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# The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus: The Role of Methodology as a Crucial Component in Establishing Historicity

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## Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have begun to employ what I have termed the “Minimal Facts” approach to a critical study of the resurrection of Jesus. This methodology differs significantly from older apologetic tactics that usually argued from historically reliable or even inspired New Testament texts to Jesus’ resurrection. The Minimal Facts outlook approaches the subject from a different angle.

In this essay, I will concentrate on the nature, distinctiveness, and value of the Minimal Facts methodological approach to the resurrection of Jesus. After a brief overview, I will interact directly with the use of such an approach by Michael Licona in his recent volume, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*,<sup>1</sup> including considering a few caveats for future study.

## The Minimal Facts Method

For more than 35 years, I have argued that, surrounding the end of Jesus’ life, there is a significant body of data that scholars of almost every religious and philosophical persuasion recognize as being historical. The historicity of each “fact” on the list is attested and supported by a variety of historical and other considerations. This motif began as the central tenet of my PhD dissertation.<sup>2</sup> This theme has continued in virtually all of my other dozens of publications on this subject since that time.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, my second

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010). This work is a revised and updated version of Licona’s PhD dissertation, as he says on p. 22. Additional page references to this volume will be listed in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1976), especially Chapter 14.

<sup>3</sup> For a few examples, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 22-41; *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 124-134; with Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, (edited by Terry L. Miethe; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 19-27, 42-46, 155-158; *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of*

debate on the resurrection of Jesus with philosophical atheist Antony Flew began with his general acceptance of my list of historical facts as a good starting point.<sup>4</sup>

From the outset of my studies, I argued that there were at least two major prerequisites for an occurrence to be designated as a Minimal Fact. Each event had to be established by more than adequate scholarly evidence, and usually by several critically-ascertained, independent lines of argumentation. Additionally, the vast majority of contemporary scholars in relevant fields had to acknowledge the historicity of the occurrence. Of the two criteria, I have always held that the first is by far the most crucial, especially since this initial requirement is the one that actually establishes the historicity of the event. Besides, the acclamation of scholarly opinion may be mistaken or it could change.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this research, I have produced two lists of facts that have varied slightly in the numbering from publication to publication. The longer list was usually termed the “Known Historical Facts” and typically consisted of a dozen historical occurrences that more generally met the above criteria, but concerning which I was somewhat more lenient on their application. This would apply especially to the high percentages of scholarly near-unanimous agreement that I would require for the shorter list. From this longer listing, I would extrapolate a briefer line-up of from four to six events, termed the Minimal Facts.<sup>6</sup> This latter list is the stricter one that Licona is addressing and which is the focus of much of this essay.

I explain my use of the longer and shorter versions this way: since I have surveyed this material for decades, I can report that most contemporary critical scholars actually concede far more facts than those included even in the long list, let alone just the few Minimal Facts alone. But the problem is that, as the numbers of events expand, fewer scholars agree on each one. So there could be more give and take on “whose facts” ought to be utilized. Obviously then, longer lists would not fulfill especially the second strict criterion of the Minimal Facts method.

So I decided to be even more selective than the majority of critical scholars by shortening the list in order to get more scholars (and especially the skeptics) on board. This methodological move has the benefit of bypass-

*Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), 152-170; “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3/2 (2005): 135-153.

<sup>4</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Resurrected? An Atheist and Theist Dialogue* (edited by John F. Ankerberg; Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 1-7. As the title indicates, Flew was still an atheist at the time this discussion occurred.

<sup>5</sup> Some examples of my early qualifications here include Habermas, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 33, 38; *Ancient Evidence*, 133-134; *Historical Jesus*, 169-170, 269.

<sup>6</sup> So as not to be confusing, my earliest publications sometimes designated this short list as the “Core Facts,” but I settled soon afterward on the designation of “Minimal Facts.”

ing the often protracted preliminary discussions of which data are permissible, by beginning with a “lowest common denominator” version of the facts. If I am correct in holding that this basis is still enough to settle the most pressing historical issues, then it is indeed a crucial contribution to the discussions. We will return below to some ramifications here.

Regarding my references to the “vast majority” or “virtually all” scholars who agree, is it possible to identify these phrases in more precise terms? In some contexts, I have identified these expressions more specifically. At least when referencing the most important historical occurrences, I frequently think in terms of a ninety-something percentile head-count. No doubt, this is one of the reasons why the concept has gained some attention.

