

# IS THERE SUFFICIENT HISTORICAL EVIDENCE TO ESTABLISH THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS?

Robert Greg Cavin

A number of Christian philosophers, most recently Gary R. Habermas and William Lane Craig, have claimed that there is sufficient historical evidence to establish the resurrection of Jesus conceived as the transformation of Jesus' corpse into a living supernatural body that possesses such extraordinary dispositional properties as the inability to ever die again. I argue that, given this conception of resurrection, our only source of potential evidence, the New Testament Easter traditions, cannot provide adequate information to enable us to establish the historicity of the resurrection—even on the assumption that these traditions are completely historically reliable.

A lively debate has taken place over the last several years (often in the pages of this journal) concerning the possibility of establishing the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Although many crucial issues have been discussed, e.g., the reliability of the New Testament Easter traditions, other problems, equally important, remain too long overlooked. It is the purpose of this paper to consider one of these neglected problems. I shall argue, in particular, that because resurrection entails the transformation of a corpse into a supernatural body, our only source of potential evidence, *viz.*, the New Testament Easter traditions, do not provide sufficient information to enable us to establish the historicity of the resurrection—even on the assumption of their complete historical reliability.

In order to appreciate this problem it is necessary to consider two matters. First, it is necessary to consider what precisely is being claimed as being established by the New Testament Easter traditions by those who claim that these are sufficient to establish the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. That is, it is necessary to consider what exactly the resurrection is conceived by these individuals to be and, accordingly, what kind of evidence would be required to establish it. Second, it is necessary to consider what kind of evidence is actually afforded by the New Testament Easter traditions and, correlatively, what this evidence is capable of establishing. I shall discuss these matters in turn.

Let us thus first examine the concept of resurrection supposed by those who claim that there is sufficient evidence to establish the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, most notably, William Lane Craig, Gary R. Habermas, Murray J. Harris, George Eldon Ladd, and Wolfhart Pannenberg.<sup>1</sup> According to this concept, resurrection is the transformation



of a corpse into a living supernatural body (*soma pneumatikon*)<sup>2</sup> and, as such, is to be sharply distinguished from the resuscitation of a dead individual to the ordinary, premortem state of life (e.g., Lazarus in Jn. 11:39-44).<sup>3</sup> Typical here is the analysis given by Craig:

Resurrection is not resuscitation. The mere restoration of life to a corpse is not a resurrection. A person who has resuscitated returns only to this earthly life and will die again.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast:

Jesus rose to eternal life in a radically transformed body that can be described as immortal, glorious, powerful, and supernatural. In this new mode of existence he was not bound by the physical limitations of this universe, but possessed superhuman powers.<sup>5</sup>

This concept of resurrection, of course, comes directly from the New Testament where the term '*anastasis*' ('resurrection') is reserved exclusively for that species of revivification affirmed of both Jesus on the third day and the dead at the end of this age—but never applied to resuscitation.<sup>6</sup> This is clear from the biblical passages that are constitutive of this concept, e.g., the saying ascribed to Jesus in Luke 20:36:

Those accounted worthy to attain ... the resurrection from the dead ... cannot die any more, because they are equal to the angels ...

and the Pauline teaching of 1 Corinthians 15:42-44b:

So is it with the resurrection from the dead.  
 What is sown is perishable,  
     what is raised is imperishable.  
 It is sown in dishonor,  
     it is raised in glory.  
 It is sown in weakness,  
     it is raised in power.

As is evident from these passages, the resurrection body on the concept we are examining possesses a number of quite extraordinary dispositional properties. Let us look briefly at those given most prominence by the individuals, noted above, who suppose this concept. It has already been observed, in the second quotation from Craig, that the resurrection body is immortal—it is impossible for it to die. Those who are resurrected, for example, cannot suffocate or be killed by poison, fire, or electrocution. Beyond mere immortality, however, which is compatible with eternity spent as, say, a leper or a quadriplegic, the resurrection body possesses the much stronger property of imperishability; i.e., as Craig, Harris, and Ladd have observed, it cannot suffer deterioration or deformity or, indeed, any kind or degree of physical indignity.<sup>7</sup> This has three important logical consequences. First, it is impossible for the resurrection body to age—it can-

not wrinkle or lose its firmness or become frail with ever increasing time.<sup>8</sup> Second, the resurrection body is insusceptible to all illness and disease, e.g., it cannot contract the common cold or AIDS, and thus enjoys absolutely perfect health.<sup>9</sup> Third, the resurrection body cannot be injured in any way, e.g., it cannot be blinded by acid or bruised in a fall or cut by a sword or be otherwise disfigured or maimed.<sup>10</sup> In addition to imperishability, finally, the resurrection body also possesses enormous power—in particular, as Ladd and Craig have observed, the power to move instantaneously from place to place, i.e., to vanish and reappear, at will, without regard for spatial distances.<sup>11</sup> Lazarus, of course, once resuscitated, would have to walk in order to get around; he would be doomed to continue to age, to become sick or injured on occasion, and to eventually die again. But this is not possible, on the concept we are examining, for one who has undergone resurrection from the dead.

