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KNOWING THAT JESUS' RESURRECTION OCCURRED: A RESPONSE TO STEPHEN DAVIS

Gary R. Habermas

The chief purpose of this essay is to reconsider the issue of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection raised in a recent article in *Faith and Philosophy* by Stephen T. Davis.¹ Although one of my books on this topic was the subject of a courteous but critical appraisal by Davis (pp. 157, 159 note 15), my purpose in writing this response is not so much to defend my own research but to attempt to outline an apologetic for an important position which he has, however kindly, dismissed; namely, that the resurrection of Jesus is an event which can be known to be an historical event.

For Davis, (1) the resurrection of Jesus would be a "hard" miracle (pp. 151-52) which is both (2) defended by Christian theists (pp. 152-53, 157) and (3) challenged by skeptics (pp. 153-55). (4) But both positions are rational (pp. 155, 158), meaning that this event can be neither proven or disproven (pp. 147). Thus, the resurrection cannot be known to have occurred (p. 158). (5) Yet the chief issue is that persons react to the resurrection on the basis of their own world view (pp. 147, 154-55), (6) thereby arguing circularly (p. 155). (7) However, Davis asserts that the truthfulness of world views cannot be discussed in his article and perhaps not at all by him (p. 158).

I will argue that points (1)-(3) and (5) are generally true but that conclusions (4), and (6)-(7) do not necessarily follow. I will concentrate particularly on the epistemic issue (4), although (6)-(7) will also be briefly discussed.

A. *The Facticity of Jesus' Resurrection*

Davis holds that the resurrection cannot be known either with Cartesian certainty or even as "the only rational option" (p. 158). It is concerning the second of these points that he cites my work as an example of such a "mistake" (p. 155). I would grant that apodictic certainty is not available concerning the resurrection, but such is hardly a problem (nor does Davis view it as such), for one would be hard pressed to produce such total, indisputable proof for any historical fact (or any other area of *factual* certainty). Yet this in no way impedes us from being sure of many historical events of the past or from gaining knowledge of myriads of other factual matters, whether scientific, judicial or medical. But



if the resurrection could be proven in the second and more widely used sense of high probability plus the exclusion of viable rational or factual doubt, it would be demonstrated by accepted historical standards. But Davis also disallows knowledge of the resurrection in this second sense.

To be sure, Davis does encourage much argumentation for Jesus' resurrection (pp. 147, 158). He holds that the most persuasive case stresses (1) the unity of the New Testament witness, (2) the presence of certain facts (listed by Davis) which have been demonstrated by historical methodology and are accepted as factual even by critical scholars, all of which reveal that Jesus' resurrection is the "most plausible explanation of these facts" and (3) the inability of critics to provide any viable naturalistic explanation for this event (pp. 152-53). Apparently Davis' point is not that these arguments are weak, for he states that they are "impressive." Rather, this apologetic does not allow that skeptics also have good reasons for disbelieving (p. 153).

While it is not possible to expand this positive argument for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection in the scope of this present article, I have done so elsewhere and will simply state that the case could be significantly strengthened on several fronts. The nature and usage of the "core facts," as I have termed the historical facts recognized by virtually all scholars, can be further developed into an especially strong argument for the resurrection.² Additionally, Davis does not mention other evidences such as the pre-New Testament creeds like I Cor. 15:3ff., frequently dated even by critics in the 30s A.D., and which they admit provides both early and eyewitness testimony for this event.³ The Shroud of Turin possibly introduces scientifically empirical and repeatable evidence, as well.⁴ Lastly, not only are each of the alternative naturalistic theories disproven, but even skeptics generally dismiss these approaches altogether.⁵

One other crucial point should be made. While it may certainly be helpful, the Christian theist does not necessarily need the initial point in Davis' apologetic, namely the unity of the New Testament witness. The major point here is that since a case for Jesus' resurrection is being based solely on facts held in common between believers and skeptics alike, such as the "core facts" and the early creeds mentioned above, claimed discrepancies or other doubts concerning the gospel texts are rather irrelevant for our purposes. In other words, since our case is based on facts held by virtually all scholars, questions concerning *other* areas are not crucial at this point.

