

THE RECENT EVANGELICAL DEBATE ON THE BODILY RESURRECTION OF JESUS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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A controversy has arisen in certain circles of evangelicalism over the issue of the nature of Jesus' resurrection body. It has chiefly centered around differences between Norman L. Geisler and Murray J. Harris. Occasioned partially by Harris' volume *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) and discussions within the context of the Evangelical Free Church, the controversy has continued to the present.

The purpose of this review essay is threefold. After a brief survey of Geisler's volume *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), I will attempt to address what appear to be some of the central issues of the controversy prior to Harris' publication of *From Grave to Glory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). It should be noted that because this latter volume was not made available to me I will only be able to address developments that appeared in print prior to that time. Lastly, I will attempt to draw a conclusion that I think is relevant to the wider field of contemporary resurrection research.

After a terse foreword by Robert Culver, Geisler's volume includes a brief introduction, followed by two chapters that describe some of the key issues to be discussed as well as their importance. Chapters 3-4 treat, respectively, numerous citations from the NT and Church history that teach a physical resurrection body. Geisler then addresses challenges to this teaching in the form of naturalistic and cultic objections (chap. 5) as well as recent theologians who express doubts concerning whether Jesus was raised in the same physical body in which he died (chap. 6).

Chapters 7-8 chiefly view the gospels and Paul in an effort to build a further case for the volume's central thesis. Chapter 9 contains suggestions on insuring doctrinal orthodoxy for Christian organizations, while chap. 10 returns to the subject of the overall importance of this topic. The volume closes with seven brief appendices on a number of related topics.

While a review essay might concentrate on any of these facets, I will attempt in the remainder of this article to address my comments largely to the debate between Geisler and Harris. It is my sincere hope that such will provide more light than heat.

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While much has perhaps transpired within the Evangelical Free Church, a surprisingly small amount of Geisler's book is specifically devoted to Harris' work. In fact only about twenty total pages of text discuss Harris' thesis, sometimes without even mentioning him by name except in an endnote. So whereas much discussion has apparently taken place outside of this volume, the reader would probably not know of it from the book itself. It is true that Geisler makes some strong and serious charges. But these should be considered on their own merits, and I have no right to read other outside contexts into them.

Some have said that Geisler is out of his field and that his book is not scholarly, especially regarding its Biblical exegesis, while Harris' volume is strong in this area. Geisler specifically explains to his readers, however, that his is a general book written for the express purpose of informing Christians about a current issue of some import (p. XX). If we employ the old rule of not judging an author for what he does not intend to do, the fact that Geisler's volume is more popularly written should not count against him, as if this disproves his central thesis.

Further, even if Geisler is not a NT specialist this is not the only discipline that impinges on the study of the resurrection. Another area is certainly that of philosophy and apologetics, as Harris also recognizes (*Raised Immortal*, pp. 57-71). Thus while some may judge that Geisler is not a specialist in one area, it may be the case that others think that Harris has his own difficulties in different but still relevant fields.

Certainly many will agree that perhaps the chief issue is the question of which author is more probably correct on the specific notion of the nature of Jesus' resurrection body. I would like to make a few preliminary comments on this subject. As I noted earlier, however, I am doing so without having seen Harris' 1990 volume. But perhaps this has its own advantages because Harris' earlier volume was presumably meant to stand on its own.

Initially I would like to say sincerely that Harris' earlier book has many strong elements, including the recording of and interaction with contemporary Biblical scholarship pertaining to resurrection research. Further, his studies on crucial NT terminology ought not to be overlooked.

Although there are several portions that invite questions, the issue that is most troublesome for me is Harris' repeated emphasis that, in his essential state, Jesus' resurrection body was characterized by invisibility and immateriality (*Raised Immortal*, pp. 53-58, 123-124; *Easter in Durham* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1985], pp. 17, 20). To be sure, Harris is also careful to assert in these same texts that Jesus was able, whenever he desired, to materialize and enter the space-time historical dimension of sense experience.

But I often found myself wondering how one would establish such a scenario based on an overall assessment of the NT texts. I thought it rather strange, for example, to find Harris arguing that in Luke 24:39 Jesus was not attempting to convince his disciples of his materiality (in spite of the clear reference to his having flesh and bones) but only that he was real (*Raised Immortal*, p. 54).