Now, from this brief review of the concept of resurrection held by those who claim that there is sufficient historical evidence to establish the resurrection of Jesus, it is clear that the hypothesis of the resurrection is *not* to be identified with the comparatively weak claim of revivification:

- (1) Jesus died and afterwards he became alive once again.

which is strictly neutral between the hypotheses of Jesus' resurrection and resuscitation. Rather, the resurrection hypothesis is logically equivalent to the much bolder claim:

- (2) Jesus died and afterwards he was transformed into a living supernatural body.

which entails not only (1) but also the following dispositional propositions:

- (3) Jesus became no longer able to die.
- (4) Jesus became no longer able to age.
- (5) Jesus became no longer able to be sick.
- (6) Jesus became no longer able to be injured.
- (7) Jesus became able to move at will instantaneously from place to place.<sup>12</sup>

Correlatively, it is clear that those who claim that the New Testament Easter traditions are sufficient to establish the resurrection hypothesis are claiming not merely that there is sufficient evidence to establish (1) but, quite significantly, that this evidence is sufficient to establish the much stronger hypothesis (2) and, in consequence, the specific dispositional propositions it logically implies, *viz.*, (3) through (7). This can be seen once again in the typical claims they make regarding this matter, e.g., the following claim by Habermas:

The evidence shows that the claims of the earliest eyewitnesses have been vindicated—Jesus' literal Resurrection from the dead in a glorified, spiritual body is the best explanation for the facts.<sup>13</sup>

Now that we have seen how resurrection is conceived by those who claim that the New Testament Easter traditions are sufficient to establish the resurrection of Jesus, we can begin to consider what kind of evidence is required to establish the resurrection hypothesis. Here it is crucial to avoid the mistake of those who, neglectful of this (the biblical) concept, have been tempted to suppose that establishing the hypothesis of the resurrection is merely a matter of establishing the conjunction of two singular historical propositions, *viz.*:

- (1) Jesus died and afterwards he became alive once again.

For example, Thomas Sherlock in his classic *Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection* argues that:

A man rising from the dead is an object of sense, and can give the same evidence of his being alive, as any other man in the world can give. So that a resurrection considered only as a fact to be proved by evidence is a plain case: it requires no greater ability in the witnesses, than that they be able to distinguish between a man dead and a man alive; a point in which I believe every man living thinks himself a judge.<sup>14</sup>

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The problem here is that Sherlock has confused the relatively weak claim of revivification (1) with the much bolder resurrection hypothesis:

- (2) Jesus died and afterwards he was transformed into a living supernatural body.

But now, while (1) may well be established through sense perception by the kind of two-step procedure envisaged by Sherlock, this is quite impossible in the case of (2). For (2) logically implies not only (1) but dispositional propositions (3) through (7)—which alone distinguish it from the hypothesis of Jesus' resuscitation. Accordingly, in order to establish the resurrection hypothesis it will also be necessary to establish these dispositional propositions. As will now be explained, however, establishing (3) through (7), in order to establish the hypothesis of the resurrection, requires far more than merely establishing singular propositions about the past.

Dispositional propositions (3) through (7), of course, are singular propositions, containing the proper name 'Jesus.' However, these propositions are also, in part, universal generalizations that make very bold claims about the past, the present, and all times of the future. To see this note that (3) through (7), as logical consequences of (2), must be understood as elliptical propositions that (within the limitations of our best information) make

implicit reference to the approximate time of the alleged events they relate, *viz.*, the period from 30 to 33 C.E.<sup>15</sup> This is because (2) itself, as understood by those who hold that there is sufficient evidence to establish the resurrection of Jesus, is not the temporally vague claim that the resurrection occurred at some time or other in the past, but rather, the comparatively definite proposition:

- (2) Jesus was transformed into a living supernatural body some-time, after his death, between 30 and 33 C.E.

(For example, (2) is clearly understood in the literature, despite its lack of explicit temporal reference, as being incompatible with a date for the resurrection during the time of Moses or World War II.) Thus, dispositional propositions (3) through (7), as logical consequences of (2), contain this implicit temporal reference as well. As a result, however, these propositions also consist, in part, of universal generalizations about the past, the present, and all times of the future. Consider, for example, dispositional proposition:

- (6) Jesus became no longer able to be injured.

This asserts that Jesus became no longer able to be injured at some (unspecified) time between 30 and 33 C.E. and thus (in part) that immediately before this time Jesus was not unable to be injured whereas at all times after this time he has been/will be unable to be injured. Accordingly, (6) has as a major constituent a universal generalization about the past, the present, and all times of the future, *viz.*:

- (8) Jesus is unable to be injured at any time after 33 C.E.

Similarly, dispositional propositions (3) through (5) and (7) have the following universal generalizations as major components as well:

- (9) Jesus is unable to die at any time after 33 C.E.  
 (10) Jesus is unable to age at any time after 33 C.E.  
 (11) Jesus is unable to be sick at any time after 33 C.E.  
 (12) Jesus is able to move at will instantaneously from place to place at any time after 33 C.E.

These universal generalizations, moreover, make claims of a very strong kind since they concern the dispositional properties of Jesus' resurrection body. (8), for example, does not claim that it is a mere matter of happenstance that at each time after 33 C.E. nothing injures Jesus. Rather, it claims that at any such time nothing *can* injure Jesus—that this is a physiological impossibility. It is clear, then, that very bold universal generalizations are constituents of dispositional propositions (3) through (7) and,

as such, logical consequences of the resurrection hypothesis (2). Accordingly, in order to establish (2) it will also be necessary to establish these universal generalizations.

