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Rev. Article: A Recent Attempt to Disprove the Resurrection of Jesus and Supernatural Beliefs

by Gary R. Habermas

Larry Shapiro, *The Miracle Myth: Why Belief in the Resurrection and the Supernatural is Unjustified*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, \$27.95.

This text by University of Wisconsin philosopher Larry Shapiro addresses Jesus' resurrection and supernatural beliefs in the context of the miracles question. This Review Article outlines briefly Shapiro's argument, including some critical responses.

Synopsis

Shapiro begins with a 2010 American Pew Forum survey on miracles and the afterlife, where 79% of respondents either "completely" or "mostly" agreed that miracles occur today, with about the same percent accepting an afterlife (ix-x). Are these views based on faith alone, or are there *reasons* here? Shapiro states his goal: "to convince you that no one has ever had or currently has good reasons for believing in miracles." (xiv)

The first of seven chapters and two appendices is entitled, "Justified and Unjustified Belief" (1-16), addressing philosophical grounds for faith. Chapter 2 is crucially concerned chiefly with defining and conceptualizing the nature of miracles. For Shapiro (18-19, 25), such a definition begins with the requirement of supernatural causal forces, typically of a divine nature. Though distinctions between supernatural causes and divine intervention might be made, these ideas are usually conjoined (26, 47, 152).

Shapiro adds immediately from his initial definition that miracles are "extremely improbable" (58, 138), and "contrary to everything we know" (25). They "should be completely, overwhelmingly, awe-inspiringly improbable" (60) and are "never justified" (57).

Supernatural events are typically caused by divine forces (18, 22, 25, 47, 55, 139), so natural explanations will not suffice (18-19, 22, 25, 29-31). Shapiro postulates some counter hypotheses, too (46-52, 140). True miracles, like raising the dead (x, 30; 49; 81; 90), originate outside nature (31). Such events may even break nature's laws, like Jesus walking on water (149-151). However, supernatural intervention cannot be proven (29, 56).

Chapter 3 explains the first of Shapiro's two chief arguments overall: "there is no way to justify beliefs about the supernatural origins of those events that are regarded as miracles." (29) However, circumscribing the supernatural is difficult. Somewhat tautologically, a supernatural event is not accounted for naturally! (30-32) Evaluating inference to the best explanation (33-56), Shapiro highlights Aaron and the Egyptian magicians, offering alternate possibilities (48-56).

Shapiro's second chief argument against miraculous events is that occurrences can never be identified as supernatural. The appropriate background assumptions "can't be verified" which "make belief in miracles unjustified." (Chapter 4, 58) Shapiro's two favorite challenges are raising the dead or lost limbs that grow back (30, 59, 61, 149).

Two related chapters on testimony follow. Chapter 5 addresses evidential conditions of a historical nature, utilizing five species of evidence that Shapiro adapted from skeptic Richard Carrier. These five are written records, enemy agreement, physical evidence, reliability from independent sources, and "implicating circumstances," where sources may count *against* their truth. Shapiro applies these five criteria to the Book of Mormon, concluding that this volume fares poorly (97-106). The second chapter on testimony addresses Jesus' resurrection. Shapiro implies that all written miracle records are weak (109), making the shocking claim that Jesus'

resurrection “is not even a teensy bit better than the evidence that Jesus walked in the Americas.”
(110)

Shapiro admits that most of his data are drawn from two atheist/agnostic scholars, Bart Ehrman and Carrier (113). This move places him on the skeptical spectrum especially with Carrier’s research, which even Ehrman notes is far removed from the vast majority of critical scholars!¹ Shapiro emphasizes anonymous Gospels (116), while dating the canonical Gospels fairly at 35 to 65 years after Jesus’ death (114). But even the “extremely rapid decomposition” of Jesus’ dead body into nothingness is more likely than Jesus’ resurrection (115), naming a host of ancients who reputedly healed or raised the dead, counting even many fictitious persons among them and indulging in a wild string of comments on the NT text (124-128).

Shapiro includes meaningful nuances, writes engagingly, occasionally compliments his opponents, and sometimes exhibits humility (52, 54, 80-81). Many humorous words are sprinkled throughout (2, 18, 42, 48, 52, 63, 100, 112). Moreover, Shapiro admits that he could be mistaken or that there could be sufficient evidence for miracles (23, 59; 77-78, 82, 84, 143), though he disagrees! He is correct that our beliefs need evidence; faith alone will not establish them (xi, xiii-xv, 77, 138-140). His “Further Reading” list (163-164) includes both believing plus unbelieving sources.

