

IDENTITY AND RESURRECTION: A REVIEW ARTICLE

FRANCIS J. BECKWITH*

If evangelicals were in fact liberals, they would "dialogue for the Bible," heretics would reside in the "community of the alternative religious movements," and we would be told that "love probably should be tolerant." As it is, however, evangelicals have a proclivity for framing their disagreements and ideas in the language of adversarial conflict, usually employing terminology germane to the fields of military science and jurisprudence. Thus the inerrancy debate is the "battle for the Bible"; pseudo-Christian sects reside in the "kingdom of the cults"; we are told that "love must be tough" and that our faith is based on "evidence that demands a verdict."

The most recent conflict within evangelicalism involves the nature of Christ's resurrection, dubbed by one author as the "battle for the resurrection." The two books I am reviewing in this article are both scholarly treatments of the conflict. Both volumes present exegetical, historical and philosophical reasons for their positions. But in a limited amount of space it would not do justice to either text to attempt to summarize accurately the entire content of each and then to compare and contrast one with the other. For this reason my review will focus on the two questions surrounding the dispute the authors have with each other: (1) What is the nature of Jesus' resurrection body? (2) Does Murray J. Harris really deny the literal physical resurrection of Jesus?

I. NORMAN L. GEISLER, *THE BATTLE FOR THE RESURRECTION*¹

In answer to the first question, Norman Geisler writes that there is a numerical identity between the pre- and post-resurrection Jesus: "Jesus was raised immortal in the *same physical body* in which he died. That is, His *resurrection body was numerically the same as His pre-resurrection body.*" As to the nature of this body, "*the resurrection body is a material body. It is not invisible or immaterial by nature.*" Furthermore "Jesus' resurrection was a *historical event*. It happened in the space-time world. . . . Regardless of the supernatural nature of the event, the resurrection was as much a part of history as was His incarnation before His death" (pp. 63-64). Thus for Geisler the resurrected body of Jesus was (1) numerically identical with his pre-resurrection body, (2) physical, and (3) historically observable. Geisler's support for his conclusions is three-pronged:

* Francis Beckwith is lecturer in philosophy at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas.

¹ N. L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

Scripture (chap. 3), Church history (chap. 4), and responses to passages that apparently contradict his position (chap. 7).

Concerning the second question in the dispute, Geisler believes that Harris denies the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus. He argues that a "careful examination of Professor Harris's writings on the resurrection reveal [*sic*] the same basic beliefs: 1) Jesus had a physical, material body before the resurrection; 2) At the moment of the resurrection this physical body was changed into a body that is by nature an immaterial, spiritual body; 3) Jesus' appearances after the resurrection were miraculous 'materializations' of this essentially immaterial body for evidential purposes" (p. 96). In defense of these claims Geisler cites many passages from Harris' books and articles. In *From Grave to Glory* Harris accuses Geisler of not truly understanding these works and for taking passages out of context. I think, however, that Harris overstates his own understandability. Geisler ought to be commended, not attacked, by Harris for attempting to systematize the unsystematic and for giving precision to the philosophically imprecise.

Consider the following. Geisler quotes Harris as saying that Jesus' pre-resurrection body "was appropriately described as 'flesh' (p. 132)," but at the resurrection it "underwent a 'radical transformation' and 'was changed into a spiritual mode of being' (p. 56)." Christ's "resurrection body is no longer a body of 'flesh' (p. 132). [Harris] says '*it will be neither fleshly nor fleshy*' (p. 124, emphasis mine)" (p. 97).² Geisler also writes: "Harris declares that in this new spiritual body Jesus' 'essential state was one of invisibility and therefore immateriality'" (p. 101).³ Contrast these quotes with an excerpt from Harris' published letter to Kenneth Meyer, president of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School: "I am happy to reaffirm that I believe that our Lord rose from the dead in the actual, physical body he possessed before his death but that as a result of his resurrection there was an alteration and enhancement of the properties of that physical body so that he now possesses what Paul calls a 'spiritual body' (I Cor. 15:44-49) or a 'glorious body' (Phil. 3:21)" (p. 103).⁴

The quotations above, when compared and contrasted, indicate a lack of philosophical precision on Harris' part. We are told that the pre-resurrected Jesus had a body of flesh, but that nevertheless it underwent "a radical transformation." We are then told that this resurrected body was "the actual, physical body [Jesus] possessed before his death," but that it is no longer a body of "flesh." Although flesh is a material substance and the resurrected Jesus supposedly possesses the same "actual, physical body he possessed before his death," the resurrected body is in a "spiritual mode of being." Add to this Harris' claim that the post-

² Geisler's quotations are taken from M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

³ Geisler's quotation is taken from Harris' *Easter in Durham: Bishop Jenkins and the Resurrection of Jesus* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985).

