, 262–263, footnote 38; cf. “Smiling Nihilism,” 7–8.
- <sup>39</sup>Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 101.
- <sup>40</sup>Cf. William F. Arndt and F. William Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 581.
- <sup>41</sup>J.M. Cameron, “A New New Testament,” *The New York Review*, December 4, 1986, 27.
- <sup>42</sup>But see the assertions in Sheehan’s *The First Coming*, 105, 108, 258, endnote 20.
- <sup>43</sup>Paul L. Maier, book review of Sheehan’s *The First Coming* in *The Christian Century*, January 7-14, 1987, 30; William M. Thompson, “Absolutely Absent,” *Commonweal*, June 20, 1986, 378; David Tracy, “To Trust or Suspect,” *Commonweal*, October 5, 1984, 533. Paul Maier called Sheehan’s proposal “Peter’s happy hunch” and judged that it was “pure conjecture.” Maier, *Ibid.*, 29-30.
- <sup>44</sup>O’Collins, 42.
- <sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.
- <sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 45-46.
- <sup>47</sup>Dunn, 73–75.
- <sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup>See footnotes 18, 19, and 27 above.
- <sup>50</sup>Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 110–114, 118.
- <sup>51</sup>Sheehan, *Ibid.*, 224, 227.
- <sup>52</sup>Cameron, 27.

[53](#)Tracy, 533.

current : : uid:852 (ip)