B. *The Skeptical Response*

Davis' chief reason for not allowing the "hard" version of the theistic apologetic to stand is that skeptics also have an impressive case for not believing in the facticity of the resurrection. This case is based on two basic points. (1) The

biblical testimony is “unreliable” in that there are numerous conflicts in the resurrection narratives which cause one to question the nature of the claims. (2) The “strongest argument” is that:

Granted I have no plausible alternative explanation of the known facts; and granted that on the basis of the known facts and available possible explanations of them the chances are (let’s be as generous as possible) 99 out of 100 that the resurrection really happened: still we must ask the following fatal question: *What are the chances that a man dead for three days would live again?* In short, the non-believer will claim that even if the believer’s arguments are strong and even if non-believers can’t say for sure what *did* happen, by far the most sensible position is to deny that the resurrection occurred. (Italics by Davis, pp. 153-54).

I would consider this statement a very typical and fair assessment of the skeptic’s response to the evidence. For example, this was the same reason given by Harvard professor Harvey Cox in a dialogue on Jesus’ resurrection. After stating that he had just heard the most persuasive lecture on the resurrection which he had ever encountered (by J. N. D. Anderson), he said he still could not accept the evidence because, basically, dead men do not rise from the dead.⁶

How might a Christian theist respond to the skeptical retort? Initially, this writer would point out that the skeptic’s first point is both mistaken and irrelevant. Not only can the gospel accounts be adequately defended against charges of unreliability, but, much more important in terms of this discussion, such charges, *even if granted* for the sake of the argument, do not even touch the type of apologetic suggested here. Again, since we would base our entire historical case on the critically known “core facts” and recognized pre-New Testament creeds, claimed unreliability in *other* points is not relevant. I am not interested here in the facts which skeptics say we cannot know, but those which they admit we *can*. And since our case was based only on the *latter*, which are sufficient to establish the case, the former are irrelevant to this discussion.

As an additional point here, it is noteworthy that skeptics usually postulate the priority and usefulness of Paul’s resurrection account in I Cor. 15 over those of the gospels. Yet, when the charge of unreliability is levelled, the questions are virtually always directed to the gospels. (See Davis’ list of such issues, p. 153). Since such questions rarely apply when only Paul’s account is used, it would appear inconsistent to attempt to apply critiques of the gospels where they do not apply, another indicator of the irrelevance of this objection.

The second skeptical response concerning the resurrection might initially appear to be more significant, for it seems commonsensical in light of the strong evidence for the laws of nature to doubt any report that a person who was fully and irreversibly dead should rise from the dead. Yet this point would also appear to

be in error, perhaps even more obviously so than the first.

When one assumes a theory or viewpoint in advance in order to arrive at a conclusion and continues to do so before or in spite of the factual evidence, he is guilty of *a priori* reasoning. Thus, while one may certainly have doubts upon encountering a miracle-claim such as the proclamation that Jesus arose from the dead, continued refusals to seriously consider the truthfulness of such claims in the light of extremely strong evidence, while generally ignoring the evidence itself, is an example of an *a priori* (and circular) rejection.

Yet we find that the skeptic's second response falls prey to just this fallacy. To assert, as Davis' example quoted above does, that there are no plausible naturalistic alternative theories concerning the resurrection and that the known facts demonstrate it to be *highly* probable, but that we must *still* reject the event because dead men do not rise from the dead (pp. 153-54), is to argue in an *a priori* fashion. Even the phrase "let's be as generous as possible" in reference to the postulated 99% probability for this event appears to be saying that *no matter how high* the probability for the event is, it is not high enough and the event must still be rejected. Such a position declares that probable facts may be set aside in favor of prior assumptions while never answering the evidence for this *particular* claim.

Another way to discover the fallacy of this second skeptical objection is to review Davis' response to David Hume's essay "Of Miracles." Hume had declared that miracles would, by definition, break the laws of nature and are thereby opposed by these laws, which were in turn supported by mankind's "uniform experience" of them. Mankind's experience thus provided a "full proof" against all miracles. Any possible evidence for such events need not even be studied.⁷ Hume commits similar fallacies in other places in this essay, as well.⁸

Christian theists do not doubt that there is considerable evidence for the laws of nature. Yet we need to remember that these so-called "laws" are only statistically generalized statements of the normal pattern of natural occurrences. But arguments from naturalistic premises inside a system cannot disprove the *possibility* that God has performed a recognizable event in nature from outside it. So Christian theists answer the claim that there is stronger evidence for the laws of nature by asserting that on one *particular* occasion the *evidence* indicates that one person was raised from the dead in a new, glorified body by a power *greater* than that of nature's laws. To assert that man's experience in general can automatically and always rule out a particular case of resurrection is to argue *a priori* and additionally to further commit the informal fallacy of division. General laws do not always apply to specific instances.