⁴ This letter was published in the *Evangelical Free Church Beacon* (July 11, 1988).

resurrection Jesus' "essential state was one of invisibility and therefore immateriality" and one is left with a philosophical mare's nest. Harris does not seem to appreciate the fact that good philosophy is a necessary prerequisite for good exegesis. Sound philosophical analysis demands linguistic precision, conceptual coherence, and logical consistency. Thus any flaws in Geisler's exegesis of Harris' writings lie in Harris' lack of philosophical rigor, not in Geisler's attempt to construct a coherent picture from imprecise language.

Although there are some aspects of Geisler's book with which I have minor disagreements (such as his interpretation of Wolfhart Pannenberg's view of the resurrection), I have two fundamental problems with it: its sensationalist packaging, and its number of misquotations. First, although I am in full sympathy with Geisler's position, and although I know that commercial publishers need to sell books, I think that the book's front cover and much of the advertising for it comes across as adversarial and unscholarly. Admittedly such a criticism is irrelevant to the book's content (which I believe is scholarly), but we must face up to the fact that because of the sensationalist nature of such packaging some nonevangelicals feel forced not to take evangelical scholarship seriously.

Second, Harris accurately points out in *From Grave to Glory* that Geisler sometimes misquotes others. No doubt some such mistakes can be attributed to typographical errors by the publisher, and most of Geisler's misquotes are not substantial departures from the quoted author's original intent. Nevertheless such misquotations serve only to injure the credibility of Geisler's case, even though they do not have anything substantive to do with the question of whether Harris holds to an unorthodox view of Jesus' resurrection.

II. MURRAY J. HARRIS, *FROM GRAVE TO GLORY*⁵

Harris' *From Grave to Glory* is a massive volume. The author's profound knowledge of the NT text, his conversance with western religious history, and his command of the original language is evident throughout. The first part of the book deals with the concept of resurrection in the NT. The first three chapters, however, are concerned with pre- and non-NT views of resurrection and the afterlife: Egypt and Greece (chap. 1), the OT (chap. 2), and intertestamental Judaism (chap. 3). In chap. 4 Harris critically surveys the instances of resurrection in the gospels and Acts (with the exception of that of Jesus). Chapters 5-8 concern the resurrection of Jesus in particular. In these chapters Harris deals with the textual, philosophical, exegetical, historical and apologetic issues surrounding this event. In chaps. 9-17 Harris discusses the concept of resurrection

⁵ M. J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament. Including a Response to Dr. Norman L. Geisler* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). The text from which I will cite is a galley proof. My pagination may therefore differ from the final product, which was scheduled for release sometime in the summer of 1990.

after Christ, dealing with such topics as the resurrection of believers, the general resurrection, resurrection and creation, immortality and the after-life, Church creeds, the distinctives of the Christian view of resurrection, and humanity's appropriate response to our risen Lord. Part 2 of the book is entitled "A Response to Dr. Norman L. Geisler" (chaps. 18–22). Some of the exegetical issues discussed in this part were also discussed in part 1. And, of course, they are the issues most relevant to the conflict at hand.

Although I am overwhelmed and impressed by Harris' scholarship and his obvious love for his resurrected Lord, I am troubled by how he responds to the previously mentioned questions concerning his dispute with Geisler.

Concerning the nature of Jesus' resurrection body, Harris writes that Jesus' "body was customarily 'immaterial' or 'nonfleshly' but was capable of temporary materialization" (p. 375). In defending this assertion Harris hopes to clarify the following summary sentence from *Raised Immortal*: "This suggests that after his resurrection *his essential state was one of invisibility and therefore immateriality*' (p. 53)" (p. 376).

