

2010

Q&A: Naturalistic Theories

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Recommended Citation

Habermas, Gary R., "Q&A: Naturalistic Theories" (2010). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 354.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/354

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Naturalistic Theories:

Question: What approaches can one take when dealing with a priori rejections of miracles or of the resurrection?

Answer: A priori rejections of miracles often say that, even before the data are viewed, there is simply not enough evidence to establish the occurrence of miracles. Here are some brief responses. 1) Jesus' resurrection is a special case where the sheer weight of the evidence may be used to outweigh the doubts. 2) Another response can be made to someone's naturalism: "Sure, miracles are uncommon, but how would you know that they can never have occurred unless you already know that naturalism/atheism is true? Share with me your proof for naturalism. Without that, your rejection of miracles is totally circular--you've assumed the position against miracles without proving it! On the other hand, what do you do with my evidence?" 3) Present several other heavily-evidenced approaches that show that the resurrection is not the only data that we have for the existence of the supernatural. I like to use accounts from the last decade or two that have been published, especially in medical journals. Two other very useful categories, even though the latter is not necessarily miraculous, is Intelligent Design or near-death experiences.

Question: While many researchers have believed that Jesus' death occurred as the result of a ruptured heart, perhaps because of the heart wound, pathologists such as Frederick Zugibe have ruled this out as medically untenable. Other scholars have regarded asphyxiation as being the cause of death, depending upon the manner in which the victim was affixed to the cross. Zugibe carried out a series of experiments with people who volunteered to be tied to crosses, arguing that if the students were suspended from crosses with their arms outstretched but without hanging down, they experienced no problems breathing. Thus the often quoted theory that death on the cross is the result of asphyxiation is no longer tenable if Zugibe is correct. According to the physiological response of the volunteers, as closely monitored by Zugibe, death in this manner is the result of the victim going into hypovolemic shock, among other problems. Doesn't Joe Zias say some similar things? Is there any support for the apparent death theory here?

Answer: The chief issue here is knowing that Jesus died by crucifixion, and I don't see any problems whatsoever with refuting the apparent death (or swoon) theory. Consider the following:

1. In his treatments of the nature of crucifixion, Joe Zias does not deny the connection between crucifixion and asphyxiation, in fact he seems to favor it. But it may depend on how the victim is positioned. I said similarly in my chapter on the death of Jesus in my 1990 co-authored (with Ken Stevenson) book on the shroud of Turin. But it still leaves intact a fairly strong argument for asphyxiation. For example, asphyxiation follows naturally if the arms are nailed or tied closer to or above the head, instead of spread straight out. Zugibe makes a similar comment. A strong indication of asphyxiation is the breaking of the ankles. Why are we told this was done to hasten death? The most natural explanation seems to be that it induced asphyxiation.
2. Even if asphyxiation was not the kind of death that Jesus suffered, virtually no scholar questions that he did die on the cross. It only means that he died by another means. Jesus Seminar co-founder Dom Crossan says that he takes Jesus' death by crucifixion absolutely for granted, and that it is as sure as any historical argument can be! That's

quite strong! Marcus Borg says almost the same thing. After all, it's not required that Jesus died by asphyxiation, only that he did die.

3. The medical argument for the heart wound seems to be quite solid on medical grounds. To my knowledge, most medical researchers strongly favor it. But note that this is a pierced heart, not a ruptured heart. You're right about that.
4. The medical argument for a "sucking chest" wound also seems to be left intact. If Jesus were alive and a spear entered his chest, his executioners would have known that he was dead by the noise coming from his lungs.
5. Most significantly, liberal scholar David Strauss' famous critique regarding the condition of Jesus' seriously wounded body clearly indicating that Jesus was alive but not resurrected has always been the key objection to swoon, according to critical scholars. This very strong criticism is undisputed by any of your questions. The chief point is that in the seriously-weakened condition caused by crucifixion, Jesus could not have convinced anyone that he had been raised from the dead! It would have been obvious to his disciples that he was alive, but no one would have taken his very seriously battered, scourged, nailed, bleeding, limping body to be that of a resurrected Savior! In other words, Jesus would not have provided any reason to think he had been actually been raised from the dead. In fact, after seeing him, it would be virtually impossible for the disciples to think he was raised. But that's the catch that is frequently missed in this argument: virtually all scholars concede that the data indicate clearly that the disciples at least believed that Jesus was raised. Hence, apparent death theories are mistaken, for there is a huge disconnect on this belief.
6. It's looking more and more of late like the shroud of Turin at least makes a serious claim to being Jesus' burial cloth. If so, it's a final clincher against the apparent death theory because there are a number of good reasons (including rigor mortis!) that the man in the shroud is dead.

