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Gary R. Habermas

Liberty University, ghabermas@liberty.edu

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Dale Allison's Resurrection Skepticism A Critique

GARY R. HABERMAS
Department of Philosophy and Theology
Liberty University
Lynchburg, Virginia

Part 6 of Dale Allison's volume, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters*,¹ is a rare, balanced mixture of mature skepticism with a healthy respect for the relevant historical and theological data. Perhaps not since Peter Carnley's *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* has there been another work on the resurrection that weaves together these contrasting elements.² Yet, not only do these two texts present very different perspectives, but Allison's exhibits a far greater command of the germane historical issues, both skeptical alternative responses as well as what can be concluded from the relevant New Testament texts. Along the way, he weaves an intriguing as well as challenging discussion of the phenomenon of apparitions of the dead.³

In this paper, I wish to respond specifically to Allison's suggested alternative scenarios to the traditional approach to Jesus's resurrection. Are there viable options for explaining the supernatural elements claimed by the New Testament accounts?

Alternative Suggestions

Throughout his lengthy chapter, Allison discusses the relevant issues, interspersed with portions where he suggests that other explanations are at

ABSTRACT: The chief purpose of this essay is to address the alternative scenarios that Dale Allison suggests regarding the historicity of Jesus's resurrection. Do other options explain viably the New Testament accounts? Special attention is paid to Allison's treatment of apparitions of the dead, as well as listing several unique qualities of Jesus's appearances. Throughout, attention is drawn to Allison's own conclusions that support the disciples really having seen Jesus again after his death.

1. Dale Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005). Subsequent parenthetical references are to this text.

2. Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

3. I might also add a personal angle here. In preparing this response, a few lengthy discussions with Dale uncovered some common interests in our research regarding both apparitions of the dead as well as near death experiences. A budding friendship also began to grow, for which I am grateful.

least possible.⁴ These suggestions perhaps could be said to fall into three categories.

(1) Allison mentions briefly the traditional hypotheses like apparent death, deliberate deception by either the disciples or others, hallucinations, as well as veridical apparitions.

(2) Allison also intriguingly poses seldom-suggested alternatives that are nonetheless found in the relevant literature. These include the possibilities of a sorcerer/necromancer stealing Jesus's dead body, the power of the pre-Easter faith of Jesus's disciples, mass hysteria, Marian apparitions, Paul's epilepsy, or his succumbing to his intense remorse for persecuting Christians, and apparitions of the dead.

(3) But not to be overlooked is another category, which Allison himself quite reservedly terms the "truly idiosyncratic hypotheses that have failed to garner respect or support" (212). These might instead have been termed the rather shocking, sometimes mind-numbing category-busters, such as my three personal favorites: the rapid though quite natural disintegration of Jesus's dead body; an aftershock from the crucifixion earthquake that ingested Jesus's dead body into a crack in the rock, which then returned to its normal position as if nothing had happened; and the Christian's time-honored nemesis of aliens taking Jesus's corpse and inserting a new brain along with a better body!⁵

It is definitely a credit to Allison that these skeptical alternatives are put forth with such fairness and understanding that, even if he does not in the end find much merit in them, it is often difficult to tell that, at least initially. In fact, because of Allison's evenhandedness, it is easy to conclude that he actually thinks that one or more of these theses could be probable. To be sure, he does think that some approaches are better than others.

But it is also easy to miss Allison's usually brief but oft-repeated criticisms of these natural suppositions. He issues many well-placed warnings, caveats, and select criticisms aimed at almost every alternate hypothesis, as well as other critical interaction. Actually, his list of brief critiques is quite lengthy.⁶ For example, after stating a number of potential natural explanations, including that a necromancer may have taken Jesus's dead body, Allison concludes that, "We have no reason to endorse any of these speculations, for which there is not a shred of evidence. They must all be deemed unlikely. Yet they are not impossible" (334).

4. E.g., 201–14, 266–9, 296–7; 318–19, 334, 339–42.

5. These are found, in order, on 212, 204, 339–340. I wish to be clear that Allison also rejects these theses, as I have said, so my tongue-in-cheek comments are *not* aimed at him or his thesis.