Davis rightly points out that it is "generally recognized that Hume overstates his case. We cannot *a priori* rule out the possibility of miracles..." (p. 148). Hume was correct that we should be quite suspicious of claims which allege

extraordinary occurrences and most of us have acted as skeptics at one time or another when confronted with such claims. But such suspicions do not warrant rejecting evidence *a priori*; suspicion is compatible with the considering of claims as objectively as is possible.

Davis also rejects the updating of Hume by Antony Flew (pp. 149-50), concluding: "It looks then, as if Hume's argument against miracles, even as expanded by Flew, fails" (p. 150). Davis rules out positions advocated by Rudolf Bultmann and Willi Marxsen on similar grounds (pp. 155-57). The *a priori* rejection on the part of Bultmann is evident when he *begins* a discussion of Jesus' resurrection by asking "But what of the resurrection? Is it not a mythical event pure and simple?"⁹

But here is the point. If Davis finds Hume, Flew and Bultmann guilty of arguing *a priori* in rejecting miracles without examining the evidence, what is the difference between the views they espouse and his second skeptical objection which asserts that, *in spite* of the high probability for the resurrection and the absence of any naturalistic theories, dead men do not rise (p. 154)? This second objection is equally in error. In fact, it is even less plausible than the others, for it first grants high probability and *then* rejects the resurrection according to its own circular assumption. It is true, as Davis states, that Hume, Flew, Bultmann, *et. al.*, are mistaken.¹⁰ But so is the second skeptical objection, and on similar grounds. And since this is "the non-believer's strongest argument" (p. 153), we begin to perceive the down fall of the skeptical position. Responses such as "we're too modern to believe in miracles" or "in spite of the evidence, it just couldn't have happened" are perhaps the skeptic's most common reactions,¹¹ but are guilty of both *a priori* rejections and of failing to adequately answer all of the evidence in favor of the resurrection.

Although Davis states that the *a priori* critique is often presented too simply, without consideration for the bias against extraordinary events, he expresses his general agreement with this criticism of naturalism. Yet, how would we respond if confronted with such an event (pp. 157-78)? But I would hold, as I have indicated here, that we should investigate the facts before we finally formulate our views, regardless of the nature of the data. To do otherwise is to argue in an *a priori* manner.¹² But to continue answering by simply rejecting the evidence because it is too incredible to believe or because dead persons always remain dead is ultimately untenable, especially since, to repeat, these are *a priori* responses and because they do not explain the strong evidences for the resurrection of Jesus or the lack of naturalistic theories. Because we know of the general law that dead men remain so, this cannot automatically rule out a specific case, and we have compelling evidences for just such an exception.

C. World Views

As pointed out above, Davis considers world views to be the main issue in this discussion, since both believers and unbelievers are said to argue according to their own perceptions, which is to argue circularly (pp. 155-57). Yet, Davis tells us that the correctness of world views will not be debated in his essay and perhaps not by him at all (p. 158).

Initially it must be agreed that world views are an important factor in one's acceptance or rejection of the resurrection. But it also needs to be pointed out that the more basic issue is not whether some persons judge on these grounds, but, rather, whether the resurrection literally occurred. World views certainly have a crucial bearing on one's *attitude* towards such a claim, but cannot change the basic *status* of the claim itself. Whether the resurrection did or did not occur, acceptance or rejection of it is not determinative. Besides, numerous individuals have decided against their own world view on this issue of facticity. But especially when it is remembered that even if one's decision is based upon one's world view, it must not be an *a priori* decision, as just discussed, it must then be realized that much emphasis also needs to be placed on the nature of the occurrence itself.

It is true that both Christian theists and non-theists alike often argue circularly by the way in which they allow their world view to determine their response to the factual claims. But although this is practiced by some, it thus need not (and should not) be the case. Davis must recognize this, for he asserts that both views are rational (pp. 155, 158) which could hardly be so if they argue circularly (p. 155).

With regard to the issue of world views per se, we are very limited in this essay and so will have to restrict our comments to two major points. First, there appears to be good reason for asserting that world views should be at least partially decided *based upon the facts*. Although such an endeavor cannot of course even be attempted here, I would only point out that numerous scholars hold that world views are an issue which can be debated and decided on the basis of factual criteria, as opposed to any intimations that world views must remain in conflict without much hope of discovering one which is ultimately true.