So, altogether, it would seem that we are on exceptionally strong grounds to say that Jesus definitely died on the cross. No wonder that critical scholars so seldom question this fact.

Question: The Gospel of Matthew tells how Mary and Mary went to the tomb and saw an angel sitting on top of the stone. Mark tells that Mary, Mary, and Salome went to the tomb, were startled by seeing an angel inside of the tomb. Was there at least one other angel? Then again in Luke the women go into the tomb and are puzzled, then two "men," or angels, show up next to them and scare the daylights out of them. In John we also have two angels there. We do get the general idea that women went to the tomb and the angels proclaimed that Jesus was risen. But these contradictions on the number of angels keep me from knowing what happened.

Answer: On the number of angels at the tomb, let's start at the beginning. It's true that Matthew, Mark, and Luke report either one or two angels. But John describes three trips to the tomb. No angels are mentioned on the first trip. Further, none are reported when Peter and John run to the tomb to check out the report. Only on the third trip do we hear that Mary saw the angels. So either the angels were present earlier or they were not (or some combination). If the angels were present on one or both of the two earlier trips, John doesn't bother to tell us, in which case he apparently thinks that other things here (like the resurrection!!) were far more important. But if John knows nothing of their presence the first two times, this may only mean that angels can

alternately appear or disappear. If this is so, there could have been one, two, or one hundred. In other words, I think the Fourth Gospel is very helpful here, since by not answering the questions on the first two trips, we learn that, either way, the number of angels is both explainable and not the true focus of the account.

Question: Christians say that if Jesus' body wasn't missing from the tomb, sources would have come forward and corrected false statements being spread by the apostles. How do we know that that didn't happen and we just don't have them available to us?

Answer: You raise a good question about early sources questioning the empty tomb, but notice that it is an argument from silence. While we do have many sources that discuss Christianity and even some enemy attestation that admits the empty tomb, we don't have any reports that deny the empty tomb. Here's the key: we can only deal with what we have, and those sources do not dispute the empty tomb.

Question: What evidence do we have that the tomb of Christ was secure from grave robbers? Some have stated that there was a Roman guard at the tomb. Is there evidence for this or was it in fact just a bunch of inept Jewish Temple guards? How do we know someone didn't steal the body, not the disciples, but someone else?

Answer: Robbing a tomb for valuables is one thing -- taking the body with you is something else! Why take a male body with you when you are trying to escape? Those who accept the presence of the guards do discuss their identification. But don't forget, while temple guards wouldn't be as well-trained as Roman guards, they would have the added advantage of great religious zeal as well as having to answer to the Jewish leaders, who wanted to get Jesus out of the way.

The empty tomb is very difficult to explain. That's why it seems that about 70-75% of recent critical scholars accept it. That they do so tells us something very crucial about this fact -- why would scholars who are looking at the New Testament simply as ancient literature recognize the empty tomb unless it was highly attested?

Even so, the more difficult item to explain is Jesus' appearances. Among all the problems with someone other than the disciples removing Jesus' body, the main one would be how does this do anything to explain the appearances to the disciples? Really, the only major thing gained by such a move is to explain the issue of the body. As I said, the appearances are the real difficult puzzler on this thesis.

Question: I was talking with a friend who believes that the disciples lied about the whole resurrection thing. I told him that no one would die for a lie knowing it was a lie. He responded that they were already so deep in spreading a lie that they could not stop. How would you respond to this—that they were already so deep into the fraud that they decided to play it out? He said that we have no evidence that disciples suffered for their faith, except from documents that were written centuries later. I know that isn't true but I didn't know what to tell him.

Answer: Even if you were already deep in a similar lie, would you willingly give the rest of your life to promote what you know to be a meaningless lie, just to save face? Or would you simply admit you were wrong, or even take your family and leave town and start over somewhere else?

Further, when your life was threatened, would you then stop and quit, or would you say, "I've gone this far promoting my life-long lie, so I may as well die for it!" Moreover, would all of the disciples respond this way in the face of their imminent deaths?

Further, contrary to his assertions, we do have first century documents outside the New Testament that report that at least Peter, Paul, and James the brother of Jesus were martyred. (See next question below for details of these sources.) Plus, this objection says nothing about how and why Paul should come to faith. Lastly, why did James leave his skepticism when he wasn't part of the lie? In short, it's all highly problematic! This is why this particular hypothesis has been virtually ignored even by critical scholars for more than 200 years!

Question: It is said that the disciples willingly died for their beliefs that Jesus Christ was alive. What is the historical evidence that they indeed did become martyrs? Who says they died for their faith?

