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CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

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SYNOPSIS

When considering recent critical responses to the resurrection of Jesus, believers may envision the centuries-old, well-worn alternatives. Did Jesus' disciples steal His dead body, as mentioned in Matthew? Five such counter-moves are found in the gospels, with three of them even being proposed by believers! The most recent scholarly research has been significantly more open toward Jesus' healing the sick and predicting His resurrection beforehand, His burial tomb being empty, and even His resurrection appearances. So the latest brand of criticism has often shifted gears, with critics now responding more frequently with what I term metacritiques — comebacks that question the overall resurrection message instead of disputing individual items within the story. Two of these approaches are considered here: (1) resurrections simply do not occur, there is insufficient evidence ever to establish them, and (2) we cannot use the New Testament writings to support the Resurrection because it is a biased or prejudiced text.

More than one approach should be used in answer to the first challenge. Naturalism itself should be challenged. If this worldview is going to be utilized as the basis for questioning the Resurrection, then this critical starting point itself must be established first. Regarding the second challenge, something must be wrong with this charge from the start, because critical *scholars* not only allow well-attested New Testament texts but employ them!

Traditional critical hypotheses have questioned the Resurrection since the beginning of church history. Surprisingly, the major options are proposed or insinuated within the gospel texts themselves! There is also no shortage of detailed refutations that may be found in the recent literature,¹ hence, there is no need to review these yet again.

Actually, today's critical scholars often discuss the Resurrection details without ever bringing up those responses that were most frequently proposed in the nineteenth century. Even scholars from decades ago often tended to avoid these old retorts, though for slightly different reasons.² Critics today often grow weary of these outdated approaches. Though they resurface from time to time, this usually occurs in popular

publications, as if the authors are unaware of the historical track record of these discussions.

Given this recent milieu where attitudes have often changed, why don't critics just accept these events? The answers concern a whole lot more than simply what history may say.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

A brief look back at the last few decades can help immensely in understanding what is transpiring at present. Much has changed in New Testament studies since the deaths of Karl Barth (d. 1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976), the most dominant theological voices of the twentieth century. While these two German scholars differed significantly in their approaches, they agreed in rejecting any search for the historical Jesus. Their dislike for such movements grew especially later in their lives, as they observed the renewed interest in this subject.³ About the time of their deaths, however, even their immense influence was still not a sufficient enough bulwark to stem the tide of another movement of great academic interest in the Jesus of history.⁴

If graduate students attending major universities and seminaries in the 1970s had identified their views that historical evidence could establish Jesus as a miracle-worker and exorcist, who left an empty tomb behind in order to appear bodily to His disciples after His crucifixion, their classmates might well have been correct to identify them either as evangelicals or as conservative Roman Catholics. Manifesting a marked contrast today, Jesus is accepted almost unanimously as having performed miracles and exorcisms in some sense. Further, the majority of critical scholars now favor the historicity of the empty tomb, as well as some sort of appearances of the risen Jesus to His followers.

One of the foremost thinkers who contributed mightily to the demise of Bultmann's chief theological agenda was the self-styled liberal scholar E. P. Sanders of Oxford and, later, Duke Universities. The purpose of one of Sanders's volumes was to trace a list of historical data that could be known about Jesus strictly according to historical methodology. Noting a list of facts that is "almost beyond dispute" among critical scholars regarding Jesus' teachings and actions, Sanders included the following: Jesus was a miracle-worker and an exorcist, and after His death by crucifixion, His followers saw Him again in some sense.⁵

Responses such as Sanders's facilitated the growing gap between what has been termed the "No Quest for the Historical Jesus" period led by Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann and that of the hugely influential "Third Quest," which dominates the present scene and has done so for a few decades. In Jesus studies, few lines of demarcation would be drawn so tersely as between these two movements. At least in the middle decades of the previous century, the historical evidence for Jesus' life, teachings, and actions was often neglected, if not opposed. To the contrary, the Third Quest raised the historical banner above almost all else.