6. For some examples, see 201n6 and n9; 203–4; 207–8; 211n50 and n53; 212; 213n60; 218; 219n81; 234; 237; 242–4; 266n280; 267–8; 270n293; 283–4; 285; 288; 301; 302; 303; 304–5; 308; 317; 324n497; 328–32; 334; 336; 340; 352–3; 357–8; 362–3.

In keeping with this last thought, Allison thinks that the resurrection cannot be proved because alternatives can always be suggested (334, 340, see also 347n583). Often these are favored due to one's presuppositions and worldviews (298; 304; 340–343, 347). But Allison realizes that such skepticism "runs both ways," since we can disprove Jesus's resurrection "only if one's mind is so saturated by a materialistic naturalism that it cannot allow either divine intervention or paranormal phenomena" (298).

Still, Allison pokes a little fun at those who defend the resurrection overly much, though he is more than able to defend his own evidential case. Tom Wright and I seem clearly to be the two researchers whom Allison targets most frequently as "apologists," even as the "gung-ho" variety.⁷ Yet, there are also a number of passages where Allison himself waxes eloquent, and minus some caveats, acquits himself very well as a skeptical apologist for the positions that he espouses.⁸ So to some extent, it appears that what counts as an overly-exuberant defense varies according to the eye of the beholder! My point should be noted carefully: the more crucial matter here is *not* whether someone is an apologist, but whether their conclusions are supported by the relevant data.

Before continuing, it should be noted that there appears to be some occasional confusion or ambiguity in Allison's treatment of alternate hypotheses. For example, it is rather perplexing when clear distinctions are not made between hallucinations, illusions, and delusions. On more than one occasion, Allison moves between these phenomena as if they confirm each other. But subjective hallucinations should not be evidenced by referring to hypnotic states, and certainly not by general comparisons to Elvis sightings (296–297). Likewise, it is unhelpful to lump side-by-side mass hysteria, imagination, Bigfoot sightings, and Marian apparitions (205–206). In cases where a real person or object is taken to be a different person or object, these experiences ought to be characterized as illusions or simply as misidentifications, but not as hallucinations.⁹

Similarly, Allison twice scolds me because my critique of the hallucination theory does not apply to apparitions of the dead (271n296; 279n319). But why should it apply at all? The sorts of apparition cases that he outlines in the immediate context (especially pages 278–282) are far different from hallucinations! We agree on this (see below). But as I just said in the previous paragraph, these sorts of phenomena need to be distinguished more carefully.

7. As one of several examples, this comment appears on 339, immediately after discussing my first resurrection debate with Antony Flew, whereas he seems to think that Wright's "apologetical moves" fail to produce "the evidence that demands the verdict" (347)! This is followed (348–9) by an outline of Wright's "apologetical proof" which "claims too much."

8. See 239–44; 326–34, 352–63 and especially one of the key sections of the book, 269–99.

9. I also address this confusion in recent critical studies. See Habermas, "The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus' Resurrection," *Trinity Journal* 22 (2001): 194–5.

Responses to hallucinations clearly will not work with veridical apparitions, but neither were they supposed to.¹⁰

Allison's chief point on the historicity of Jesus's resurrection, in a nutshell, seems to be that there are some good historical reasons for believing that Jesus's burial tomb was later found empty and that Jesus's resurrection appearances occurred, but that the possibility of alternative explanations keeps the issue in some amount of tension (334, 340). After all, Allison clearly concludes, "I am sure that the disciples saw Jesus after his death" (346). If this is correct, then the required response is not so much for me to refute his views, but rather to clarify my position and then dialogue over our major points of difference. I have also said many times that the historical evidence for the resurrection is probabilistic and corrigible; it is *not* apodictically certain, or some such thing.

Therefore, it appears that differences between our positions pertain in large part to the *degrees* of our persuasion. For example, I think that the alternative approaches to both the empty tomb as well as Jesus's appearances are much less likely than Allison apparently thinks. But we agree that none of these hypotheses viably explain all the empty tomb or appearance data. And we agree, most crucially, that, after his death, the disciples saw Jesus in some manner.