Answer: We don't have early historical evidence for the deaths of several of the disciples. But four key apostles--Peter, Paul, James the brother of Jesus, and John--are most important in terms of their immense influence in the early church and their strong testimony for Jesus' resurrection. We have very early, first century data for the deaths of the first three of these apostles. Clement of Rome (Corinthians 5) reports the deaths of Paul and Peter. Josephus, of course, is a non-Christian and reports James' martyrdom (Antiquities 20:9:1). On this topic, then, Christianity is on very firm grounds. However, besides these early first century reports, I think all we need to argue is that Jesus' disciples were willing to die for their faith, which virtually no one will dispute. This shows that they at least believed that their message was true.

Question: What sources do you recommend in answering with various theories that attempt to explain away the resurrection, such as with hallucinations?

Answer: For about 100 pages of general overview of many natural theses (even a few unordinary examples) and the key problems with them, I'd recommend the book by Mike Licona and myself, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel Publications, 2004). I include many more critiques of different versions of the subjective vision (hallucination) thesis in "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: The Recent Revival of the Hallucination Theories" in the Christian Research Journal, Vol. 23, No 4 (2001), pp 26-31, 47-49.

Question: Where can one find information on purchasing the 2000 debate between you and Antony Flew?

Answer: The 2000 debate between Antony Flew and myself was published in a book in 2005. It is entitled Resurrected? An Atheist and Theist Dialogue (Rowman & Littlefield). At the time of the debate, Tony Flew was an atheist; he has since become a deist. If you prefer, the debate is also available on video from both John Ankerberg (423- 892-7722) and from www.impactapologetics.com.

Question: Recently I was reading an essay by a fellow who seemed to be an atheist. Most of what he said wasn't really very new. But I was interested in his claim that the bereaved sometimes do have hallucinations of their loved ones after they've died. Now I realize that it is

doubtful that this would happen to all of the disciples but I would be curious as to how common grief hallucinations are. Also, I've heard it said that the appearance to Paul could be explained by Paul just being so adamantly against the idea of Christianity that he actually hallucinates that Jesus is alive and then becomes the chief proponent of the Christian mission. This all seems absurd to me but I was wondering about your response.

Answer: Speaking about grief hallucinations is basically just giving the old Subjective Vision or Hallucination Theory a more specific name, especially since has been suggested regularly. There are many problems with a thesis like this:

1. Both grief as well as other hallucinations fail to explain the empty tomb, for which there are many evidences. You have to suppose another natural hypothesis for the condition of the tomb.
2. The conversion of James the brother of Jesus is a huge issue, since virtually all scholars think that the evidence indicates that he was previously a skeptic and wouldn't have a reason to hallucinate. Someone can say the cause was guilt, but there is not a speck of evidence for such a response.
3. In spite of the suggestion you mention, Paul is still another huge problem. There is no evidence of any previous guilt, but only his testimony that he was totally sold out to his previous Jewish faith. And he persecuted the church accordingly (especially Gal. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:4-6). Everything we know says exactly the opposite. Further, for both he and James, the fact that they never wavered in their commitment tends to argue against such a "convenient" conversion on their parts.
4. The fact that Jesus was seen in groups, which is recognized by virtually all scholars (see 1 Cor 15:3-7) basically kills this hallucination thesis by itself.
5. So does the different people involved, in terms of various personalities, times, places, etc., for it would be almost impossible to believe that all of them, independently, were in precisely the proper frame of mind in order to hallucinate.
6. Rarely do hallucinations ever change lives, in part because there is good data that people are often talked out of hallucinations.

Question: You mention in your book co-authored with Mike Licona (The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus) that it would have been difficult for a skeptic like James to have hallucinated his brother's appearance because he wouldn't have been in the proper frame of mind to hallucinate. However, James was still Jesus' brother and loved his brother. So couldn't this account for an hallucination? Is it true that group hallucination cannot happen? Is this a reasonable explanation of the resurrection? Why?

Answer: James was a part of Jesus' family, but we are told (and critics almost always agree, if you want to pursue this) that James not only didn't believe Jesus, but thought he was mentally disturbed and they actually wanted to take him away! (see Mark 3:21; cf 3:31, too). As we say in the book, almost all critics agree that James came to believe from a skeptical mindset. So while he was a family member, he was not very pleased with Jesus' preaching! Critical scholars generally agree that James is not a very likely candidate for hallucinations. I'm working presently with a clinical psychologist, to publish a technical article on this. After a review of the literature, he told me that there is no empirical data favoring group hallucinations. The chief reason is that

hallucinations are internal events, like dreams, so they cannot be shared. Besides, as far as I know, no psychological or psychiatric specialists really even argue that this could apply to the group resurrection appearances.