THE PRESENT STATE OF RESURRECTION STUDIES

The foregoing contrast in current Historical Jesus studies should help us understand the more “open” situation today regarding extraordinary subjects such as Jesus’ miracles, exorcisms, empty tomb, and resurrection. Altogether, there is probably more openness to the general New Testament view of Jesus at present than there has been in decades, or perhaps even since the rise of the First Quest in nineteenth-century Germany. Writing about the same time as Sanders’s text and after examining four key attitudes in the related area of Christology, another major New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown, concluded that the prominent position was what he termed “Scholarly (Moderate) Conservatism.” As Brown points out, “In the third quarter of the 20th century there was a shift to a position more conservative than that of Bultmann.”⁶

Where does this leave us concerning the current state of resurrection studies? Returning to Sanders’s assessment regarding the New Testament studies of two decades or so ago, he considered that one of the “secure facts” was the conclusion that, after His death, Jesus appeared in some sense to His followers.⁷

Several years ago, confirming the results of Sanders’s study, I published a survey of recent critical scholars and found that almost three-quarters of them accepted in some sense the actual resurrection appearances of Jesus. Further, three of every four of these researchers thought that Jesus’ appearances were bodily in nature. Overall, that meant that less than a quarter of all these scholars rejected the Resurrection, preferring a natural alternative.⁸

Given the much more positive research results of late, those who wished to deny the Resurrection had a comparatively more difficult time developing a creative stance that opposed these data on historical grounds. This may well account for the comparative paucity of natural rejoinders. So where did these critics go from here?

A DIFFERENT SET OF RESURRECTION CHALLENGES

For the most part, the old naturalistic standby hypotheses mentioned above are cited much less frequently today, even by skeptical scholars. Instead, more general approaches are often employed — what might be termed metacritiques. These attempts are overarching skeptical replies that may challenge the entire subject of truly supernatural events as a whole, as opposed to proposing individual critiques of key resurrection components.

In other words, there seem to be fewer new, creative attempts to eliminate a crucial component of the Resurrection message, which would in turn neutralize the entire report. On the old claim that the disciples stole His dead body, for example, the remainder of the story might even be accepted in a more-or-less straightforward manner. For if the disciples subsequently lied about His appearances, then their preaching that He “appeared” to them would hardly be an issue. The miraculous element would thereby be eliminated.

A word should be added here regarding the important distinctions between the scholars and the nonscholars who offer these resurrection criticisms. While we can only speak here in the broadest generalities, very skeptical *scholars* sometimes do still cling to the older naturalistic approaches, while choosing just one of these options and sticking with it as their chief explanation is increasingly less common. It is almost as if they do not want their only challenge to be disproven, leaving them with no fallback, so they may mention several nonmiraculous options.

The nonscholars who oppose the Christian message tend to be far less disciplined, and their denials of the Resurrection may come from just about anywhere, while anger sometimes seems to hover just slightly below the surface. These responses are far more likely to be the ones that doubt or even deny Jesus' existence altogether, while often manifesting very little knowledge of where scholarship is today. Shooting from the hip, so to speak, these complaints are often offered in an authoritative manner, as if a mere assertion is all the grounding that is needed. A few of these distinctions will be sharpened up somewhat as we move along in the discussion.

Rather incredibly, critics in nineteenth century German theology went through a very similar process, right down to the nonscholarly segment of German liberals, who also offered their criticisms. Albert Schweitzer referred to the latter as "a few imperfectly equipped freelances."⁹ In the heyday of these alternative challenges to the Resurrection, scholars began by trying to eliminate key components of the resurrection claim, thereby nullifying the impact of the message while largely leaving intact the majority of the story's details. But in the next round of responses, several of these critical scholars broke ranks with their colleagues and actually either abandoned or simply ignored many of the New Testament accounts, declaring that the whole story was mistaken, or at least nonauthoritative.¹⁰ It is this latter sort of maneuver that is seldom addressed, but which we are concentrating on in this article.

One family of preferred responses today has to do with the charge that miracles simply do not occur in a world such as ours. It might be expressed in a popular slogan such as, "Extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence." "Extraordinary events" often refers to claims about the world that involve what are thought to be the equivalent of fairy tales being true. A more direct assertion heading in a similar direction would be that "dead people stay dead."

