

1988

## Review: The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy

Gary Habermas

*Liberty University*, ghabermas@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts\\_fac\\_pubs](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs)

---

### Recommended Citation

Habermas, Gary, "Review: The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy" (1988). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 29.

[http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts\\_fac\\_pubs/29](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/29)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu).

twofold significance. Subsequent chapters explore titles of Christ (Messiah, Lord, Son of God) and the significance of what Jesus did for who he is. Here McGrath contends that the NT itself moves from a functional to an ontological approach, a point some will contest, although he is careful to state that the two approaches are complementary rather than contrasting. The significance of the incarnation is that by it alone we come to know God. McGrath's presentation suffers from oversimplification at this point. Without explanation he suggests that "God doesn't just reveal things *about* himself—he reveals *himself* in Jesus Christ. Revelation is personal. It is not given in a set of propositions, a list of statements which we are meant to accept, but in a person. . . . God does not encounter us as an *idea*, but as a *person*" (p. 113).

Part 3 (chaps. 8–11) moves on to examine the work of Christ. Chap. 8 devotes about one page each to seven key words (ransom, redemption, justification, salvation, reconciliation, adoption, forgiveness) while the last three chapters cover three theories of the atonement (moral/exemplarist, Christ as victor, Anselm's forensic theory). A final chap. 12 comprises McGrath's part 4 and concludes the book.

McGrath's text would serve a college-level forum well, but even here it will need to be complemented by other resources. Its total lack of bibliographical information stands out as a real weakness for students who want further help. Seminary students will need something more substantive, and here Webster's tome deserves a wide readership. He brings to the text both scholarly ability and pastoral concern, moving the reader through the necessary paces of discovering who Jesus is to the goal of submission to his lordship.

Daniel B. Clendenin

William Tyndale College, Farmington Hills, MI

*The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus During the Deist Controversy.* By William Lane Craig. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1985, 677 pp., \$69.95.

The first couple of decades of this century witnessed the demise of nineteenth-century liberalism, with its mistrust of supernatural events as well as of most revealed theology. The middle decades proved to be the heyday of existential theologies of various types, manifested primarily in the dialectical thought of Barth and in the more radical tendencies of Bultmann. But while taking distinctly different views on the issue of Jesus' resurrection, both of these scholars exhibited little toleration for attempts to apply the findings of historical studies to the life of Jesus. In contrast, scholarship in the last twenty years has produced a distinct upsurge of interest in historical aspects of Jesus' resurrection.

This massive volume begins with the assertion that few scholars are aware of the dialogue concerning Jesus' resurrection that has occurred over the centuries prior to the present. Craig believes that the period of the Deist controversy, in particular, provides some especially insightful historical precedent for portions of the twentieth-century discussion. Accordingly Craig explains that his chief purpose in this work is not only to discuss various aspects of the Deist controversy over the resurrection as an historical phenomenon in itself but also to assess the arguments that were utilized at that time in order to ascertain what may be relevant for today's studies (p. XV).

The book is divided into three sections, the first consisting of what the author terms "Pre-Modern Anticipations" of what will later become the multifaceted historical case for Jesus' resurrection. It concentrates on the various forms of argumentation found in the NT itself, in the writings of the early-Church theologians through Eusebius, and in the middle ages through Thomas.

The portion on the NT, though brief, uncovers a number of worthwhile points. The endnotes in particular provide many insightful comments for the serious student. One of the few disappointments in the entire volume, perhaps, is that this section is presented too briefly and is even somewhat sketchy. The material on all four gospels plus Acts, for instance, occupies only about 16 pages (pp. 3-19), necessitating some picking and choosing of topics. Yet a developed NT apologetic is not the purpose of this volume, and several pithy points seldom found in the relevant literature are still made. The treatment of Paul's major text in 1 Cor 15:3-8, though it also is short (pp. 19-26), is exceptionally helpful, especially because evangelicals so seldom treat this passage in terms of recent critical discussions. And here the endnotes are perhaps the strongest element in this section.

The second portion of section 1 is concerned with several authors of the second and third centuries who treat the resurrection in their writings, both defending it and utilizing it as part of an apologetic for Christianity. Defenses of the resurrection of the body and Origen's debate with Celsus formulate the key portions of this topic, which is an historical period so frequently ignored by Protestants.

Lastly, in section 1, Craig discusses the time period that he laments as the downfall of historical reasoning. Few scholars of the middle ages pursued this methodology very rigorously, and only two are discussed in much detail: Augustine and Thomas.