A Necessary Interlude

Nonetheless, Shapiro’s volume also exhibits a large number of serious misunderstandings, overstatements, and data mischaracterizations, especially on factual matters. His backdrop employs a *highly-slanted perspective* throughout, one that seemingly assumes some version of naturalism, *although without a speck of “proof” on its own behalf*. Yet it is the

measure of everything else, as an all-pervasive *assumption*. Shapiro's table tilts downward from his own unproven worldview (which may well be unprovable altogether²). But it remains seriously and alarmingly ubiquitous. Why should *any* unproven thesis act as a trump card? This background attitude seems like a thinly-veiled disgust with anything regarding supernatural items or religious revelatory beliefs.

Whenever there is a potential range of views, Shapiro often launches his critique from as far away from any supernatural understanding as possible, such as gathering his gospel data from Carrier and Ehrman! Enough said—specialists already know the outcome.

Initially, Shapiro's definition of miracles unfairly starts the ball rolling against the supernatural, including conclusions of "vast improbability" (18); "contrary to everything" (25); and "impossible" (31). The case is thus unfairly weighted from the outset, while good data are ignored. Yet he began his volume requiring *reasons* for our conclusions, not assertions (xi-xv), thereby questioning his entire *ungrounded philosophical backdrop!*

It is difficult to resist commenting that circumscribing the case from the onset is illegitimate, especially by definition. May all sides be engaged here? But it may seem more like almost *everything* in this discussion stands against believers, while a good, civil conversation is being called for. Then there is the huge issue of Shapiro's "where's your evidence?" questions, though providing no worldview justification himself. Yet his rejoinders include aliens! Is this like an election or sporting event where one side *requires* an overpowering lead before the contest is allowed to begin?

In contrast, many other miracle definitions head in fairer directions of an unusual and religiously significant event which reveals God's purposes but is beyond nature's ability to

produce.³ Like Shapiro, “supernatural” and “divine” are built into many such definitions, too, but without stacked decks aimed immediately against any potential religious outcome.

Shapiro argues in detail (49-51) that counter explanations can always be postulated, even retorting that perhaps there is “a natural cause that we don’t presently understand” (49), posing this explanation more than once for good measure (51). Incredibly, he notes the possibility of “evidence” in favor of extraterrestrials zapping statues of Mary so that they appear to cry (51)! (*Please state this unnamed extraterrestrial “evidence”!*) But this clearly appears to be a “naturalism of the gaps” response, not unlike the reverse of his miracles definition. This stance *assumes* that naturalism *must* be true, so therefore we will embrace heartily *almost anything* rather than a supernatural option.

Naturalists will very frequently cry foul here, postulating that supernaturalism is unevenced, and so on. We have seen this repeated fare in Shapiro. Is any room made for supernatural options that *just may* possess more evidence than often thought, especially when the overall naturalistic backdrop lacks provenance?

Shapiro challenges afterlife beliefs while repeatedly requiring reasons (x-xv). However, new data for Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) may present outstanding potential evidence. To ignore or take NDEs lightly is a huge mistake. These matters have been discussed in over 100 peer-reviewed medical and psychological journal articles alone, plus other reputable literature!⁴ Many patients without *measurable heart or brain activity*, after resuscitation, have reported verified incidents that actually occurred simultaneously, even over distances. Confirmed consciousness during even long “measurably flat” times occur often. These cases have included sightless patients and healthy, unaffected persons who simultaneously witnessed the NDE incidents!

NDE-type experiences have been reported by up to 20 million Americans, as mentioned in the latest medical treatment.⁵ More crucially, over 300 *verified* cases have been identified. These data may even coincide with the same territory being addressed by Jesus' resurrection—the afterlife. The details here are all too brief and sketchy, but these cases have not been refuted. Besides the evidence itself, these matters should definitely caution against allowing unsupported naturalistic tables to tilt too far!

