

## Westcott and the Resurrection?

by James May<sup>[1]</sup>

Donald Waite, Ph.D., Th.D., is the author of a continuous stream of false information in support of the alleged perfection of the King James Version of the Bible. His catalogue includes hundreds of tapes, pamphlets, booklets, and books. Fortunately no one needs to read very much of the doctor's material to discover how thoroughly unreliable he is, and after discovering the true nature of his writings, no sensible person would care to waste valuable time with such nonsense. This harsh judgment is not simply someone's opinion: Waite is wrong time and time again in regard to undeniable facts. That a statement in support of the KJV is outrageous and totally wrong does not hinder the doctor from its assertion. Particular objects of Waite's unfounded slander include Cambridge scholars B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort. These 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglicans were responsible for producing an edition of the Greek New Testament that dared to follow older manuscripts than those which underlie the KJV. Among other publications attacking these two, Waite has produced a booklet in which he assaults Westcott's doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having carefully analyzed his statements concerning Westcott's view of the inspiration of the Bible and of the deity of Christ,<sup>[2]</sup> this author sees little reason to provide a full analysis of Waite's misinformation concerning Westcott's position on the resurrection. The quality of Waite's research and reasoning can be abundantly illustrated by examining but one of his allegations. The very first time in his booklet that Waite directly quotes from Westcott, he provides information that is as wrong as it can be:

1. Westcott Mentioned Two "IMPORTANT CRITICISMS" Of His Book By Those Whose "MODES OF THOUGHT" Were "FOREIGN" To His Own. He wrote:

*"In revising the following pages [from his "NOTICE TO THE FOURTH EDITION" of 1879] I have had the great advantage of considering TWO IMPORTANT **CRITICISMS** upon its main argument, one by Mr. R.W. Macan in his Essay on The Resurrection of Christ, 1877 and the other by the author of Supernatural Religion, in the third volume of his work, and in two papers in the Fortnightly Review for February and March 1878. . . . I gladly acknowledge the help which both have given me in UNDERSTANDING MODES OF THOUGHT WHICH ARE FOREIGN TO MY OWN." [ibid., p. v, "NOTICE TO THE FOURTH EDITION"]*

It would be interesting to look into these "TWO IMPORTANT CRITICISMS" alluded to by Westcott to see just WHY their "MODES OF THOUGHT" were "FOREIGN" to that of Westcott. Possibly because these two took the BODILY RESURRECTION of the Lord Jesus Christ LITERALLY to have taken place without any purpose of evasion or re-definition of terms!<sup>[3]</sup>

There are two important points to be made here, one from Westcott's material, one from Waite's. Westcott had written a book entitled The Gospel of the Resurrection. In the fourth edition he noted that an earlier edition had been the object of criticism by two men, R.W. Macan in an essay, and Walter Cassels in his three volume work, Supernatural Religion. Westcott observed that Macan and Cassels held to radically different views of the resurrection than did he. From this fact, Waite suggests that Macan and Cassels likely differed from Westcott because they held to a literal, physical resurrection of the body of Christ, which Westcott, according to Waite, did not. So we might justly conclude, again according to Waite, that Macan and Cassels were two noble defenders of the Word of God, men who stood without qualification for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in opposition to the rascally apostate, Brooke Foss Westcott.

### Background

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a devastating attack upon the orthodox teachings of biblical Christianity by the forces of rationalism. The Tubingen school of Ferdinand Christian Baur spearheaded the assault with its attempt to fully account for the historic origins of the Christian religion and for the composition of the New Testament documents wholly apart from any supernatural activity of God. Miracles were by

definition excluded from any consideration. According to the analysis of Baur, there was a tremendous and hostile struggle in the first century church between an exclusive, Judaistic branch of Christianity lead by the Apostle Peter, and a universal, liberating gospel preached by the Apostle Paul. The interaction of the two opposing forces produced a synthesis in the form of doctrine contained in the Gospel of John, which Baur dated at A.D. 170. Germany criticism was not confined to its native land, but also spread to France, England and the United States. Its English expression found incorporation in three noteworthy books: Essays and Reviews (1860), Ecce Homo (1865) and Supernatural Religion (1874). The last of these was a three volume work authored by Walter Cassels.