Apparitions of the Dead

Due to Allison's lengthy treatment of apparitions of the dead, I would like to add a few additional comments about this research. As a longtime observer of this same data, along with the related subject of Near Death Experiences (266), for over thirty years,¹¹ I will state initially that I agree with him on the veridicality of at least a number of both apparitions as well as NDEs. Further, I also agree that these subjects are highly relevant to studies of Jesus's resurrection.

This conclusion of veridicality is built on certain cases that evince exceptionally strong data. Many of the relevant studies, especially of NDEs, were done in recent years, by highly qualified researchers from relevant disciplines, and many have been published in peer-reviewed and other well-acclaimed sources. Moreover, Allison is certainly correct to concentrate on the evidential reports, rather than on the mere numbers of stories or any generally common tendencies shared by the claimed experiencers. I would also suggest that the two sorts of data augment each other.

10. Somewhat similarly, Allison could emphasize more strongly that some popular alternative ideas are anything but naturalistic, with the adherents holding to actual resurrection appearances, with the chief difference being the form in which Jesus appeared (such as 208–9, 212).

11. E.g., Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), chapters 7–9.

Having said this, we must be very careful about how far we use the apparition data in comparison to the resurrection appearances of Jesus. To be sure, many apparition cases do meet important evidential standards (294–295).

But there is also a large body of material that does not qualify as the sorts of reports that I would like to use. A volume could be written on this evaluation alone. For example, the anecdotal nature of even most of the apparition reports, the possibility of faulty recall, the often lengthy time between the event and its recording, the popular character of many accounts, the sometimes sensationalistic, credulous, or almost tabloid appearance of other cases, the nonspecialized background of many of the authors or researchers, the lack of evidence beyond simply reporting a story, and that a large body of the material dates from approximately one hundred or more years ago, as well as a number of potential medical and psychological issues, and so on, are all serious concerns.¹² Allison mentions briefly a few similar problems (293–294).

In my own study of apparition cases, in spite of my very positive mindset, I hardly ever saw a case for which there were not several potential alternative theses. In fact, when even the best cases are studied, something regularly seems to be lacking. Further, in order to compare these cases to the resurrection narratives, one needs to weave a patchwork quilt by "mixing and matching" a combination of these otherwise diverse and sometimes questionable reports.

One advantage of the earliest Christian accounts is that the leaders, particularly those who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, repeatedly placed themselves in harm's way, were apparently willing to die for the proclamation of the resurrection, and early data report the martyrdoms of at least Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and Paul.¹³ Few scholars doubt this. This aspect alone provides some crucial checks and balances, helping us to rule out some of the more obvious sorts of fabrication or even the nonmanufactured development of fantastic tales that might otherwise nullify the resurrection claims, as Allison notes (201, 207–208). But it is more difficult to argue the provenance of some key apparition of the dead accounts at this point, to guard against these concerns.

Thus, when studying the resurrection appearances, one may respond that, "The apparition of the dead data are similar." A chief strength of these

12. Of course, critics may say many of the same things about the resurrection accounts, although the latter have some evidential advantages, too. But as Allison notes as well, the case for the resurrection still seems to survive such criticisms, and I agree. After all, these and many other worse charges have been aimed at the resurrection accounts and it is fair to say that most scholars think that these charges fail, for a variety of reasons. Similarly, it is not that these concerns invalidate the apparition cases, either. They stand on their own. My only point is that we have to be very careful with the data itself, as well as with comparisons.

13. I have provided details in *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 24, plus the endnotes.

data is certainly the large numbers of evidenced cases from which to draw. But due to the issues like those I have mentioned above, it is difficult to be sure of many crucial examples. This might be part of the reason why Allison seems to concur that these comparisons to the resurrection appearances ought not be pressed too far (284).

The Uniqueness of Jesus's Resurrection Appearances

So I am by no means charging that Allison thinks Jesus's appearances can be completely explained as "typical" apparitions. He is clear that he does not think so (283–285). I just made the preliminary point that straightforward comparisons might be more difficult than they appear, but there is still another avenue to pursue. Perhaps there are also major elements of the resurrection appearance traditions that not only resist easy comparison to the apparitions, but appear to be rather unique. Here I will list several possibilities, each of which can be mentioned only very briefly.¹⁴ I want to be very clear that I am not arguing *why* these details ought to be accepted, only that there are significant differences that emerge in a comparison of both sorts of reports. Thus I am emphasizing the *distinctiveness* of these details, *not* their factual provenance.