Harris' Biblical defense of this view is very straightforward: Because there are passages in the NT that seem to indicate that the resurrected Jesus is immaterial (e.g. Luke 24:31, 36; John 20:19; Acts 10:40–41a), because there are others that seem to indicate that the resurrected Jesus is material (e.g. Matt 28:9; Luke 24:43; John 20:20; Acts 1:4), and because Paul speaks of Jesus having a "spiritual body," therefore Jesus' resurrected "body was customarily 'immaterial' or 'nonfleshly' but was capable of temporary materialization." Although Harris cites and quotes a number of evangelical scholars whom he believes support aspects of his view (though the quotations are almost always equally consistent with Geisler's view, unless one begs the question), for the sake of brevity I will deal only with his Biblical defense.

The fundamental problem with Harris' defense is that he confuses ontology with epistemology—that is, he confuses Biblical statements about the being of Jesus' resurrected body with Biblical statements about the knowledge of the observers of Jesus' resurrected body. All the "materialistic" passages concern the being of his body (e.g. "Touch me and understand, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" [Luke 24:39b]), while the "nonmaterialistic" passages concern the inability of the observers to see the risen Lord (e.g. "He disappeared from their sight" [Luke 24:31]). Some of the materialistic passages Harris cites (and one that is not cited [John 2:19–21]) have Jesus saying he is a body of flesh and bones. Yet it is interesting to note that Harris does not cite one nonmaterialistic passage in which Jesus says his body is immaterial; he merely cites passages in which Jesus cannot be seen. Granted that the nonmaterialistic passages tell us that Jesus' resurrected body is far different from an ordinary physical body (i.e. it is an immortal "spiritual" body), it is a logical *non sequitur* to say from this fact that it follows that Jesus' body is not physical.

Harris, however, argues that such an inference does follow from the so-called “nonmaterialistic” passages:

Whenever Jesus appeared to his disciples, he was visible to their naked eye. As many as were present on each occasion actually saw him. Moreover, those who saw him could handle him, if they chose to or were invited to do so. . . . That is, when he was visible he was also tangible and therefore material. But the corollary of this is that when he could not be seen by the naked eye, he could not be touched by the human hand, and any human “body” that is intangible must also not be fleshly or material (p. 390).

This quotation accentuates Harris’ confusion between ontology and epistemology, for it does not follow that because one cannot be seen by the naked eye that one is essentially immaterial. The stealth bomber cannot be seen by the radar eye, but it does not follow from this that it is essentially immaterial. As a philosopher and logician I am surprised that anyone can find such an argument even remotely plausible. Harris’ lack of philosophical rigor on this issue detracts from an otherwise well-done volume.⁶

Concerning whether Harris really denies the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus—that is, that Jesus’ resurrected body is essentially material—it is apparent that he does. Of course he does not believe that such a denial is unorthodox: “In his normal or customarily bodily state after the Resurrection, Jesus was neither visible to the human eye nor composed of ‘flesh and bones.’ . . . This cannot be dismissed as an uncommon view among evangelical writers” (p. 392). He then goes on to cite B. F. Westcott and W. J. Sparrow-Simpson, both of whom Harris believes held views similar to his. Whether he is correct about Westcott and Sparrow-Simpson cannot be addressed here. But I do not see why their authority is relevant. If Harris is correct about the views of these authors, then we can only conclude that there has been a larger number of people holding to unorthodox views than we had suspected, not that Harris’ view is not unorthodox.

⁶ An important historical criticism can be leveled against Harris’ position. Although he writes that “apart from the work of J. A. Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrected Body*, which views Christ’s resurrection body as one of glorified flesh, there has been no serious discussion of these issues among evangelicals during the last twenty-five years” (p. 393), Harris completely ignores a whole body of theological work that for nearly three decades has been critical of a similar (though not identical) position. I am referring to the literature of evangelical anti-cult writers who have exposed the flaws of the logical and exegetical arguments for the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ view of the resurrection, some of which are nearly identical to Harris’. See e.g. W. R. Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1977) 34–110; W. R. Martin and N. H. Klann, *Jehovah of the Watchtower* (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1974).