### Walter Richard Cassels

There is no need here for an extensive treatment of Walter Cassels' book, Supernatural Religion. Waite implies that it is perhaps an outstanding Christian book, a solid defense of the Bible and of the resurrection of Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is, from beginning to end, a systematic denial of historic, biblical Christianity. In the words of Henry Nash:

It is an assault upon "supernatural" religion. Since that religion connected itself inseparably with miracles, the purpose of the book is to bring the "supernatural" to the ground by knocking the miraculous underpinning from beneath it. . . . The purpose is to show that the canonical Gospels are so far removed in time from the events they record that they lose all competence as witnesses to the reality of the miraculous.<sup>[4]</sup>

Anyone who examines Cassels' blasphemous book will quickly encounter an abundance of material to fully document the description given above by Nash. Paging through an aged copy, discolored and crumbling, this author easily found all the proof that was needed:

It must be clear to every unprejudiced student that the appearances of Jesus narrated by the four Gospels in Galilee and Judea cannot be harmonized <sup>[5]</sup>.

Apart from continual minor contradictions throughout the first three Gospels, it is impossible to reconcile the representations of the Synoptics with those of the fourth Gospel. They mutually destroy each other as evidence, (Cassels, p. 575).

[T]he Acts of the Apostles, as might have been supposed, is a legendary composition of a later day, which cannot be regarded as sober and credible history, and rather discredits than tends to establish the reality of the miracles with which its pages so suspiciously abound, (Cassels, p. 576).

First taking the four Gospels, we found that their accounts of these events [the resurrection and ascension] are not only full of legendary matter, but that they even contradict and exclude each other, and so far from establishing the reality of such stupendous miracles, they show that no reliance is to be placed on the statements of the unknown authors, (Cassels, p. 577).

These words of Cassels demonstrate beyond all controversy that he did not believe in the resurrection of Christ from the dead nor in the historical reliability of the New Testament books. The only point of accuracy in Donald Waite's analysis is that Cassels and Westcott did indeed hold to opposing views of Christ's resurrection.

### Brooke Foss Westcott

Dr. B.F. Westcott was a 19<sup>th</sup> century conservative New Testament scholar. He wrote extensively defending the New Testament against the liberal attacks of his day. In particular he defended the historicity and first century dating of the Gospel of John, he wrote an entire book refuting the radical liberalism of David Strauss, and he wrote an extensive essay against Walter Cassels' denial of the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. The essay against Cassels first appeared in the *Contemporary Review* of November,

1877 and was later published as Appendix II of the fourth edition of Westcott's The Gospel of the Resurrection.

While Cassels argues against the reality of miracles and revelation, Westcott posits that both are to be expected given three assumptions: (1) that God exists; (2) that man was made in the image of God; and (3) that man has fallen.<sup>[6]</sup> Westcott further asserts that "those who have attained to the maturity of self-knowledge under normal conditions recognize them [the three assumptions] as true," (Westcott, p. 279).

Rationalists such as Cassels and Macan (who is also addressed in the essay) argue that if God performed miracles in history, uncertainty and confusion are introduced into the laws of nature. Westcott's response is that man himself is able to modify the medium in which he moves, thus introducing an uncertainty which cannot be measured, "yet this indeterminate factor introduces no practical disharmony into the universe," (Westcott, p. 282). The Christian view of miracles "simply substitutes the concept of a rational order for the conception of a mechanical order," (Westcott, p. 281).

Cassels states that the resurrection of Christ was but one of many alleged raisings from the dead, (Cassels, p. 428). Westcott's position was that, "If it were no more than this, it could not form the foundation of a Gospel. The fact was, as we maintain, essentially unique; the teaching which it conveyed was essentially new," (Westcott, p. 284).

Westcott points out that he, Cassels and Macan agree that "the first disciples believed that the Lord had been raised from the dead" and that "the eleven apostles and St Paul believed that they had seen Him after the Resurrection," (Westcott, p. 285). He then asks the question, "In the case of the Resurrection the question at issue is simply, in one form or other, Is it more reasonable to suppose that the apostles were mistaken or that the Lord did rise?" (Westcott, p. 285). He then argues for the latter alternative based upon the empty tomb and the repeated appearances of Christ to his disciples. Westcott also believed that only the resurrection of Christ could account for the existence of the Christian Church.

Skipping over many other points in Westcott's lengthy essay of 30 pages, we note his contention that the Gospels and Epistles are accurate historical records of the resurrection:

We have, in the Synoptic Gospels and the appendix to St Mark (to summarize results which appear to me to be unquestionable), a general view of the oral teaching of the Twelve, which was the original foundation of the Church: we have in the writings of St Paul, who must have been well acquainted with the earliest belief of Christians, an explicit statement of what he 'received' and taught with intense personal conviction won through experience: we have in the Gospel of St John the personal testimony of one who had actually seen and heard the Risen Lord, (Westcott, pp. 289-99).