(1) Although it is difficult to tell for sure, Allison seems to take seriously the Gospel accounts (such as Mark 8:31; 9:9–10, 31; 10:33–34; 14:28) of Jesus predicting his death and resurrection (230–232, 244–245). In recent decades, scholars have regularly taken a positive view of Jesus being aware of his impending death, and many are also at least open to the resurrection predictions. This is probably due to several factors such as the embarrassment on the part of the disciples and especially Peter, who disbelieved and even resisted Jesus's comments, the multiple attestation as found in Mark, M, John, and possibly Q, the absence of clear Old Testament parallels, that most of these statements are imbedded in Son of Man texts, and that these comments played no serious or extended function in a New Testament apologetic.

If established, these predictions would most likely indicate that Jesus was aware of both his death and resurrection, as well as something of the role they played. This foresight would differentiate them from the apparition cases, since not only would Jesus have appeared to his followers, but he would have known of it ahead of time, which most likely indicates a plan known in advance.

(2) For the sizeable majority of contemporary critical scholars who recognize the historicity of the empty tomb, this is a major consideration that

14. While Allison warns against overemphasizing these differences (284), he still recognizes that several are worth mentioning (283–5).

sets off Jesus's resurrection appearances from the apparitions. Allison allows the "tentative" conclusion that the empty tomb is a probable event that is "historically likely" (331–334, 344, 346–347). While this of course does not necessitate a supernatural occurrence, the alternatives appear to be "speculations, for which there is not a shred of evidence" (334). For a variety of reasons, I think that the case is far stronger than Allison allows, but this cannot be resolved here. Suffice it to say that the extent to which the empty tomb is acknowledged indicates that what happened to Jesus's body constitutes something quite distinct from that of the apparitional cases. Therefore, the majority of scholars who grant more weight to the probability of the empty tomb will presumably find less overall similarity in the apparition cases.

(3) In interacting with one of Tom Wright's arguments, Allison acknowledges that there were probably qualities in the disciple's resurrection belief that cannot be explained by any sort of disembodied sightings alone (321–326). Such apparitions were well-known in the ancient world, but were not expressed as resurrections, and generally convinced no one in this direction. To the contrary, although these apparitions may have comforted the mourners, we must not lose sight of the fact that these persons were definitely known to have remained dead!

Allison considers this to be one of the strongest arguments for the empty tomb, but perhaps even more is transpiring here. As Theodor Keim pointed out over a century ago in his diatribe against David Strauss's subjective vision theory, the New Testament writers consistently distinguished between the resurrection appearances of Jesus and later visions.¹⁵ Something set these appearances apart, and it seems to be more than the empty tomb alone,¹⁶ or else the later visions also might have qualified as resurrection appearances.¹⁷ Allison makes a similar observation, wondering about the nature of these differences in the New Testament accounts (260–261). But whatever the best answer, the resurrection appearances seem to have been of a different quality, distinguishing them from other visionary phenomena.¹⁸ Perhaps most to the point here, the difference between the apparitions of those who *remain* de-

15. Theodor Keim, *The History of Jesus of Nazara*, 6 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1873–1883), 6:353.

16. Especially since Keim, interestingly for his theory, actually rejected the historicity of the empty tomb.

17. The physical nature of Jesus's resurrection appearances is another chief reason for this New Testament differentiation from visions, but ancient apparition reports include both the visionary sorts as well as bodily examples (for an instance of the latter, see the account of Rabbi Judah I in the Babylonian Talmud [Seder Nashim, Kethuboth, 3:12:103a]). So again we are left with the question of differentiation. If the chief difference is the empty tomb, and apparitions of the dead are reportedly both bodily and nonbodily, why are not the later New Testament visions counted as resurrection appearances or emphasized in the same way?