But now consider what kind of evidence is required to establish universal generalizations (8) through (12). Let us pursue this matter by looking more generally at any proposition of the form:

- (13) Object  $s$  is able/unable to  $\phi$  at any time after  $\tau$ .

There would seem to be only two possible ways of establishing such a proposition—depending upon the extent of our previous experience with objects of the same kind as  $s$ . We will consider each of these and then apply the results to determine specifically what kind of evidence is required to establish universal generalizations (8) through (12).

First consider those cases in which  $s$  is an object of a kind  $\psi$  of which we have had considerable previous experience. Here it may be possible, without the need for direct testing, to establish a proposition of the form of (13) “from above,” i.e., by deriving it as a consequence from some previously well-established general hypothesis of the form that links objects of kind  $\psi$  with the permanent ability/inability to  $\phi$ , *viz.*:

- (14) Objects that are  $\psi$  at a given time are able/unable to  $\phi$  at any time thereafter.

The evidence we will need to accomplish this is simply the corresponding proposition of the form:

- (15) Object  $s$  is  $\psi$  at time  $\tau$ .

Thus, for example, suppose that a clay pot is fired in a kiln on May 14, 1997. Then we can establish the dispositional proposition:

- (16) The clay pot is brittle at any time after May 14, 1997.

without ever actually having to try to crack, fragment, or shatter the pot by simply appealing to the well-established generalization:

- (17) Clay that is fired in a kiln at a given time is brittle at any time thereafter.

in conjunction with the particular observation-based proposition:

- (18) The clay pot was fired in a kiln on May 14, 1995.

Now consider those cases in which  $s$  is the kind of object of which we have had little or no previous experience, so that we lack generalizations regarding the properties of objects of this kind. Here it will be necessary to establish a proposition of the form of (13) “from below,” i.e., by gathering information about  $s$  that *directly* tests it for the ability/inability to  $\phi$  at

any time after  $\tau$ . Suppose, for example, that an old tree stump, found soaking in a vat of some unknown fluid labeled "E.K.S.," retains this substance, but in solidified form, after its removal from the vat. Then, since, *ex hypothesi*, we have no generalizations regarding the behavior of wood saturated with substance E.K.S., it will be necessary in order to establish one or the other of the following dispositional hypotheses:

- (19) The stump is flammable at any time after its removal from the vat.
- (20) The stump is nonflammable at any time after its removal from the vat.

to directly test the stump to see whether it in fact burns. It is crucial, however, not only in this case, but again, in any case generally, that our evidence concerning object *s* constitute a *genuine* test of its ability/inability to  $\phi$  at any time after  $\tau$ . Indeed, it is an acknowledged principle of inductive logic that such a test must provide a considerable number of independent instances (propositions based ultimately upon observation) acquired over a long period of time in which *s* does/does not  $\phi$  under a wide variety of circumstances in which  $\phi$ -ing occurs. To see this, consider, for example, what kind of evidence would be required to establish proposition (20), whose negative form makes this requirement particularly acute. It will not do, clearly, even to have a large number of observations made at various times that merely yield the information that the stump is not on fire.<sup>16</sup> The problem, of course, is that this information does not tell us whether the stump has been exposed to conditions that cause combustion on these occasions and, thus, cannot minimize the probability that it has not—that the stump is actually flammable at these times. What a genuine test of (20) must do, accordingly, is minimize this probability by providing evidence in which the stump fails to burn even though it is exposed to considerable heat (e.g., by being placed in a flame) while in the presence of oxygen. Moreover, such observations must be made under a wide variety of circumstances conducive to combustion in order to minimize the still remaining probability that our evidence (instances in which the stump is not on fire under conditions that cause combustion) is due merely to coincidence or some unsuspected transient factor, e.g., an undetected electric field that, only when present, creates a rearrangement of the molecules of E.K.S. within the wood fibers that prevents their reaction with oxygen to produce combustion. Finally, since the stump is being tested for *permanent* nonflammability, it is also necessary to gather our items of evidence, not just at a few times that occur fairly close together, but rather, over a large number of times that are spread far apart. The upshot of this discussion, then, is that in order to establish universal generalizations of the form of (13) "from below" it will be necessary (and indeed sufficient) to have as evidence a large number of independent instances acquired over a relatively long period of time in which object *s* is exposed to a wide variety of conditions that cause  $\phi$ -ing and yet does/does not  $\phi$ .

In light of this general background we can now see specifically what kind of evidence is required to establish universal generalizations (8)

through (12). Consider first what would be required to establish these propositions “from above.” The task here, again, is to avoid the need for directly testing propositions (8) through (12) by deriving them from some well-established generalization of the form:

- (21) Individuals who are  $\psi$  at a given time are unable to  $\phi$  at any time thereafter.

that links individuals of kind  $\psi$  with the permanent inability to  $\phi$ , i.e., to die, to age, etc. To accomplish this, accordingly, we will need as our evidence the corresponding singular proposition of the form:

- (22) Jesus was an individual of kind  $\psi$  sometime between 30 and 33 C.E.

For example, it might be possible to use the historical proposition:

- (23) Jesus was executed for claiming to be the Son of God and then revived in vindication of that claim sometime between 30 and 33 C.E.

in conjunction with the generalization:

- (24) Anyone who at a given time is executed for claiming to be the Son of God and then revived in vindication of that claim is unable to be sick at any time thereafter.

to establish:

- (11) Jesus is unable to be sick at any time after 33 C.E.