But are figures like these based on something between a rough guess and an estimate? Academics quite often report things such as “most scholars hold that” or “the majority view here is that.” Although similar phrases are found frequently in the literature, we may wonder how the knowledge of such conclusions were, or even could be, established. Those who specialize in the particular area are probably the best to consult on such matters. But even when the authors are well-respected, Licona still provides illustrations where different researchers produce estimated head counts that seem to be at odds with each other (pp. 278-9).

Still, the regularity of citing majority views may serve to illustrate how important we seem to think that such overviews of pertinent researchers might be, especially where such conclusions could be reasonably established.<sup>7</sup> Once again, the situation seems to be that there is an incessant search for a methodological starting point. Where are most scholars and *why*, precisely, are they there?

To answer this question in my case, what began as a rather modest attempt to update my resurrection bibliography grew by large increments until it developed into a full-blown attempt to catalog an overview of recent scholarship. The study dominated five straight years of my research time, as well as long intermittent stretches after that. Apparently, I was not very successful at drawing boundaries! I pursued an ongoing study that classified at least the major publications on these topics, continuing on through other representative sources. I counted a very wide spectrum of scholarly views, tracing the responses to about 140 sub-issues or questions related to the death, burial,

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<sup>7</sup> However, after referring specifically to my research on the resurrection (!), Dale Allison then avers that he is “incurably incurious” regarding scholarly surveys and the like, while acknowledging that there could still be some benefits to such exercise: Dale Allison, “Explaining the Resurrection: Conflicting Convictions,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3.2 (2005): 117-33 (125).

and resurrection of Jesus. My bibliography is presently at about 3400 sources and counting, published originally in French, German, or English.<sup>8</sup>

Initially I read and catalogued the majority of these publications, charting the representative authors, positions, topics, and so on, concentrating on both well-known and obscure writers alike, across the entire skeptical to liberal to conservative spectrum. As the number of sources grew, I moved more broadly into this research, trying to keep up with the current state of resurrection research.

I endeavored to be more than fair to all the positions. In fact, if anything, I erred in the direction of cataloguing the most radical positions, since this was the *only* classification where I included even those authors who did not have specialized scholarly credentials or peer-reviewed publications. It is this group, too, that often tends to doubt or deny that Jesus ever existed. Yet, given that I counted many sources in this category, this means that my study is skewed in the skeptical direction far more than if I had stayed strictly with my requirement of citing only those with scholarly credentials. Still, I included these positions quite liberally, even when the wide majority of mainline scholars, “liberals” included, rarely even footnoted this material.<sup>9</sup> Of course, this practice would also skew the numbers who proposed naturalistic theories of the resurrection, to which I particularly gravitated.<sup>10</sup>

The result of all these years of study is a private manuscript of more than 600 pages that simply does little more than line up the scholarly positions and details on these 140 key questions, without additional interaction or critique. Most of this material is unpublished, though I have released some of the results in essays that specifically attempt to provide overviews of some of these current academic positions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Not to be misunderstood here, as I have tried to explain elsewhere, I am making no claim to having done an exhaustive study of all these resurrection sources. My figures reflect a difference between representative sources that have been catalogued in all their significant, exhausting details, to those that were surveyed more briefly, to those that are simply listed in my ongoing bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> Strangely enough, in spite of “bending over backwards” to include radical writers who did not possess scholarly credentials, I have frequently received letters, emails, and comments over the years, complaining that I no doubt neglected many of the radical skeptics simply in order to make my numbers look better! Such responses seemed to border on a conspiracy theory of sorts. I confess that these often-emotional responses often made me want to drop the entire non-credentialed group from my study! It is not my fault that, if even after counting them, the research still did not favor these writers or their theories!

<sup>10</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus’ Resurrection,” *Trinity Journal*, new series, 22 (2001): 179-96.

<sup>11</sup> Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present,” 135-53; “Experiences of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 45/3 (2006): 288-97; “Mapping the Recent Trend toward the Bodily Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Light of Other Prominent Critical Positions” in John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T.*

### Michael Licona's Research

The heart of Michael Licona's astounding and excellent PhD dissertation of some 700 pages is an application of the Minimal Facts argument to several scholars and their research on the resurrection of Jesus, in order to ascertain how these authors fare against the known historical data. As reflected in this volume's subtitle, Licona began with great insight in some 200 pages on the study of historiography, including the relevant theory (chapter 1.2), methodology (chapter 1.3), and the ever-present question of history and miracles (chapter 2). To my knowledge, this is the best study in print on the overall application of historiography to the particular question of miracle-claims.<sup>12</sup>