18. E.g., after one of Paul's appearance accounts in Acts, we are told that he saw the Lord speaking to him again (Acts 22:17–18), but we never hear any special emphasis placed on this case.

ceased and the strong conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead bodily needs to be emphasized.¹⁹

(4) According to the New Testament accounts, Jesus appeared many times, to individuals as well as to groups of up to five hundred persons at once, was touched, ate food, and had normal, sometimes rather lengthy, conversations with his followers.²⁰ As Allison points out, similar details are sometimes observed in the apparitional literature. But for this response to suffice, we must avoid initially all of the difficulties with the apparitional accounts that I mentioned above. As a result, we must be astute in avoiding a common mistake: allowing the apparition or other alternative accounts to stand in a straightforward manner, while picking continuously at the resurrection reports. This definitely does not nullify the apparitional testimony, some of which is very strong. But at the very least, as we said, many of the apparitional accounts must be patched together into a rather incredible train in order to come close to a parallel case, indicating that the resurrection narratives present quite a distinctive, perhaps even a unique combination. This is the crux of this point.

(5) Allison thinks that there “is every reason” to think that Luke properly reports Paul’s resurrection appearance (236). We “can be fairly certain” of the tradition behind Luke’s three Acts accounts and that his ultimate source is Paul himself. Accordingly, several details may be gleaned from these reports, including the “supernatural light” that caused Paul to fall to the ground, to which Allison sees a parallel in 2 Corinthians 4:6 (263–264). Acts describes this light as being even brighter than the sun (26:13), causing Paul’s friends to fall down, as well (26:14), and that, because of it, Paul was blinded (9:8–9; 22:11).²¹

Details like these clearly separate Paul’s appearance from the *typical* apparitions, but they also do more than that. The incredibly bright, blinding light is traditionally seen as an indication that Jesus had been glorified

19. A very intriguing question is, if there had been no resurrection appearances, would the other New Testament visions of Jesus have been taken as apparitions of the dead, providing comfort that Jesus was alive, but *without* indicating his resurrection? If so, now we may be able to see some of the distinctions between these two.

20. Some of these details, especially those in the last half of this sentence, are questioned in the critical literature. But again, as I have said, we are only comparing the various sorts of reported phenomena here, not debating the data on their behalf. After discussion, if certain scholars think that particular items here should be bracketed, that could of course affect their reaction to the conclusions here. But I still maintain that there would be enough remaining that most scholars would still allow various levels of differences between the appearances and the apparitional literature.

21. Allison reports his personal experience that the apparition of a friend was “brightly luminous” (275), and notes that the presence of light is found in some apparition accounts (285). However, the case of Luke’s exceptional luminosity, described as brighter than the sun, Paul’s resulting blindness, plus all the men falling to the ground, besides Paul’s own perception of Lordship (below), seem to render his appearance rather distinctive in our context.

in heaven. This is often given as one reason for Paul’s emphasis on a *sōma pneumatikon* in 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul’s extraordinary experience must be explained. If the view is taken that Paul most likely saw Jesus’s glorified body, this could point in the direction beyond the initial resurrection itself, to God’s glorification that endorsed Jesus’s teachings and ministry. Along these same lines, Paul perceived the risen Jesus as the Lord (see 1 Cor. 9:1). At a minimum, for those like Allison who accept the Lukan accounts as fairly reliable renditions of what occurred, including that Paul thought that Jesus appeared bodily (317), this appears to be a major differentiation from the apparitions of the dead.

Thus, whatever we think of the apparitions of the dead, the resurrection appearances appear at the very least to extend into another category. I think it is very crucial to note that while there is clearly some overlap between Jesus’s appearances and apparitions, *so are there similarities with other afterlife phenomena* like the apotheosis stories of Enoch and Elijah, the Transfiguration account, Paul’s (NDE?) visit to the third heaven, or even modern NDEs. In a sense, they are all members of a general class.