Westcott gave these words in opposition to material that he quoted from page 519 of Cassels' Supernatural Religion:

The whole of the evidence for the Resurrection reduces itself to an undefined belief on the part of a few persons, in a notoriously superstitious age, that after Jesus had died and been buried they had seen him alive, (Westcott, p. 299 quoting Cassels, p. 519).

Three points have been clearly established: (1) Walter Cassels was a wicked unbeliever who denied the physical resurrection of Christ from the dead and the historical accuracy of the New Testament; (2) Brooke Foss Westcott believed in the physical resurrection of Christ from the grave and devoted himself to refuting the false views of Cassels; and (3) Donald Waite is a thoroughly unreliable source of information concerning the theology of Westcott. Waite's culpability is compounded by the ease with which this material may be found. The book Supernatural Religion was quite popular and is today commonly available in theological libraries. The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia

of Religious Knowledge, a most widely used reference work, has an entire article devoted to the book Supernatural Religion. Volume one of Schaff's History of the Christian Church, perhaps the most famous modern set on church history, contains numerous references to Supernatural Religion, and in fact contains a synopsis of the book on page 192. Westcott's close friend, J.B. Lightfoot, also wrote a series of essays refuting Supernatural Religion. Most New Testament scholars would surely be aware of the publication of the essays in book form in recent years. All of which is to say that Waite has no excuse for his failed research.

### Neglected Quotations

Waite is very selective in his quoting of material. While this paper makes no attempt to fully analyze Westcott's view of the resurrection, a few quotations from the Cambridge scholar will serve to reveal the poverty of Waite's discussion:

Indeed taking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no single historic incident better or more variously supported than the Resurrection of Christ. Nothing but the antecedent assumption that it must be false could have suggested the idea of deficiency in the proof of it. ~ B.F. Westcott

The Resurrection is either a miracle or it is an illusion. Here there is no alternative: no ambiguity. And it is not an accessory of the Apostolic message, but the sum of the message itself. Its unique character is the very point on which the first teachers of Christianity support all their arguments. ~ B.F. Westcott

For the same reason we may suppose that the Lord took up into His Glorified Body the material elements of that human body which was laid in the grave. ~ B.F. Westcott

But this Body which was recognized as essentially the same Body, had yet undergone some marvelous change, of which we can gain a faint idea by what is directly recorded of its manifestations. ~ B.F. Westcott

Before examining whether this was so we may observe how incredible it is from the nature of the testimony alleged that the Apostles could have been deceived. The sepulcher in which the Lord had been laid was found empty. This fact seems to be beyond all doubt, and is one where misconception was impossible. On the other hand, the manifestations of the Risen Saviour were widely extended both as to persons and as to time. St Paul, and in this his record is in exact accordance with that of the Evangelists, mentions His appearances not only to single witnesses, but to many together, to 'the twelve' and to 'five hundred brethren at once.' One person might be so led away by enthusiasm as to give an imaginary shape to his hopes, but it is impossible to understand how a number of men could be simultaneously affected in the same manner. The difficulty of course is further increased if we take account of the variety as well as of the number of the persons who were appealed to as witnesses of the fact during their lifetime; and of the length of time during which the appearances of the Lord were continued. It is stated in the Acts that the necessary qualification of an Apostle was that he should be a personal witness of the Resurrection; and St Paul admits the qualification, and shews that it was fulfilled in his case. Every avenue of delusion seems to be close up. For forty days Christ was with the disciples talking with them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. If we cannot believe that the Apostles deceived others, it seems (if possible) still more unlikely that they were the victims of deception. ~ B.F. Westcott

If now we consider the direct evidence for the fact of the Resurrection from this position, it will be found to be overwhelming. ~ B.F. Westcott<sup>[7]</sup>

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[2] See this author's [B.F. Westcott and the Inspiration of the Bible](#) and [B.F. Westcott and the Deity of Jesus Christ](#) at [KJVOnly.org](http://KJVOnly.org).

[3] D.A. Waite, [Westcott's Denial of Christ's Bodily Resurrection](#) (Collingswood, NJ: The Bible for Today Press, 1983), p. 15.

[4] Henry S. Nash, "Supernatural Religion," [The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge](#), ed. Samuel M. Jackson (1907; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), Vol. XI, pp. 166-67.

[5] Walter Cassels, [Supernatural Religion](#) (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1879), Vol. III, p. 469.

[6] B.F. Westcott, [The Gospel of the Resurrection](#) (4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), p. 278-79.

[7] [The Gospel of the Resurrection](#) (4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), pp. 137, 52, 111-12, 162, 114-15, 298.