Lengthy and detailed treatments follow, initially on the relevant historical sources for the existence of Jesus and his resurrection (chapter 3). From these sources, the historical bedrock data with regard to Jesus' fate is determined (chapter 4). The conclusions gleaned from this minimal factual material are then applied in the last portion of the volume (chapter 5), entitled "Weighing Hypotheses," along with an appendix (numbering a total of about 180 pages). Here the theses of five prominent critical scholars who propose naturalistic hypotheses regarding the resurrection are investigated (Geza Vermes, Michael Goulder, Gerd Lüdemann, John Dominic Crossan, and Pieter F. Craffert). Licona treats another recent thinker (Dale Allison) who takes a different angle in the Appendix.

Each of these scholars is evaluated to the extent to which they account for these minimal historical data, using criteria for the best explanation that were constructed earlier (pp. 467-68). It may well be the case that it will be this last section of Licona's work, in particular, that receives the lion's share of the scholarly attention, though only time will be able to determine this.<sup>13</sup>

Licona very kindly asserts that, in determining the historical bedrock, "To an extent, we will be standing on the shoulders of Habermas, who has to my knowledge engaged in the most comprehensive investigation of the facts pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus" (p. 302). Yet, throughout this masterful treatment, Licona unmistakably makes many of his own additions, including both "tweaks" along with other more detailed clarifications and delinea-

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*Wright in Dialogue* (edited by Robert B. Stewart; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 78-92, 199-204; "The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus' Resurrection," 179-96.

<sup>12</sup> For two other excellent research works on historiography as applied to the broader study of the historical Jesus, see: N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God Volume 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), Part II: 29-144; Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; San Jose: Pickwick, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> At least a strong "second place" designation may be allotted to the superb historiographical work mentioned above.

tions. Throughout the process, he is singularly rigorous in his pursuit of the final goal.

In keeping with the theme of this essay, Licona's treatment of these matters surrounding the establishing and explicating of the Minimal Facts will most occupy us here. Very early in his discussion of historiography, Licona addresses the absolutely vital matter of the scholar's horizons (chapter 1.2.2), the glasses that everyone wears when we view the world around us, and which can color severely and restrict our conclusions. And the more central the issues at hand, the more our prejudices and other views may rear their heads. To use Licona's very helpful example, whether or not the runner was safe at second base depends largely on whether our son is the one stealing the base or the one who tagged him (p. 38)!

Next, he provides six hints as to how we might manage and perhaps even minimize our horizons (chapter 1.2.3). One of these suggestions is to, "*Account for the relevant historical bedrock.*"<sup>14</sup> Licona makes an assertion here that he repeats elsewhere, that, "If a hypothesis fails to explain all of the historical bedrock, it is time to drag that hypothesis back to the drawing board or to relegate it to the trash bin" (p. 56, cf. 277-278). This is a way to keep a constant check on the construction of our explanatory narratives (pp. 56-8). Similarly the last of the six hints is to detach ourselves from the bias that we discover (pp. 58-60).

Before moving on, I'll just note briefly that it seems apparent that even many professionals appear to be unaware that we all wear blinders of one sort or another, including political, cultural, moral, and/or religious glasses. Our supposed "neutrality" seems to arise a startling number of times during dialogues, lectureships, and other venues. So even to recognize, be aware of, and to understand these parameters is exceptionally essential. But by going the next mile in proposing several potential ways to actually manage, and perhaps even to take some steps toward minimizing our horizons, Licona has done us all a big favor.

Following these concerns in the very next section (1.2.4), Licona addresses the role played when we have a scholarly consensus on the relevant data. His negative examples include those who have opposed the wide majority of contemporary scholars across a broad spectrum of beliefs and still insist on denying that Jesus ever existed, that the Holocaust occurred, or that Muslims were largely responsible for the events of 9/11 (pp. 62-6).

One sub-point should be mentioned here briefly. When establishing a consensus of views, it is important to show that such a near-unanimity is "composed of scholars from all interested camps" (p. 64). We are not guessing about where researchers stand, and neither are we basing the case on a small, sectarian element within the academic community. Rather, the schol-

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<sup>14</sup> This is Licona's emphasis (56).

ars should hold a variety of religious and philosophical positions (p. 65). Later, Licona reported that:

These scholars span a very wide range of theological and philosophical convictions and include atheists, agnostics, Jews and Christians who make their abode at both ends of the theological spectrum and everywhere in between. We therefore have the heterogeneity we desire in a consensus, and this gives us confidence that our horizons will not lead us completely astray (p. 280).