So it seems that Jesus’s appearances do what the New Testament writers attest—they break all the categories. They were indeed unique. The resurrection predictions, the empty tomb, the New Testament differentiation of Jesus’s appearances from visions when apparitions only convince the recipients that the individual is still dead, the number of Jesus’s appearances, even to groups of observers, including the specific messages and other details that require a patchwork comparison of apparitions, along with the glorified appearance to Paul, are each at least fairly well evidenced. Most critical scholars recognize enough of these phenomena to build a distinctive case on behalf of these appearances.²²

22. For those like Allison’s hypothetical questioner who postulates that the resurrection appearances are “instances of a wider phenomenon” (347), I have suggested that there definitely would be some important overlap, as with various other afterlife data. But it does not follow that the resurrection appearances are simply apparitions. There are too many crucial differences. To start with, apparitions produce the conviction that though the person may be doing well, they are nonetheless dead. The empty tomb argues a substantial difference. The variety and form of Jesus’s appearances even to groups and the differentiation from visions are also significant. Jesus’s predictions and the glorified appearance to Paul indicate that Jesus’s resurrection is part of a larger plan, including affirmation by God (cf. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 214–19). Of course the critic could question the data itself, and that could well be pursued profitably, as I have done often in other contexts. But as I have said from the outset, here we are discussing the *distinctiveness* of the appearance reports, not their factual provenance. Further, in the overall picture, this paper is addressed to Allison’s treatment, and he seems to think that at least the majority of these distinctives are well-attested.

Conclusion

As I said above, perhaps the chief difference between Allison and me is the *degree* to which we think that the empty tomb and resurrection appearances are best explained by the hypothesis of Jesus's bodily resurrection. What specific weight do we give the particular details? After all, he gives a slight nod to the empty tomb and clearly affirms Jesus's resurrection appearances. I am far more convinced of the data for the empty tomb. Still, Allison concludes: "I am sure that the disciples saw Jesus after his death" (346; see also 343) and thinks that at least the New Testament report (including Paul's) is of bodily appearances (317, 324–325). I agree. He also concludes that the apparitions of the dead do not explain completely these appearances (283–284). Again, I also agree.

While we share in general many of the positive conclusions regarding the empty tomb and appearances, I rate the evidence more positively than does Allison. Perhaps due to this, my perspective is from the angle of the affirmative case, even though, like Allison, I am well aware of the inability to close the door completely against alternative suggestions. Allison, on the other hand, repeatedly highlights his more skeptical concerns, due to the fact that the alternative options "are not impossible" (334; also 340). Yet, as he also states frequently, natural options are unlikely. But given the agreed likelihood of the major highlights of the positive case, *why continually emphasize the alternative views if they are admittedly improbable?*

Further, since Allison tends to think that one's worldview is the determining factor in one's conclusions here (341–344), he questions whether factual debates result in conversion (339, 343). Actually, my experience has been that few religious subjects are accompanied by the compelling degree of evidence that is available for NDEs. While I consider conversion to be a different matter from that of the data, I could list a number of well-published scholars who have changed their worldviews, even from naturalism, precisely because of this evidence for NDEs. I know other scholars who have been converted to Christianity by studying the resurrection data.

At the very least, I would suggest a different angle here in closing. Allison confesses his personal desire that Jesus's resurrection would provide some sort of "postmortem endorsement" of Jesus's teachings, and especially the afterlife (214–219). I often approach the matter²³ by beginning with the evidence for NDEs (and I have cited apparitional cases here, as well), indicating the likelihood of some notion of an afterlife (343, 225). This is even more likely when God is already postulated (215). Then, as a more distinctive example of the specific species of afterlife, the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus can be introduced (see Allison's similar move on 299). I

have argued here that at least a few of these distinctive elements point in the direction of God's endorsement of Jesus's ministry and teachings.²⁴

I have found that using NDEs in this manner is a very helpful move, particularly when addressing those who are reticent to recognize the supernatural, even with naturalists. Indeed, in Allison's case, it seems that this sort of data had precisely that affect on him, as well, indicating the probability of the afterlife (225, 343–44). It often succeeds in breaking barriers. At the very least, it provides a different perspective on the issue of Jesus's resurrection.

In sum, I am quite pleased that Dale Allison, in spite of his skepticism, *clearly* allows the historicity of the empty tomb and the postresurrection appearances of Jesus, even if his position on the former is qualified. Even for Allison, the overall case is well-vindicated to that degree.²⁵

23. For one example, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, esp. 60–77.

24. For additional considerations, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chapters 1–6.

25. I wish to thank Steve Davis, Bill Craig, and Mike Licona for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.