We could do this, of course, provided that (23) is among the items of evidence we have at our disposal and that (24) is a well-established general hypothesis. Propositions (8) through (10) and (12) could be established “from above” in this same way.

Next consider what would be required to establish universal generalizations (8) through (12) “from below.” As is clear from our earlier discussion, here we will need as our evidence a large number of independent instances gathered over a relatively long period of time in which Jesus is placed under and passes a wide variety of genuine tests of the dispositional properties posited in these propositions. Thus, for example, consider:

- (8) Jesus is unable to be injured at any time after 33 C.E.

This is a generalization of staggering proportions! It implies such things as, for example, that Jesus can never be blinded by acid, that he can never be bruised by stones, that he can never be poisoned by snake venom, that he can never be pierced by a speeding bullet, that he can never break his arm falling off the tallest skyscraper, and that he can never be so much as



even singed by the blast of a hundred-thousand megaton hydrogen bomb! To establish (8) "from below," accordingly, it will be insufficient to merely adduce as evidence a proposition like:

- (25) Jesus had no injury on a small number of occasions (about a dozen) that occurred during a brief period of time (forty days) after his revivification, sometime between 30 and 33 C.E.

The problem, of course, is that (25) omits several crucial items information that are essential for establishing (8), *viz.*, whether the revivified Jesus was actually subjected to injurious agents at the times to which it refers, what kinds of agents (if any) these were, what the attending circumstances were on these occasions, etc. As a result, (25) makes (8) no more probable than it does obvious competing hypotheses, in particular, that Jesus (like Lazarus) was merely resuscitated and just happened to avoid injury during the brief period of time he was observed, that Jesus was able to withstand only certain injurious agents, that Jesus' ability to withstand injury was only temporary (due to some special transient factor), etc. Accordingly, in order to minimize the probability of these alternatives and thus establish universal generalization (8) "from below," it will be necessary to have as our evidence the much stronger proposition:

- (26) Jesus was subjected to a wide variety of injurious agents (e.g., the scourge, hydrochloric acid, cyanide capsules, etc.) under various conditions (e.g., the absence of air, temperatures below  $-320.5^{\circ}$  F) on a large number of independent occasions between 30 and 1996 C.E. and suffered no injury at any of them.

Propositions (9) through (12) will have to be established "from below" in essentially the same way. It must be emphasized, however, in the case of:

- (10) Jesus is unable to age at any time after 33 C.E.

that it will be necessary to amass our evidence over a very long period of time—years if not centuries or even millennia—since this is the only way to detect signs of the aging process (e.g., increasing wrinkling of skin, graying and loss of hair, advancement of Alzheimer's Disease, rheumatoid arthritis, etc.) It is also necessary to note in the case of:

- (12) Jesus is able to move at will instantaneously from place to place at any time after 33 C.E.

that we will need numerous instances in which Jesus specifically *wills* to move instantaneously from one place to another and actually succeeds in doing so.

Let us now turn to the putative historical evidence we actually have for the resurrection hypothesis. This consists entirely of biblical traditions that come from the letters of Paul, the Gospels, and the book of Acts. These doc-

uments report a number of appearances of what is alleged to be Jesus in his resurrection body: eleven appearances on earth (to Mary Magdalene, Peter, *et al.*) during the forty day period that began on the first Easter and one heavenly appearance (to Paul) approximately three years later.<sup>17</sup> Let us grant—but merely for the sake of argument—that the New Testament Easter traditions are entirely historical, down to the last detail.<sup>18</sup> Then we may state these traditions in one compendious proposition as follows:

- (27) Jesus died and became alive again sometime between 30 and 33 C.E. On eleven occasions, during the next forty days, he presented himself alive before various individuals and groups—doing such things as walking, teaching, eating, etc. He had no illness or injury (other than what he suffered in connection with his crucifixion) at any of these times. On two of them he moved instantaneously from place to place—vanishing from the house in Emmaus and appearing later in the Upper Room. On another occasion he walked through the closed doors into the Upper Room. Finally, at the end of his last appearance, he ascended from the Mount of Olives into a cloud waiting overhead. Sometime, about three years later, Jesus appeared on the road to Damascus to Saul of Tarsus and his traveling companions in the form of a heavenly light and voice/noise claiming to have undergone resurrection from the dead.

Details not explicitly stated in this proposition, e.g., that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on their way from the empty tomb (Mt. 28:8-10), are nonetheless tacitly assumed.

Let us now consider, finally, what the New Testament Easter traditions, as stated in (27), are actually capable of establishing. Taking (27) as our evidence for the resurrection hypothesis, even for the sake of argument, is clearly going far beyond “the second mile.” After all, (27) even assumes the revivification hypothesis (1) as a fact(!). Nonetheless, even if we waive all critical doubt regarding the historical reliability of (27), it is clear that this “evidence” still cannot be used to establish universal generalizations (8) through (12)—either “from above” or “from below.”