A second very common comeback is that if Christians are going to attempt to prove the Resurrection or other miracle claims, they need real evidence that does not involve quoting prejudiced writings such as the New Testament. Here the idea is that Christians must utilize something other than their own religious propaganda in order to establish their thesis. Otherwise, the results sound sort of like arguing that we must indeed be smart students because our mothers told us so!

As mentioned, these comebacks regularly bypass the individual Resurrection details and prefer to posit a "one size fits all" sort of approach. The point is that, rather than digging into the specific details, larger overall considerations should do the trick.

In the remainder of this article, we will address these two metacritiques that often call for abandoning the Resurrection project. How should believers address the

claim that miracles just do not occur, and therefore the evidence is simply insufficient? What about the notion that the New Testament is a biased text written by believers and therefore should not be allowed as a source?

RESPONDING TO THE CRITICISM

Many responses could be made to each of the two metacritiques just mentioned in light of the available evidence. It ought to be noticed initially that, purposefully or not, these challenges have attempted to shift the playing field somewhat. Instead of directing particular challenges to the Resurrection itself, these overarching questions often sidestep the actual event to pose roadblocks based on the specifics *surrounding* the event.

Denying a Supernatural Reality

The initial stance here denies the existence of any supernatural realm. Since miracles are believed not to occur, no amount of evidence will ever qualify as establishing these incredible events. The popular phrase “extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence” typifies this approach. *If* there is in fact no supernatural realm, *then* something must be mistaken regarding *any* claim that purports to show events originating *in* that realm. The bottom line is that *no* amount of evidence, theoretically, could show otherwise.

The heart of this objection more often assumes the truth of naturalism, which involves the claim that the whole of reality excludes any supernatural realm. This perspective (or significant strands of it) has for some time been the dominant worldview in the Western world, having held sway in most of our universities and other prominent learning institutions. It often appears to be the case that when a particular trend — philosophical, political, or religious — gains this sort of dominance, it often becomes less introspective and overly confident. Naturalism is no exception to this trend.

This is most likely why, for example, naturalistic scholars often respond with a guffaw to comments that Christianity is true, followed by a mere *assertion* that these religious views are simply mistaken. In such circumstances, the Christian may be so used to being on the defensive that even well-equipped believers often resort immediately to a list of arguments or evidences. Believers often become excellent counterpunchers in these circumstances!

Though more seldom used, why shouldn't the questioner's own underlying assumptions be challenged? For example, *why* should naturalism simply be assumed here and allowed to stand unopposed *without the need to support its own assertions and assumptions*? Many philosophers would assert that naturalism is on slippery ground at this point, since this view cannot be “proven” as the grounds for posing such a challenge in the first place. Many counterarguments stand against it too, as even some naturalists, such as Thomas Nagel, acknowledge.

Conversely, in this same context, how could it be known that a theistic God does *not* exist, which is a naturalistic requirement? Unless we know that God does not exist, the naturalistic challenge fails on those grounds alone!

Such an approach frequently changes the conversation rapidly and completely! If the assumption here is that miracles simply do not ever happen, thus no evidence could show that they occurred, on what grounds should *that* conjecture be allowed to stand without the appropriate buttressing data? In other words, on what grounds is naturalism itself automatically the default position of the universe, thereby having the power to trump any and all religious statements?

Assuming the naturalistic worldview in this context is meant to eliminate the supernatural claim in the first place, hopefully without even a debate. However, when naturalism is challenged and shown not to occupy that exalted position, the discussion is then forced back where it belongs: precisely to the issue of which argument offers the best *evidence*? With both positions stated fairly, now a decision can be made without so many prior assumptions clogging the discussion. Here is where the theist can marshal considerations that favor God's existence, such as intelligent design and fine-tuning arguments, which are highly problematic for naturalists. Strong arguments in favor of Jesus' resurrection also can be used fruitfully.

The New Testament Writings as Sources

Our second objection comes chiefly from popular, nonspecialist writers. The often vociferous claim is that data concerning early Christianity that is drawn from the New Testament writings do not really count, since these sources are prejudiced in that they were written by believers who had something to gain by making the claims in question.

