

THE NATURE OF BODILY RESURRECTION: A DEBATABLE ISSUE

SCOT MCKNIGHT*

In an admirable, restrained, irenic tone, Murray J. Harris has finally essayed to respond to Norman L. Geisler's criticisms of his positions and legitimate status in the Evangelical Free Church of America (=EFCA). (Harris is a tenured professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.) Geisler has surely called into question the theological examination given by Trinity to prospective faculty members. Harris has, as he clearly states, refused to respond to Geisler, not because he was afraid or because he thought Geisler an unworthy opponent or because he sensed that the issues being raised were unimportant. Rather, Harris declined to refute the criticisms because he recognized that time and time again Geisler failed to present his views accurately in context and so created many misunderstandings, the correction of which would have taken Harris more time and space than was prudent. But to avoid further slander of the EFCA Harris has finally taken pen to hand. His book is good and readable and should finally show all concerned that Harris believes, and always has believed, "in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and also in the bodily resurrection of believers" (p. XXV).¹ Harris is quick to point out, however, as does W. C. Kaiser, Jr., in the foreword, that his exegetical positions are not the official views of the EFCA or of others at Trinity.

In responding to Geisler, Harris has written what is in effect two books: (1) The first 300 pages comprises a semi-popular presentation of the background and doctrine of the resurrection; (2) the final 130 pages are a more direct response to Geisler. But should any reader look for fisticuffs, he or she will be disappointed. Only in chap. 18 ("The Antecedent of the Controversy: The Bishop of Durham Affair"), chap. 19 ("The History of the Controversy" [i.e. with Geisler]), and chap. 22 ("Reflections on the Controversy") does Harris respond directly to Geisler. In fact chaps. 18-19 could have been written in a much more polemical manner than they presently appear. In effect, then, only chap. 22 takes on Geisler's statements. Here Harris tackles Geisler's (1) misrepresentations (by misquotation, by distortion, by omission, by ignoring Harris' clear distinction

* Scot McKnight is assistant professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

¹ This review is based on the galleys of M. J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). All pagination refers to galley page numbers, which may vary from the page numbers in the final published version.

between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that of believers in certain respects), (2) methods of argumentation, (3) competence in Greek, and (4) apparent indifference to the "consensus of the faithful," many of whom are worthy of more than polite respect.

Because this review is largely concerned with the debate between these two scholars, my remarks will be limited largely to the second part of the book. It remains here only to say that, once Harris' name has been cleared from the ugly (but false) debris that others have thrown at it, the first half of the book could be published separately and will, I predict, function as a useful textbook for any class addressing either methodology in doing Biblical theology or the doctrine of the resurrection (of Christ and believers). It is an admirable survey of the Biblical evidence and the history of interpretation, prefaced by a succinct discussion of the afterlife in Egypt and Greece (Harris was himself trained as a classicist) as well as a survey of the ideas associated with resurrection in the OT and intertestamental Judaism.

So what is the difference between Harris and Geisler? Simply put, it is that whereas Geisler believes in the "resurrection of the flesh" (the use of a term that must be entirely confusing to most laypeople who have been nursed on Paul's use of "flesh" for "the human being who is inclined to sin"), Harris believes in the "resurrection of the body" (or, as he prefers, "the resurrection of the dead"). But surely, most will say, "flesh" and "body" are not that different. They are, however, as Geisler and Harris define them. Harris understands the resurrected body as a "spiritual body," fit for eternity; Geisler apparently understands the resurrected body as a "fleshy, material, fleshly, physical body" in its essence. Put differently, Geisler is keen to emphasize continuity and identity between present body and future body; Harris emphasizes discontinuity, exaltation and glorification. Geisler focuses on reanimation and Harris on transformation (cf. the terms used by Harris on p. 102).

For Geisler, Harris' views are tantamount to denying the Biblical doctrines of creation, salvation, incarnation (Geisler hints that denial of the resurrection of the flesh is "neodocetism"; see *The Battle for the Resurrection* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989], p. 34), and human immortality (here Geisler does not even touch the finesse of Harris on the meaning of "immortality"). Unfortunately Geisler regularly leads the reader to think ill of Harris by associating him with clearly unorthodox thinkers, including the Jehovah's Witnesses. Further, Geisler thinks that denial of the resurrection of the flesh creates a moral deception on the part of Christ and leads to the impossibility of historical verification. For his part, Harris' chap. 22 outlines, sometimes in parallel columns, the misrepresentations, distortions and omissions that mark Geisler's use of his sources. Harris also offers some telling comments about Geisler's methods (i.e. how he creates both straw men and evidence) and shows the latter's incompetence with regard to the Greek language. The time needed to undo all these contortions has already been hinted at in Harris' book, and he serves to the reader only a few examples.