Further, Harris states that Jesus showed his wounds (24:39) in order to reveal his identity (*Raised Immortal*, p. 25). Would not such identity also involve the aspect of continuity with the same body that was crucified—especially in John 20:20 where showing the wounds served precisely this purpose? And if continuity is so important, how can the appearances emphasize “bodily discontinuity,” as Harris states (*Easter in Durham*, p. 20)?

Additionally I do not think that Harris’ discussion of Luke 24:31, 36 (Jesus’ ability to disappear and appear) proves that Jesus was essentially invisible and immaterial (*Easter in Durham*, p. 17). Why could one not use these same texts in the immediate context of 24:39–43 to argue that Jesus specifically pointed out that his essential state was that of a physical resurrection body and that whatever other traits it possessed were to be interpreted in light of this clear statement? Is it not the case that to argue otherwise from the Lukan material is, at the very best, to argue from silence?

These are examples of my chief question concerning Harris’ position. To my knowledge, his view on Jesus’ essential state being one of invisibility and immateriality cannot be positively demonstrated from the relevant texts. And in the absence of such Biblical verification, on what grounds would Harris substantiate his view?

Of course I could be mistaken in my interpretation of Harris. But I have attempted to read him very closely (and, as I said, there are many positive reasons for doing so). Neither am I a stranger to studying the current state of resurrection studies, and if I have misread his meaning here it is possible that others may have done so as well.

But Harris will presumably explain his position further in his 1990 volume. It is hoped that he will not only do so but that this specific aspect of the issue concerning Jesus’ essential state may be addressed and resolved.

At the same time it should be noted that simply to disagree with Geisler’s statements is not sufficient in and of itself unless the magnitude of the rejoinder is such that it is able to answer the central issue that has been raised. In other words, simply to note myriads of disagreements is not necessarily sufficient to disallow Geisler’s major thesis. In particular Geisler asks the question of whether Harris’ position best explains the Biblical data concerning Jesus’ resurrected state and the nature of the appearances.

To illustrate my point, Geisler and I have a number of our own differences over these questions. For example, I remain unconvinced that Jesus’ body could not possibly have dematerialized at points, such as in its exit from the tomb. It appears to me that to argue otherwise from a purely textual position is to do so from silence. At any rate I surely would not term such a view a “departure from orthodoxy” (*Battle for the Resurrection*, pp. XX, 189). Neither do I think that more spiritual interpretations of Jesus’ resurrection appearances necessarily destroy the possibility of verification (pp. 36–38). Further, if we are not careful we risk ignoring important elements—such as the less objective aspects of the phenomena

perceived by Paul's companions, or the fact that Jesus' resurrection body was indeed transformed and glorified. Additionally, Geisler's volume contains some questionable interpretations (such as that concerning views of Wolfhart Pannenberg) and the labeling of various other views. I also thought the survey questions listed in Appendix G would have been confusing to many respondents for the same reason addressed in the excellent Appendix A, which clarifies options concerning whether Jesus' resurrection body had to be identical in every particle.

But my major point concerning such differences is that they do not necessarily invalidate Geisler's chief criticism. One can, of course, have any number of disagreements with Geisler while not contravening his basic position. And I still think that Geisler is correct in pointing out that Harris' position does not do the best job of interpreting the gospel records of Jesus' appearances in particular.

But whatever is decided concerning the current dialogue between Geisler and Harris, there is another aspect to this issue that begs to be discussed. Harris' position is far removed from that of nonevangelicals who study the resurrection: Most of these contemporary critical scholars reject the gospel testimony that Jesus appeared in a bodily manner. Instead they frequently opt for literal but nonphysical appearances to the original witnesses. Thus there is indeed a major dispute between them and the general evangelical position.

Even many nonevangelical scholars who are sometimes championed by evangelicals likewise do not hold to bodily appearances of the resurrected Jesus, even while regularly holding that Jesus literally appeared to his followers. I think Harris would acknowledge these recent trends even as he has distanced himself from such critical positions.

But there is a crucial point to be made here. It appears to me that there is in fact a real battle for the resurrection and that a large portion of it does concern whether (and in what sense) Jesus' resurrection appearances were bodily. At least on this more general issue Geisler is correct. After all, we have already noted that the dispute with Harris directly occupies only a small portion of his volume. Consequently evangelicals need to continue to offer arguments for both the historicity of the resurrection and the bodily nature of the appearances.

Furthermore, Geisler asserts that the critical position has already made some headway into evangelical circles. At the very least, we need to insure that this trend be halted and reversed.