Licona makes an insightful comment here regarding guarding against our own horizons. We must beware of our own imported biases, as well. When discussing the Minimal Facts, I have always purposely included notes at each juncture that list representative numbers of skeptics of various stripes who still affirm the data in question. This is a significant methodological procedure that serves more than one purpose. Among others, it assures the readers that they are not being asked to accept something that only conservatives believe, or that is only recognized by those who believe in the veracity of the New Testament text, and so on. After all, this sort of widespread recognition and approval is the very thing that our stated method requires.

Licona begins by listing my three chief Minimal Facts regarding Jesus' fate: (1) Jesus died due to the process of crucifixion. (2) Very soon afterwards, Jesus' disciples had experiences that they believed were appearances of the resurrected Jesus. (3) Just a few years later, Saul of Tarsus also experienced what he thought was a post-resurrection appearance of the risen Jesus (pp. 302-3).

Licona then conducts a lengthy investigation of these three facts (pp. 303-440), providing many details, including responses to a number of central issues. In the latter category, he includes very valuable treatments of the following "hot-button" questions: details both for and against Jesus having predicted his death as well as his vindication/resurrection (pp. 284-301); reasons for recognizing Jesus' death by crucifixion (pp. 303-18), which may grow increasingly important as Christian scholars interact with Muslim scholars; the motif of three days as the time of the initial resurrection appearances (pp. 324-9); the nature of the appearances (pp. 329-33); whether Paul was aware of the empty tomb traditions (pp. 333-9); the appearances as authority-legitimizing formulas (pp. 339-43); the importance of female eyewitness testimony (pp. 349-55); the fates of the apostles (pp. 366-71); a comparison of the Acts accounts of Paul's resurrection appearance to the apostles' own writings (pp. 382-400); and Paul's notion of the nature of the body in which Jesus appeared (pp. 400-40).

This last topic deserves special mention. Licona's research on any number of issues is excellent and especially insightful, to be sure. But he excels in none of these to a greater extent than when he treats Paul's notion of the resurrection body. Up until Licona's work, the related scholarly treatment that often receives the most attention, and with good reason, is Robert



Gundry's superb text *Sōma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*.<sup>15</sup> Though Gundry's treatment covers far more ground related to the larger question, it is also especially good when treating "The *sōma* in death and resurrection."<sup>16</sup> His conclusions come substantially close to Licona's on several key occasions. But in my opinion, Licona's substantially longer analysis of Paul's notion of the nature of the resurrection body has not been bettered.

What, then, is the nature of the actual historical bedrock at which Licona arrives during his investigation? Does he affirm my initial three historical facts surrounding Jesus' fate, with which he begins? Licona indeed concludes that these three facts deserve the designation of historical bedrock, having many reasons each in their favor without viable refutations and being accepted as historical by the vast majority of critical scholars, across a wide spectrum of theological positions (pp. 463-464, p. 617).

He also investigates two other facts as to whether they similarly deserve the designation of bedrock events: the conversion of James, the skeptical brother of Jesus, due to what he also thought was a special resurrection appearance of Jesus to him in 1 Cor. 15:7 (pp. 440-61), and the empty tomb (pp. 461-63). Licona finds significant evidence to conclude that James and his brothers were skeptics during Jesus' ministry and even taunted him, and were apparently absent at the crucifixion. However, they were present in the "upper room" a short time after the resurrection, at least some of them became Christian believers, and James became a prominent apostle and the leader of the Jerusalem church. Licona agrees with the majority scholarly view that James' conversion was most likely due to his experience with the risen Jesus (pp. 460-1). Further, concerning the scholarly popularity of such elements, "There is significant heterogeneity within this group that includes atheists, agnostics, cynics, revisionists, moderates and conservatives" (p. 461).

Yet, while the majority scholarly view is clear at these points, Licona judges that, "the number who comment on the material is small." In other words, while there a great deal of agreement among the wide spectrum of scholars who have weighed in, the total numbers who have commented on these issues still remains too few. For this reason, he is "reluctant to include the appearance to James in the historical bedrock" (p. 461).

Concerning the empty tomb, Licona actually says comparatively little. He cites my studies indicating that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the critical scholars who comment on this matter favor the tomb being empty for other than natural reasons. Further, Licona also mentions that my research specifies 23 reasons that favor the historicity of the empty tomb along

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<sup>15</sup> First published by Cambridge University Press in 1976, this volume was later released by Zondervan's Academic Books in 1987.