It is clear, first, that we cannot use (27) to establish universal generalizations (8) through (12) “from above.” The problem here is that there are no *well-established* general hypotheses that link the putative evidence we have about Jesus in (27) with the dispositional properties of the resurrection body (e.g., the permanent inability to die) posited in universal generalizations (8) through (12). For example, we have no well-established generalizations about the properties of revived individuals, e.g.:

- (24) Anyone who at a given time is executed for claiming to be the Son of God and then revived in vindication of that claim is unable to be sick at any time thereafter.

because, clearly, we have no experience with revived persons (especially

those claiming to be the Son of God) upon which to base such generalizations. It may be objected that we *do* have eyewitness reports concerning such individuals, *viz.*, those recorded in the biblical accounts of revivification (2 Kg. 4:32-35; 13:21; Mt. 9:25; 27:52-53; Lk. 7:12-15; Jn. 11:43-44; Acts 9:36-41; 20:9-10). However, these stories, in addition to being of dubious historical value, involve only cases of resuscitation. Thus, even if historical, they would actually tend to support the following generalization:

- (28) Anyone who has been revived at a given time is able to die, to be injured, etc., at any time thereafter.

and thus, ironically, lead us to the contraries of propositions (8) through (12)! And this is the situation quite generally: We lack the requisite experience necessary for establishing general hypotheses that would link the information we have about Jesus with the dispositional properties of the resurrection body.

It is also clear that we cannot establish propositions (8) through (12) "from below," by directly testing them against the putative evidence offered in (27). The problem here, simply, is that the appearances of the revived Jesus adduced in (27) do not constitute an *adequate* sample upon which to base universal generalizations of such immense scope. This is evident, on the one hand, in the case of the earthly appearances of the revived Jesus. These are very few (only eleven) in number, occur within a very brief period of time (only forty days), and, worst of all, do not involve genuine tests of the dispositional properties of the resurrection body. Thus, Jesus is never exposed to objects that can injure (e.g., a mace), disease producing agents (e.g., *Plasmodium malariae*), or lethal substances (e.g., mustard gas), etc. (This is hardly surprising, of course, since his followers would never dare commit such sacrilege as, e.g., setting Jesus' clothes on fire in order to see whether he would burn!) Furthermore, Jesus is only observed during a six week period in these appearances—making detection of the aging process impossible. Finally, in the Emmaus and first Upper Room appearances Jesus does not even will (at least overtly) to teleport. Nor, on the other hand, does the heavenly appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus add anything appreciable to our evidence. For all that was actually observed on this occasion was a blinding light—not the body of Jesus himself.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Paul was not in a position to determine whether Jesus could still be injured, killed, etc. Moreover, there were no further appearances of the revived Jesus.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, we have no observations of the actual body of Jesus from the time of the ascension until the present. Thus we have no evidence that Jesus didn't catch a bad cold in 43 C.E. or that he didn't cut himself on a rock one hundred years later. We have no evidence that he didn't succumb to gangrene or a blow to the head in 503 C.E. or that he wasn't shriveled with old age in the year 1200 C.E. Nor do we have evidence regarding the ability of Jesus to move instantaneously from place to place at any of these times. Consequently, the incidents adduced in (27) can no more establish universal generalizations (8) through (12) than could parallel observations (e.g., made by the townspeople of Bethany) establish:

- (29) Lazarus was transformed into a living supernatural body on

the fourth day after his death by Jesus.

They perhaps offer (12) a scintilla of support—but that is all.

The upshot of this discussion, then, is this. In light of the kind of evidence required to establish universal generalizations either “from above” or “from below,” the putative evidence we actually have from the New Testament Easter traditions (proposition (27)) is far too weak to establish the distinctive consequences of the resurrection hypothesis:

- (8) Jesus is unable to be injured at any time after 33 C.E.
- (9) Jesus is unable to die at any time after 33 C.E.
- (10) Jesus is unable to age at any time after 33 C.E.
- (11) Jesus is unable to be sick at any time after 33 C.E.
- (12) Jesus is able to move at will instantaneously from place to place at any time after 33 C.E.

However, since the resurrection hypothesis entails universal generalizations (8) through (12), it is necessary to establish these propositions in order to establish the resurrection hypothesis. Consequently, it must be concluded that the putative evidence afforded by the New Testament Easter traditions fails to establish the resurrection hypothesis. This conclusion, of course, applies *a fortiori* to the *bona fide* evidence we have for the resurrection hypothesis—what Habermas has called “the known historical facts” of the case—e.g., the basic empty tomb tradition (Mk. 16:1-6,8) and the appearance list given by Paul (1 Cor. 15:3-8).<sup>21</sup>

I think there are two likely objections to my argument that the New Testament Easter traditions do not provide sufficient evidence to establish the resurrection hypothesis. First, and most obviously, it may be objected that the ability of the revived Jesus (as granted in (27)) to appear/disappear and to pass through solid objects signifies a change in the nature of his body most congruent with the supposition that he could no longer be injured, die, etc. The intuition here is that a body capable of teleportation and/or passage through solid matter must have undergone a remarkable change incommensurate with all forms of physical corruptibility. Accordingly, it may be argued that (27) *does* provide evidence at least for universal generalizations (8) through (11).

But this objection is without foundation. Upon closer examination, it proves to be an attempt to establish propositions (8) through (11) “from above” by appeal to (27) in conjunction with the following implicitly assumed generalization:

- (30) Any revived person who can move instantaneously from place to place or pass through solid objects at a given time is unable thereafter to be injured, to die, to age, or to be sick.