The second point is that the resurrection of Jesus is an event which would have some strong implications for world views. I am *not* declaring that this or any event is a so-called "brute fact" of history which is self-interpretive and stands by itself. Rather, I have often said that the resurrection must be linked with the claims of the one declared to have been raised.¹³ And one significant indicator of this second point is revealed by Davis' own distinguishing between "hard" and "soft" miracles. A hard miracle, which the resurrection is declared to be, is designated as such because since skeptics cannot viably explain it away according to their world view they deny it. As Davis points out further with

regard to this event, “skeptics apparently cannot agree that it has occurred...without abandoning religious skepticism” (p. 152). In other words, the event must be rejected or skeptics would apparently have to reject their world view.

Davis also admits that “with the resurrection we are talking not just about a highly unusual event but an event which, given our best knowledge of the workings of the world, seems causally impossible” (p. 151). Accordingly, if the resurrection occurred it “in all probability could not be explained without God, and so...is probably a miracle” (p. 151).

From the above assertions by Davis we perceive his view that the resurrection is, indeed, an event which at least *implies* a theistic world view in that God’s action would be required. I believe that Davis is basically correct here. In light of the strong evidence for the resurrection, the most likely explanation for the critical opposition is its threat to the skeptical world view. If it was a rather insignificant person who was claimed to have been raised, there would probably be less objection. However, besides the strong evidence for Jesus’ resurrection, one is also confronted with his unique religious claims, which definitely conflict with the skeptic’s naturalistic world view. But if the resurrection is historically demonstrated, there is definite significance for the claims of Jesus, as well; claims which concern the truthfulness of Jesus’ theistic world view.¹⁴ But this, too, is beyond the scope of this essay.

Based on the Christian theist’s (already admitted) highly probable case for Jesus’ resurrection and the failure of the skeptical position, I hold that this event literally occurred in history.¹⁵ Davis’ stated skeptical position is self-refuting and otherwise unable to be an equally rational view. Neither is ignoring the positive evidence on the basis of general *a priori* principles a sound practice.¹⁶ Although it is not always fashionable today to argue this thesis of the historical resurrection, it is warranted by the evidence. As eminent scholar Wolfhart Pannenberg asserts after being convinced against his former view, it is just easier to accept the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection than it is to support the skeptical viewpoint.¹⁷

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NOTES

1. Stephen T. Davis, “Is it Possible to Know that Jesus was Raised from the Dead?” *Faith and Philosophy*, volume I, number 2, April, 1984. Further references to this article will appear in the text itself, indicated by the appropriate page numbers.

2. See Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book

House, 1980), pp. 24-26, 38-41 for this argument in some detail including primary source examples of the many critical scholars who accept the "core facts," as well as how they are both verified and employed.

3. See Gary R. Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1984), Chapter Five, "Creeds and Facts" for details and documentation of these points, as well as a more in depth treatment of the "core facts."

4. For this research, see Gary R. Habermas and Kenneth Stevenson, *Verdict on the Shroud* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981; New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1982).

5. See Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, pp. 26-33.

6. Harvey Cox, "A Dialogue on Christ's Resurrection" in *Christianity Today*, volume 12, number 14, 12 April 1968, pp. 08-09. Other examples are given below.

7. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section I, Part I.

8. *Ibid.*, Part II. See especially Hume's treatment of the Jansenist claims.

9. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 38. Incidentally, one of Bultmann's chief interpreters blames him with this very attitude toward the resurrection, noting his "entirely arbitrary dismissal...because of some prior assumption in his mind." See John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 185; cf. p. 186.

10. For numerous critiques of both Hume and those who update his views, see Gary R. Habermas, "Skepticism: Hume" in *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots*, edited by Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981).

11. See Davis, p. 154; cf. Bultmann, p. 5 (which Davis also rejects).

12. Habermas and Stevenson, *Verdict on the Shroud*, p. 159.

13. See Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, Chapter 2.

14. For a defense of the uniqueness and truth of Jesus' claims, see Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, Chap. 2. Cf. Davis, p. 150. See the interview with Wolfhart Pannenberg in Roy Varghese, Editor, *The Intellectuals Speak Out About God* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, Inc., 1984), pp. 263-64.

15. However, this is not necessarily to assert as yet that it is a miraculous event, which would involve further world view considerations, as noted above.

16. Most of this essay has of course been specifically addressed to Davis' presentation, which is both a fair and a typical statement of the skeptical position, as we have said. While it is true that a different tack might have been proposed by the skeptic, such would still encounter both the strong categories of evidence for the resurrection and the critique of the unbeliever's viewpoint, which still cannot rule out this event by any *a priori* means.

17. Pannenberg in Varghese, p. 262.