For Harris, and surely Harris is correct at this point, the differences between the two are clear but are nothing more than "an exegetical skirmish." With Harris it is surely appropriate to ask: "What motivated Dr. Geisler to try to convert what should have remained a private, intramural discussion about the nature of the resurrection body into a public *Battle* for the Resurrection, especially when he was playing the part of 'one man against the world'?" (p. 443). Lest it be forgotten through the quiet approach of Harris, let me repeat: Harris correctly observes that this is a debate, not about the fact of the resurrection, not about the historicity of the resurrection, but about the nature of the resurrection body. And we need to note here the humility that Harris confesses on this issue. At several crucial junctures (e.g., pp. 359, 373-374, 419) Harris properly confesses that his views are not held by all (but that they are held by many saintly and sophisticated theologians) and that they are not necessarily final. He knows that he is undertaking a discussion about which the NT offers precious little data, and he knows that it is out of the question to imagine that one knows all about the nature of the resurrected body. Geisler, for some reason, seems to believe that he has absolutely final conclusions drawn from absolutely clear data about which there are no serious debates.

In essence, I agree with Harris that there is no battle for the resurrection. Technically Geisler's book contains a logical fallacy in design: This is not a battle for the resurrection at all; it is battle about the nature of the resurrection body. (Further, I question if his analogy to the battle for the inerrancy of the Bible is logically apposite. There the issue is largely a denial of inerrancy, not the nature of inerrancy, while here the issue is not one of denial but of nature.) In other words, I agree with Harris that Geisler has trumpeted the issue, calling out that it is a battle, when no real battle is being engaged (as Harris points out with respect to a recent evangelical congress on doctrinal issues). The entire issue revolves around the nature of Christ's resurrection body. Harris and Geisler differ on the position taken, but I cannot see how this makes Harris (or Geisler) any less orthodox. As Church history shows, scholars have not agreed on the nature of the resurrection body. Furthermore, few have seriously thought about it. Fewer yet have grappled with the issue with the expertise, reverence and care that mark Harris' treatment.

And here the differences can be stated clearly: On the basis of the evidence of the NT, Harris affirms that Jesus Christ arose in the same body in which he died. But although he believes that Christ was touched, seen, and so forth, those materialistic encounters are to be understood as "temporary materializations" of a spiritual body. "Spiritual body," when used of Christians, is to be understood as "a form of embodiment that is permanently revitalized by, and fully responsive to, the Christian's perfected spirit or God's Holy Spirit" (p. 400). Jesus, similarly, was raised in a body of glory that was customarily immaterial during the forty days and fit for eternity. But God in his grace allowed the resurrected Lord to materialize (then his body was visible and fleshly) at will from God's

right hand in order to demonstrate to those who saw him that he had been raised and was personally identical to the one whom they had loved or seen prior to the crucifixion. In other words, on the basis of the NT evidence (e.g. Jesus' sudden appearances and disappearances), Harris contends that during the forty days after his resurrection (Harris sees this as his exaltation as well) the body of our Lord was customarily both invisible and nonfleshly. A chart on p. 404 summarizes this well: From an earthly perspective, during the forty days the spiritual body of Jesus was customarily invisible and nonfleshly but occasionally visible and fleshly; from a heavenly perspective, after the forty days the spiritual body of Jesus was solely visible (for heavenly inhabitants) and nonfleshly.

As Harris is quick to point out, this does not make the resurrection body any less real, nor does it make Jesus Christ have any less of a body, nor does it make his body simply a spirit. Rather, it is the same body as before the resurrection that has now been raised immortal, glorious and spiritual. But when Jesus materialized he was "flesh and bones." He could be touched, seen and handled. This he did, according to Harris, to authenticate his personal resurrection. What can be more orthodox than this confessional stance of Harris?

Furthermore this resurrection body, being glorious and spiritual, does not undo the incarnation. Harris states that "the incarnation is irreversible" (p. 413). Jesus as our advocate is fully human, but he is a glorified human being. For sheer brilliance of expression and accuracy of confession I like the following observations: "In the Incarnation the Son of God became what he was not (viz., 'flesh'), without ceasing to be what he was (a diving Being). In the Resurrection he assumed what he did not have (viz. a 'spiritual body'), without losing what he already had (a truly human nature and form). The glorified Jesus is still 'in the flesh'" (p. 413).

In reading this book and Geisler's (both on Easter weekend), I wanted to cry out in agreement with Harris. Surely Geisler fails to appreciate the qualitative and quantitative newness of the resurrected body that Jesus Christ and believers acquire as a result of God's glorious power in raising us from the dead. As I read Geisler I wondered if he really believed in little more than a prolongation of present existence. I must agree with Harris that the resurrected body is a glorious, transformed body and fit for God's presence. The NT evidence seems then to suggest that there is "substantial discontinuity" between the present body and the spiritual body that is ours through our Lord's glorious resurrection. In the end, Geisler's book disappointed me. I am amazed at the logical contortions he manages to produce while at the same time advertising himself as a logician and philosopher. In this discussion Harris appears to be the careful logician and Geisler the ill-informed reactionary.