<sup>16</sup> This is the title of Chapter 13 (159-83).

with 14 reasons against it, as found in the scholarly literature (pp. 461-2). But having said this, it becomes immediately obvious that even the pretty strong scholarly agreement in favor of this event does not approach the much higher, nearly unanimous requirement in order to be considered as a Minimal Fact. Accordingly and not surprisingly, Licona rejects the empty tomb as part of the historical bedrock (pp. 462-3).

In conclusion, Licona counts only three historical facts as part of the historical bedrock: Jesus' death by crucifixion, the disciples' experiences that they believed to be appearances of the risen Jesus, and Paul's experience that convinced him similarly (p. 468). As Licona states, "These facts form the historical bedrock, facts past doubting, on which all hypotheses should be built" (p. 617).

But Licona also thinks that there are four additional facts which, while they are not part of the historical bedrock, are still close enough that they should be considered as "second-order facts." Two of these have just been mentioned: the conversion of James, the brother of Jesus, which was probably due to an experience that he also considered as a resurrection appearance of Jesus, and, slightly less likely, the empty tomb. The other two second-order facts include Jesus' predictions of his violent, imminent death as well as his resurrection afterwards, and that the earliest apostles held that Jesus appeared in a bodily form, both also mentioned briefly above (pp. 468-9).

Still, it should be noted carefully that Licona proposes that only the three bedrock historical facts be considered when weighing the critical hypotheses. The other four "second-order facts" would only be utilized in cases where "no clear winner emerges" among two or more competing views. This leads directly to his examination of the five naturalistic hypotheses that occupy the remainder of the book (p. 469).

Licona also addresses potential objections to the Minimal Facts argument. One is particularly intriguing and deserves mention: could we, in a sense, be "doctoring" the bedrock historical facts by, perhaps even subconsciously, not including some events which could also meet our criteria and be in our list, because they might upset our approach, or because these facts might somehow militate against our own preferred view? But as Licona correctly notes, many critical scholars might be highly motivated to find precisely such additional data, "and yet do not identify other facts for which a nearly unanimous majority approval exists" (p. 280).

Why is this so? It is simply the case that no other facts which would fulfill our criteria but somehow oppose the overall conclusion of historicity appear to be on offer. Think of it this way: Licona is being very strict when James' experience does not make the grade, even though it *is* held virtually unanimously among scholars, and for several good reasons, but it is still relegated to the second tier of data simply because not enough scholars address the subject!

Licona concludes with a lengthy discussion (chapter 5) where he works carefully through each of the critical hypotheses and then compares them to the historical case favoring the resurrection. In the end, he determines that Jesus having risen from the dead is a far superior historical thesis than the agnostic or natural suggestions that he also investigated (pp. 606-10, including chart). This treatment is one of the many places where countless gems are to be found throughout.

For example, I would like to single out very briefly one of Licona's chief responses to a major skeptical comeback. Perhaps more commonly than any other retort, we often hear that, since the resurrection thesis requires a supernatural cause, it is thus a lesser view than natural hypotheses, or a variation of a similar rejoinder. As a result, any natural response is superior.

Among other comments, Licona replies that this is one reason why, in this volume, so much attention was focused on bracketing our worldviews when participating in particular historical studies (p. 602). Metaphysical naturalism is "no less a philosophical construct than supernaturalism and theism" (p. 604). Basically, when previous conceptions of reality are thus bracketed, the resurrection thesis is superior (p. 602-5). There is much more to be said here than I have singled out, to be sure, but it is still helpful to indicate the general direction of Licona's response on this particular issue.

### A Few Caveats

I will now venture a few additional comments. Licona and I are very close in our configurations. Rather incredibly, we have probably discussed research on the resurrection of Jesus for literally thousands of hours! Yet, as among many great friends, we do have some slight variations from one another. However, on each of the following points, I am raising methodological questions for myself at least as much as I am proposing them regarding Licona's approach, which should be obvious as we move through them. I am still thinking out loud through each of these areas.

To name a few caveats of one sort or another, first, when counting the Minimal Facts over the years, I began by almost always conflating the disciples' experiences along with the *early date* at which these experiences were proclaimed. But nearly from the very beginning of my resurrection studies, I also began treating the time factor separately, demarcating the incredibly early period to which the proclamation of the resurrection message can be traced.<sup>17</sup> Then more recently, I added the time element as an additional consideration, counting it as a separate Minimal Fact.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Habermas, *Ancient Evidence*, 124-7. Ever since this volume first appeared in 1984, I have devoted a chapter section to this topic.