Section 2, "The Modern Period," formulates by far the bulk of the volume. It is subdivided into two parts: the upturn in the historical argument for the resurrection that occurred in the eighteenth century, and the decline of similar argumentation later that century and afterwards due to trends in higher criticism and to the philosophical subjectivism then emerging in Europe. The former part contains much of the deist-orthodox debate, including discussions of the nature of Deism, its variety of attacks on the resurrection, and orthodox defenses of the integrity of Scripture and the historical nature of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Here the reader is confronted by some of the major scholars of this period, such as Locke, Blount, Tindal, Toland, Woolston, Sherlock, Voltaire and Rousseau. Claim is set forth and confronted by counterclaim with the principal participants sometimes being placed head-to-head.

In part 2 the decline of historical argumentation for the Christian faith is traced to such causes as Lessing's radical attack on reasons of any evidential sort (especially historical ones) serving as the basis for faith, the continuing surge of naturalistic explanations being proposed to account for belief in the resurrection, and the popularity of an inward, sentimental romanticism. Even conservative theology experienced a shift to such subjective interests (p. 476).

Section 3 provides an assessment of the eighteenth-century debate surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. Subjects discussed include the philosophical issue of the possibility of miracles and the higher-critical methods of Biblical studies. Craig's chief purpose is to ascertain those facets of the past discussion that are relevant to a contemporary study of the resurrection. And here modern critical scholarship has witnessed that the Deists were right on some issues while the orthodox scholars were correct on others.

Craig asserts that the orthodox apologists presented a better overall case in favor of the resurrection, however, than the Deists did against it (p. 542), partially because some of the deistic victories are on what many scholars today would consider important but nearly moot points in terms of the issue of Jesus' resurrection (pp. 540-541), while contemporary defenses of this event frequently utilize some arguments that are very similar to those of the orthodox scholars (esp. pp. 528-535). Craig concludes by making a brief case for the resurrection as understood in a contemporary context.

Yet this last apologetic section (pp. 528-546) is basically only an outline. It certainly needs to be expanded further if it is to stand on its own as a developed case for the resurrection of Jesus. In fact Craig recently has completed a companion volume so that a detailed apologetic can be given for this event.

I recommend this book for those careful students of apologetics who are interested in the subject of Jesus' resurrection and who wish to pursue some of the history of argumentation surrounding it. Such a study would help us not only to understand our past but also to see where our current apologetic approaches are similar to those utilized by others throughout history. Further, such comparisons can assist us in avoiding approaches that are likely to fail even today. Finally, the more than 1300 endnotes provide both additional commentary and sufficient sources (especially original ones) for those who would be interested in a further study of any of a number of important related topics.

Gary R. Habermas

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

*Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration.* By Peter Toon. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987, 206 pp., \$8.95 paper.

Toon has written an "explorative" study of the doctrine of regeneration in order "to stimulate interest and further study" (p. 10). He surveys the Biblical teaching on regeneration (pp. 11-68) and the history of the doctrine (pp. 69-182) before summarizing his own views (pp. 185-189).

The real contribution of this work to the current literature is its lengthy treatment of historical theology. Toon lays out the interpretations of regeneration that historically have been most influential in the various branches of Christianity. It is good to have all this information gathered together in one place. More effort could have been made, however, to explain how the various positions arose and to criticize them in the light of Scripture. Still, Toon's historical survey should prove useful to students and theologians alike.

Of lesser value is Toon's treatment of the Biblical passages that pertain to regeneration. He covers the relevant material, though rather superficially. There is a lack of in-depth exegesis, thorough discussion of difficult questions, and wrestling with alternative positions. For example, on pp. 47-48 he outlines an alternative (pentecostal/charismatic) line of interpretation but does not interact with it. On pp. 27-29 he accepts (practically on the authority of Church tradition) without exegetical argument that "born/begotten of water" in John 3:5 refers to water baptism, but he does not even mention any other interpretation (cf. pp. 127-128) except for the curious view that "water" refers to semen. More needs to be said.

Another problem is that the details of Toon's exposition are too often inadequate. For example, in discussing John 1:11-13 he builds an elaborate argument on the erroneous assertion that *tiktēin* means "to beget" (p. 25; also p. 33). He goes on to "presume" that *gennēthē anōthen* in John 3:3 means "is begotten from above" rather than "is born again" simply because "the ancients put the greater stress on the male's role in generation" (p. 27). His argument for the translation "from above" is merely the observation that Jesus "may have been . . . providing a strong hint to Nicodemus that he was speaking of a special kind of birth" (p. 27). (Despite his exegetical decision, Toon throughout the book speaks of birth and begetting, from above and again, as if it were all there in John 3:3.)

In his final chapter Toon briefly sets forth his own views, drawing upon both Scripture and historical theology. He understands regeneration (inward spiritual renewal) as the gift of the risen Lord that places one in the new age (pp. 185-186). Regeneration occurs when the Holy Spirit indwells the soul (pp. 186-187), which probably takes place, in the case of adults, after "the Spirit first empowers the soul to engage in faith and repentance" (pp. 187-188). Regeneration probably then produces conversion



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.