The problem, however, is that this generalization is just an *assumption* and

thus incapable of providing the epistemic link required for the relevant items of (27) to confer evidence upon universal generalizations (8) through (11). On the one hand, (30) is not true on conceptual grounds, for there are numerous conceptually possible cases in which it is false, e.g., the case in which the resuscitated Lazarus is directly teleported by God out of the tomb.<sup>22</sup> Nor, on the other hand, is there any evidence for (30)—we have no instances of revived individuals who can move instantaneously from place to place or pass through solid objects (other than the very case in question) and thus have no way of determining what such individuals are incapable of, e.g., dying, aging, etc. Moreover, there are at least some intuitive grounds for holding that (30) is actually false, since teleportation and passage through solid objects would surely seem to require the expenditure of tremendous amounts of energy—energy that would no longer be available for use by a revived body to maintain itself in homeostasis over against physico-chemical equilibrium with its environment.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the appeal to proposition (27) in conjunction with supposition (30), far from providing evidence for universal generalizations (8) through (11), merely pushes the problem of evidence one step further back.

A second natural objection to my argument that there is insufficient evidence to establish the resurrection hypothesis can be summarized as follows. The revived Jesus (as supposed in (27)) was either a liar, himself deceived, or else telling the truth regarding his resurrection. But, clearly, Jesus wasn't a liar—we know this already even from his earthly life. Nor could Jesus have been deceived about the fact of his resurrection. His ascension and later appearance in heavenly glory preclude this and show that he would have had to have known what had happened to him, for God would not allow an individual in such circumstances to be deceived. Consequently, the revived Jesus must have been telling the truth about his resurrection, i.e., what he actually underwent was resurrection, not resuscitation.

This objection, like the first, is also an attempt to establish propositions (8) through (12) "from above" by appeal to the relevant items of (27) in conjunction with certain implicit generalizations—in this case:

- (31) Revived persons who have been great moral teachers are unable to lie.
- (32) Revived persons who have ascended and appeared in heavenly glory cannot be deceived regarding their species of revivification, i.e., whether they have undergone resuscitation or resurrection.

Once again, however, this objection will not withstand scrutiny. The problem here, as before, is that the generalizations presupposed in the objection are pure speculation and thus cannot furnish the necessary evidential connection between (27) and propositions (8) through (12). It is clear, in the first place, that neither (31) nor (32) can be shown to be true by appeal to conceptual considerations. For example, it is conceptually possible that a very powerful evil spirit (e.g., one of the Watchers of the pseudepigraphic book of *Enoch*<sup>24</sup>) or a group of technologically advanced but unscrupulous

aliens (e.g., the Talosians of *Star Trek*<sup>25</sup>) brought about the resurrection, ascension, and glorious appearance of Jesus—either forcing him against his will to lie about the resurrection or else tricking him into believing that it had actually occurred by enthroning him, after his ascension, in a fake heaven as the “resurrected” Son of Man. This is conceptually possible, note, even on the *Christian* conception of God, according to which God is of such a nature as to permit the occurrence of major theological deception, e.g., false signs and wonders capable of misleading even the elect.<sup>26</sup> But that this is at least conceptually possible shows that (31) and (32) cannot be true on conceptual grounds.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, if these generalizations are to be shown to be true at all, it must be by appeal to experience. Unfortunately, however, we have no real empirical evidence for either of these generalizations, i.e., we have no instances (other than the assumed case in question) of great revived moral teachers who have ascended from the earth and then appeared to others in blinding heavenly glory.<sup>28</sup> As a result, we have no way of determining whether such individuals are peerlessly honest or pathological liars or whether they are accurately informed or utterly deceived. There is simply no way to determine the probability of what God would allow/disallow in such cases. The upshot, accordingly, is that the claims of the revived Jesus regarding his resurrection in (27) cannot furnish evidence for universal generalizations (8) through (12).

This brings us to the end of our discussion. We have considered the claim that there is sufficient historical evidence to establish the resurrection hypothesis, *viz.*, the hypothesis that sometime, after his death, between 30 and 33 C.E., Jesus was transformed into a living supernatural body permanently incapable of death, aging, etc. Upon careful examination, however, we have found that our only source of potential evidence, the New Testament Easter traditions, fall far short of providing the kind of information necessary for establishing the resurrection hypothesis—even on the assumption of their complete historical reliability (proposition (27)). This assumption, of course, is rightly dismissed in light of contemporary New Testament scholarship (particularly in the case of those traditions that recount the disappearance/appearance of the revived Jesus [Lk. 24:31,36], his walking through closed doors [Jn. 20:19,26], and his ascension from the Mount of Olives [Acts 1:9].)<sup>29</sup> It has served, nonetheless, to dramatically highlight the ultimate point of this discussion, *viz.*, that the tiny fraction of New Testament Easter traditions that comprises our *bona fide* historical evidence—the core empty tomb tradition (Mk. 16:1-6,8) and the appearance list given by Paul (1 Cor. 15:3-8)—is woefully inadequate to establish a proposition as bold as the resurrection hypothesis.<sup>30</sup> It also serves to rebut the charge, so often leveled by apologists, that the reason critics find evidence wanting for the resurrection is because of overly zealous skepticism toward the New Testament Easter traditions coupled with the *a priori* rejection of the supernatural.<sup>31</sup> For the real problem, we have seen, is one of logic—not metaphysics. Things would be different, of course, if had we eyewitness reports of the revived Jesus passing genuine tests of the dispositional properties of the resurrection body, e.g., the statement of Peter and John that they saw Roman lances bouncing off the body of the revived Jesus as he stormed the Praetorium to unseat Pilate

and take his rightful place as Messiah. But, unfortunately, we do not. Consequently, apologists would do well to stop making exalted claims about establishing the resurrection and turn their attention instead to the revivification hypothesis. But there are serious logical problems here too that await future discussion.<sup>32</sup>

*University of California, Irvine*

#### NOTES

For helpful criticisms and suggestions made in response to an earlier version of this paper, I would like to express my thanks to Dale Brant, Carlos Colombetti, William Lane Craig, Stephen T. Davis, Nelson Pike, and *The Hymenaeus Institute*.