<sup>18</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 28, cf. 17-19; "Experiences of the Risen Jesus," 289-90.

My reasons for this move were straightforward: there was no question that there were many well-established data in favor of this very early date, not the least of which are drawn from the famous and much-studied text in 1 Cor. 15:3-8. Further, that the disciples had post-crucifixion experiences does not by itself insure that these were proclaimed at an early date. It could of course have been the case that the declaration of these experiences did not occur or at least could not be established for decades afterwards. So I concluded that these elements should not be conflated, as I had done for years. Additionally, very few conclusions are better-accepted by scholars across a very wide and diverse academic spectrum.

Second, a few times I also separated the notion that the proclamation of the resurrection was the *central* Christian proclamation, and also a Minimal Fact.<sup>19</sup> After all, the resurrection could have been proclaimed by the early Christians as one of many important doctrines, or even as a lesser add-on to more crucial messages, but this was not the case. As such, it was a helpful counter to several natural hypotheses. And although I was aware of a few critical scholars who questioned the centrality of the resurrection message, it is still very widely acknowledged, even by quite skeptical researchers. Yet, I also recognized that the case here was not quite as strong as that for the early date of the resurrection teaching.

Third, I go back and forth on whether to count the testimony of James the brother of Jesus among the Minimal Facts. I have included it more than once as a Minimal Fact,<sup>20</sup> and so do Licona and I in our co-authored volume on the resurrection.<sup>21</sup> There are several arguments in favor of accepting it, too, as both of us have pointed out, and few dissenters among critical scholars. It is true that fewer scholars address this event than with the other three historical facts in the list, but this is not the fault of the report; it simply seems to get less attention, perhaps because it occupies the fewest texts in the New Testament. Still, I will not belabor this point. As I say, I fluctuate on this one.

Lastly, I want to make a brief comment about the current research on the empty tomb. Licona's comments might be misunderstood as saying that, in deciding against including the empty tomb among the Minimal Facts (pp. 461-4, p. 618), that he somehow differs from my own assessment on this. But I have never counted the empty tomb as a Minimal Fact; it is very obvi-

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<sup>19</sup> Gary R. Habermas and J.P. Moreland, *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 70; Habermas and Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 133-5; Gary R. Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics* (ed. Steven B. Cowan Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 115.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 28; "Evidential Apologetics," 115.

<sup>21</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 67-9.

ous that it does not enjoy the near-unanimity of scholarship. From the very beginning of my research, I have been very clear about this.<sup>22</sup> Of course, Licona knows this,<sup>23</sup> so the comment is not being directed to him, but rather is made for the sake of clarification.

I mention these caveats for more than one reason. There are certain benefits if the list of Minimal Facts were legitimately lengthened, though I will not pursue that at present. Of course, if that were to occur, it still would have to be because the criteria were fulfilled strictly. Whether that can and should be done in these cases will have to be decided elsewhere, however.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to provide some elucidation of the Minimal Facts approach as a methodology for studying the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. This included unpacking several of the relevant aspects, as well as interacting with Michael Licona's lengthy and rewarding treatment of this approach. His volume is truly a treat to read and study, incorporating so many excellent clarifications. I ended with the consideration of a few caveats that may be useful for future study.

I would like to make one last observation in closing. This entire exercise is about constructing a viable methodology that is capable of establishing the historicity of the resurrection even when utilizing the particular methods, tools, and conclusions of the critical community of scholars. Many times, legitimate and worthwhile insights have been added to our own studies as a result. Chiefly, these can indicate that, even by skeptical approaches, the resurrection can be established historically.

But it should always be remembered that this is an apologetic strategy. Thus, it is not a prescription for how a given text should be approached in the original languages and translated, or how a systematic theology is developed, or how a sermon is written. So it should never be concluded that the use of such methods in an apologetic context indicate a lack of trust in Scripture as a whole, or, say, the Gospels in particular. Nor should it cause others to question or doubt their beliefs. Thus, it should only be understood and utilized in its proper context.

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<sup>22</sup> For examples, see *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 25; *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*, 127; with Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, 19; *The Historical Jesus*, 158.

<sup>23</sup> For example, we write, "The empty tomb of Jesus does not meet our two criteria of being a 'minimal fact' because it is not accepted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject" (Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 69-70).