There are many reasons why specialists, even the non-Christian ones, would never regard such a claim as a rule to guide their research. For example, should researchers jettison potentially good information from many sources that do not present backup evidence and/or are reported only by writers who have something to gain? Do we reject Julius Caesar's book *The Conquest of Gaul*, or Colonel William Travis's personal letters written from the Alamo when it was under siege, or private reports of personal accomplishments gleaned from presidential diaries, or from anywhere else where the writers could be thinking of their own reputations?

That's not the way history is written. Why not? Scholars who know the methods of their craft can gather probable historical nuggets from Homer's ancient epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, even though they were not written as history texts. Good researchers often locate backup for other events, even confirming reports from "prejudiced" texts. For example, the agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman lists twelve early, independent sources for the truth of Jesus' crucifixion, most of which are taken from the New Testament.¹¹ Non-Christian specialists who are atheists, agnostics, or skeptical in other ways, such as Ehrman and the late Maurice Casey, have produced many volumes listing dozens of historical facts that we can learn about Jesus, gathered from the New Testament.

One example is that virtually all scholarly critics unanimously allow Paul's seven major epistles to be cited as undisputed and authoritative texts.¹² These critical scholars do not even hesitate to cite key historical passages from these writings, as well as from other New Testament books, especially when there is confirmatory evidence. It would be difficult to find even a single New Testament specialist who would raise this objection about not using New Testament material, although it is still heard quite frequently among the popular, nonscholarly writers.

A similar charge also posed chiefly among popular writers is that the gospel Resurrection texts contain too many apparent contradictions. This point is encountered in scholarly writings too, but more to note matters that need further research. Scholars very seldom cite these issues just to argue that the text cannot be historical as a result.

The hardest-hitting comeback to this objection may well be what I have termed the "Minimal Facts Method." It utilizes only those historical facts surrounding the death and resurrection appearances of Jesus that exhibit two prerequisites: most crucially, each is backed up and confirmed by many independent evidences. Further, as a result, these facts are considered to be historical by virtually every critical scholar who addresses this subject.¹³

The strength of the minimal facts argument is that even by using *only* the strongest historical facts that are also accepted as such by critical scholars, an especially strong case for the resurrection of Jesus can be constructed. So even though these data come from the New Testament, and despite whatever unresolved problems exist with *other* biblical passages, the factual foundation for the Resurrection is firm — a secure resting place for faith.

Attacks on Jesus' resurrection will continue, since critics know that it is the very heart of the Christian message. Whether facing the old sorts of criticisms or newer, more generic questions, the historical and other data are more than sufficient to handle the challenges. Since these facts are secure, the basis for Resurrection belief is also firm, establishing the truth of the "yellow brick road" of the gospel message that follows naturally from the greatest event in history down the path to eternal life.

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NOTES

- 1 Among the more popular volumes, the most detailed set of responses to both the classical as well as to newer natural alternatives is found in the almost hundred pages in Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

- 2 See, e.g., Laurence W. Miller, *Jesus Christ Is Alive* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1949), 45–52.
- 3 E.g., Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1966), 68–69.
- 4 Both Barth and Bultmann agreed in rejecting any quests to establish a historical Jesus. However, Bultmann plainly rejected the bodily resurrection of Jesus, while Barth just as surely accepted this event along with Jesus' appearances. Still, even Barth opposed the need to offer any evidence on behalf of the Resurrection or for the Christian faith as a whole.
- 5 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 4–14, 164–68, 276–81.
- 6 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist, 1994), 14–15.
- 7 Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 11, 13, 278, 280.
- 8 Gary Habermas, "Mapping the Recent Trend toward the Bodily Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Light of Other Prominent Critical Positions," in *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), esp. 91–92.
- 9 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1906, reprinted 1968), 38.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 51–57.
- 11 Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 291, 163.
- 12 Namely, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon are considered to be authoritative texts that can be used in constructing such a historical case. Ehrman calls them the "seven undisputed letters" (Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 263, 290.)
- 13 For details, see Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, esp. chaps. 3–4.