1. See William Lane Craig, *Knowing the Truth about the Resurrection* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1988); *idem*, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity*, vol. 16 (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1989); Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980); Gary R. Habermas and Antony G. N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987); Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983); George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975); Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?," *Dialog* 4 (1965): 128-135 and *Jesus—God and Man*, 2nd ed., trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), pp. 88-106.

2. Although not entirely satisfactory, the English "supernatural body" is a much better rendering of the Greek phrase "*soma pneumatikon*" than the quite misleading expression "spiritual body."

3. This is also the concept of those critical scholars writing on the resurrection of Jesus who do not necessarily hold that the historical evidence is sufficient to establish the resurrection hypothesis, e.g., Raymond Brown, Gerald O' Collins, Reginald H. Fuller, PHEME Perkins, and J. A. T. Robinson. See, for example, Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), p. 73:

It is probably true that a great number of Christians who believe in the resurrection of Jesus have confused this resurrection with the resuscitation of a corpse. For instance, many see no difference between the risen Jesus and the people whom Jesus is reported to have restored to ordinary life during his ministry (Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain). This is a confusion because the NT evidence is lucidly clear that Jesus was *not* restored to ordinary life—his risen existence is glorious and eschatological, transported beyond the limitations of space and time; and he will not die again .... Perhaps we could insist on using "resuscitation" to describe the Gospel miracles by which Jesus restored men to natural life and on keeping "resurrection" to describe the unique eschatological event by which Jesus was elevated from the tomb to glory.

4. Craig, *Knowing*, p. 15.

5. Craig, *Knowing*, p. 127. Cf., for example, the parallel analysis of Harris: "the term 'resurrection' when it is applied to Christ ... refers to the revival and metamorphosis of Jesus of Nazareth after his crucifixion and burial" (p. 58); "the Resurrection was not a resuscitation of the earthly Jesus merely to renewed physical life" (p. 56); and "the resurrection of Christ was unlike the 'raisings' mentioned in the gospels (Mark 5.22-4,35-43; Luke 7.11-17; John 4.46-53; 11.1-44) in that Jesus ... rose in a glorified deathless state (Rom. 6:9)" (p. 57).

6. See the discussion of this point in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Resurrection," by J. A. T. Robinson. Note that throughout this article I am using the term 'revivification' in just that sense according to which all resuscitations and all resurrections are revivifications—but not *vice versa*. It is worth noting in this connection that at least for Paul the verb 'egeiro' also applies only to revivification as transformation into a supernatural body. Thus Paul (Rom. 6:9) gives as the sole grounds of our knowledge that Jesus will never die again the reason that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

7. Craig, *Assessing*, p. 142; *idem*, *Knowing*, p. 141; Harris, p. 121; Ladd, p. 115. Consider, for example, the observations made by Craig (*Knowing*, p. 104): "The resurrection body ... is completely freed from the effects of sin...such as disease, death, and decay..." and by Ladd (p. 114):

The mortal body is perishable, dishonouring and weak; the resurrection body [is] ... imperishable, glorious, and powerful ... Who can imagine a body without weakness? or infection? or tiredness? or sickness? or death? This is a body utterly unknown to earthly, historical existence.

8. Craig, *Knowing*, p. 141; Harris, p. 121. Harris points out (p. 121) that the resurrection body is forever freed from the distressing infirmity of old age and observes in this connection (p. 123) that:

Compared with the earthly and therefore transient character of the physical body, the spiritual [resurrection] body is permanently durable, transcending all the effects of time. Compared with earthly corporeality with its irreversible tendency to decay which finally issues in death, the heavenly embodiment is *indestructible*, incapable of deterioration or dissolution.

9. Craig, *Knowing*, p. 141; Harris, p. 121; Ladd, p. 115.

10. Craig, *Knowing*, p. 141; *idem*, *Assessing*, p. 142; Harris, p. 121.

11. On this point Craig states: "According to the gospels, Jesus in his resurrection body had the ability to appear and vanish at will, without regard to spatial distances." (*Assessing*, pp. 342-43); and: "In his resurrection body Jesus can materialize and dematerialize in and out of the physical universe" (*Assessing*, p. 346).

12. I am using the modal terms 'able' and 'unable' in connection with the phrases 'to die,' 'to age,' 'to be sick,' and 'to be injured' in just that sense according to which a thing is able/unable to die, age, be sick, or be injured only if it is *alive*. There is, of course, a trivial sense in which a corpse can be said to be unable to die, age, and be sick—simply because it is not a living thing. This is the sense in which any inanimate object, e.g., a rock, is unable to die, age, and be sick. Similarly, there is also a sense in which a corpse might be said to be able to be injured—because it can still be cut up, burned, etc. But neither of these accords with the above sense which is understood throughout this discussion.