A Further Critique

Other problems abound, particularly in Shapiro's factual comments. After calling often for evidence, he makes many authoritative-sounding comments throughout the book that appear to rest on his own authority and say-so alone, often devoid of citations.⁶

His suggestion of waiting for new naturalistic explanations if one is presently unavailable (49) falls far short, until he fulfills his own demands and produces the evidence favoring them. Otherwise, his approach of depending on future unspecified research could be used to reject many unwanted religious or even scientific ideas.

Similarly, while discussing Inference to the Best Explanation (33-52) and Aaron versus the Egyptian magicians, Shapiro mentions rival natural explanations that he cannot imagine refuting (48). However, as Shapiro notes, Jesus' resurrection is usually taken as the most crucial topic here (107), as his title also reflects. So why the detailed response regarding Aaron, if the resurrection *were even potentially* better-positioned to disprove the other alternative positions, including the toughest ones that Shapiro could not answer? Why the amount of discussion on Aaron's minor case while not spending enough time and energy on the chief event in his own

book? After all, how many books defend the historicity of Aaron's actions? True, Chapter 6 is devoted to Jesus' resurrection, but we will see how well that fares.

Shapiro argues that most miraculous belief comes *not* from the person's own experience but from hearing the "miracle" stories of others (59). This may or may not be the case, but how can his argument be evaluated without data? No matter what is often thought of anecdotal miracle stories, there are many both incredible and well-evidenced miracle reports in the medical community.⁷

Shapiro wildly misunderstands the state of Jesus' miracle-claims reported in the Gospels (79). So content to simply mention an opposing view so as to lop it off, if his synopsis were accurate and if it were so easy to disprove Jesus' miracles, then why do *virtually all* critical scholars today accept that something at least like the miracle reports in the Gospels really occurred? For example, Shapiro should address the well-known (late) skeptical scholar Marcus Borg, who can speak for the majority of scholars today when he attests that, "Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist."⁸

Shapiro uses Carrier's list of five tests for historical truth (93-96) but apparently does not realize that at least four and perhaps all five tests are fulfilled by Jesus' resurrection data! He butchers the information in his own Chapter 6 by often taking almost the most radical views possible. But then he errs often by misunderstanding the nuances involved when the vast majority of these same radical specialists freely concede a minimal amount of historical facts from the end of Jesus' life. It has been argued at length that these critically-acknowledged facts *alone* are able to indicate that Jesus rose from the dead.⁹

If the resurrection data were as bad as Shapiro claims, then a statement by well-known skeptical New Testament scholar Dale Allison should strike a puzzling cord. While calling himself a “crylic Deist” Allison still reports that, “I am sure that the disciples saw Jesus after his death.”¹⁰ Dozens of other skeptical scholars affirm the minimal resurrection data.¹¹

¹ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (N.Y.: Harper Collins, 2012), especially 2-3, 17-19, 167.

² See Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 117-122.

³ Such as Robert Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield [Lexington], 2014), 3, 36.

⁴ For over 100 verified NDE cases, see: Titus Rivas, Anny Dirven, and Rudolf H. Smit, *The Self Does not Die*, ed. by Janice Miner Holder (Durham: IANDS, 2016).

⁵ John Hagan, Ed., *The Science of Near-Death Experiences* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017), 4.

⁶ Examples include much of his definition of miracles (18-19; 25); his comments that inference to the best explanation can *never* support miracle-claims (33-52, 56); the best way to promote faith is not for God to do miracles but to promote peace and happiness (50--by whose definition?); or that there is as much “evidence” for extraterrestrials shooting a beam that makes Mary statues weep as there is for miracles (51). Further, there are no endnotes in Shapiro’s last chapter or two appendices. Shapiro’s *entire book* contains only 23 total endnotes in seven chapters and two appendices, averaging about 2½ notes each.

⁷ Many strong examples may be located among many lesser reports even in these volumes: Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Rex Gardner, *Healing Miracles: A Doctor Investigates* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1986); H. Richard Casdorph, *The Miracles* (Plainfield: Logos, 1976).

⁸ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 61.

⁹ For excellent defenses of the historical evidence, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2010); N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), especially Chapter 1.

¹⁰ Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T and T Clark, 2005), the two quotations appear, respectively, on pages 215 and 346.

¹¹ Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, provides several lists of such skeptical scholars on pages 19-31 and elsewhere. See also the detailed arguments and scholars in Chapters 2-6 (especially 2-3) to counteract Shapiro’s claim (on his own authority once again?) that the inference from Jesus’s resurrection to God is weak (55).