13. Habermas and Flew, p. 29. Cf., for example, the claims made by Craig (*Knowing*, p. 127):



The historical evidence supports the resurrection of Jesus. The empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith can be explained only if Jesus actually rose from the dead. What are some implications of this fact? ... First, the resurrection of Jesus was an act of God. Jesus' resurrection was not just a resuscitation of the mortal body to this earthly life, as with Lazarus, miraculous as that would be. Rather, Jesus rose to eternal life in a radically transformed body that can be described as immortal, glorious, powerful, and supernatural. In this new mode of existence, he was not bound by the physical limitations of this universe, but possessed superhuman powers.

by Harris (p. 71):

There are compelling historical evidences that encourage and validate the belief that, at the latest, some thirty-six hours after his death and burial, Jesus rose from the dead in a transformed bodily state.

and by Ladd (p. 140):

The only hypothesis which adequately explains the "historical" facts, including the empty tomb, is that God actually raised the body of Jesus from the realm of mortality in the world of space and time to the invisible world of God ...

14. Thomas Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 8th ed. (London: 1736), p. 63.

15. Given our best current information, the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of the resurrection are respectively April 9, 30 C.E. and April 5, 33 C.E.

16. That is, not on fire at these times.

17. This figure of eleven depends on how one tries to harmonize the various appearance traditions. But it makes no difference exactly how many appearances there were.

18. In actual practice we cannot assume the complete detailed historical accuracy of the New Testament Easter traditions since several of the components that make up these traditions contradict one another. I am simply *pretending* here that we can completely harmonize these traditions.

19. As Craig points out (*Assessing*, p. 75 n. 35 and p. 333), all Paul actually saw on the road to Damascus was a light brighter than the sun.

20. What Stephen (Acts 7:55-56) and John of Patmos (Rev. 1:12-16) saw were mere visions—not genuine appearances of the revived Jesus.

21. Habermas and Flew, pp. 25-26. Habermas lists "four core historical facts" as "accepted as knowable history by virtually all scholars" and a larger set of twelve facts as "accepted as knowable history by many scholars." Proposition (27), of course, includes both sets.

22. By conceptually possible here I mean (roughly) logically consistent with the definitions of our concepts.

23. One might well think that the diversion of energy necessary for teleportation or passage through solid objects would increase the aging process as well as susceptibility to injury, disease, and dying.

24. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Watcher," by Theodor H. Gaster.

25. *The Star Trek Encyclopedia*, s.v. "The Cage" and "Talosians."

26. Thus according to the Christian conception of God:

False Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. (Mt. 24:24)

and:

The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Th. 2:9-12)

On this conception, all of the billions of adherents of all of the world's religions (other than Christianity) are being deceived to the point of eternal damnation—by God's permission. Moreover, on the Christian conception God actually allows people to have *unveridical* experiences of being transported into "heaven" and being told things by "angels" which, unbeknownst to them, are diametrically opposed to the truth. Consider, for example, the Kabbalah mystic's experience of the Merkabah in the Seventh Hall of the Seventh Heaven and the near-death out-of-body experiences of the *New Age* movement wherein "revelations" are imparted that run contrary to the message of the gospel.

27. It might seem plausible to hold that the proposition that Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God entails universal generalizations (8) through (12) by virtue of conceptual considerations. Note, however, that our "evidence" statement (27) doesn't assert this. Although more than generous, (27) says only that Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives into a cloud waiting overhead (Acts 1:9) and that he appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus in the form of a glorious heavenly light (Acts 9:3).

28. Nelson Pike has kindly pointed out to me in this connection that from the standpoint of traditional Christian theology there can be *in principle* no empirical evidence for (31) or (32) (or for (24) above), other than the assumed case in question, because according to this view these propositions apply uniquely to Jesus.

29. For excellent discussions of the critical problems concerning to the New Testament Easter traditions see Reginald H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) and Craig, *Assessing*, Parts I and II.

30. Note that even if it is denied that universal generalizations (8) and (10) through (12) are consequences of the resurrection hypothesis (2), this cannot be denied regarding (9), since every use of the term "resurrection" in the New Testament—from the resurrection of Jesus to the resurrections of the just and of the unjust at the end of time—involves the permanent inability to die. But, as was shown in the main text above, proposition (27) provides no evidence for universal generalization (9). Thus, since (2) entails (9), it still cannot be denied that there is not sufficient evidence to establish (2).

31. Craig, for example, (*Knowing*, p. 126) echoes the charge of Carl Braaten:

Theologians who deny the resurrection have not done so on historical grounds; rather theology has been derouted by existentialism and historicism, which have a stranglehold on the formation of theological statements. This makes denials of Jesus' historical resurrection all the more irresponsible, because this conclusion has not been determined by the

facts—which support the historicity of the resurrection—but by philosophical assumptions.

Cf. the parallel charges made in Gary R. Habermas, "Knowing that Jesus' Resurrection Occurred: A Response to Stephen Davis," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (July 1985): 298-299; Harris, pp. 65-67; Ladd, pp. 12-13, 23-27; Pannenberg, "Did Jesus Really Rise?," p. 131.

32. It is my intention to discuss these problems in a future article to be entitled "A Logical Analysis and Critique of the Historical Argument for the Revivification of Jesus."