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Review of On the Resurrection: Evidences Volume 1

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Review of On the Resurrection: Evidences Volume 1

Abstract

Dr. Brian Chilton reviews the first volume of Dr. Gary Habermas's magnum opus *On the Resurrection: Evidences*. Chilton summarizes Habermas's work, offering key themes found throughout the book. Then, he analyzes the methodology of the book and confronts the possible objections offered by popular naysayers of the minimal facts approach. Chilton ultimately deduces that the naysayers objections are overblown and that Habermas's approach stands on its own.

Keywords

Habermas, Resurrection, History, Gary Habermas, New Testament, Jesus, Gospels, Brian Chilton

Cover Page Footnote

Brian G. Chilton earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Theology and Apologetics program at Liberty University (September 2022). He currently serves as an Adjunct Professor of Apologetics at Carolina College of Biblical Studies, a hospice chaplain, and the Assistant Director of Family Services. He is the founder of Bellator Christi Ministries (<https://bellatorchristi.com>) and has two published books: "The Layman's Manual on Christian Apologetics" and "Conversations about Heaven."

Habermas, Gary R. *On the Resurrection: Evidences. Volume One.* Brentwood, TN: Baker Academic, 2024. 1,072 pp. \$79.99.

Author Credentials

Gary Habermas is the Distinguished Research Professor of Apologetics and Philosophy at Liberty University. He teaches courses in apologetic methodologies, miracles, doubt, and New Testament creeds for the Ph.D. program at the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity. He has also taught as an adjunct professor and visiting professor for 15 graduate schools and seminaries across the United States and around the world.

Habermas received his Ph.D. at Michigan State University, where he wrote his dissertation on the minimal facts for the resurrection. He also earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of Detroit and a Bachelor of Religious Education at William Tyndall College.

Habermas is a prolific writer on the resurrection of Jesus. He has contributed more than 60 chapters or articles to published books. Additionally, he has penned over 100 articles and reviews in journals and other publications throughout the years. Dr. Habermas is a world-renowned expert on the resurrection of Jesus, near-death experiences, and the Shroud of Turin. In addition to his recent work, Habermas is known for the following books: *Risen Indeed: A Historical Investigation into the Resurrection*; *Did the Resurrection Happen? A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Anthony Flew*, by Gary Habermas, David Baggett, and Anthony Flew; *The Case for the Resurrection*, by Gary Habermas and Michael Licona; and *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*.

Purpose Statement of *On the Resurrection: Evidences*

On the Resurrection: Evidences is the first of a four-part series that is considered to be Habermas's magnum opus (1). The entire series will feature the life's work of the famed scholar, especially as it pertains to his research on the resurrection of Jesus. The first volume examines the research for the probability that Jesus of Nazareth arose from the dead on the first Easter morning. Thus, the theme of the first volume is to investigate the historical data regarding the "status of the crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and subsequent appearances of Jesus" (3). Subsequent volumes will peer into the objections often given against the resurrection, that is, refutations; Volume Three will survey 140 questions from Good Friday to the resurrection, offering a landscape of the data; and Volume

Four will provide a theological glimpse into what the resurrection says about dealing with grief.¹

Methods

For anyone who has followed Habermas's work, it will come as no surprise that he voluminously employs the use of his minimal facts approach throughout his book. The minimal facts approach evaluates data that is so historically veritable that it enjoys a scholarly consensus from across the spectrum of historical scholarship (90–91). Habermas's primary focus is on the data pertaining to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Before a datum is added to the list, the fact must be validated by "multiple critically ascertained, independent lines of historical argumentation" (92), and the "vast majority of published contemporary scholars with credentials in relevant fields of study have to acknowledge the historicity of the event" (92). When using the phrase "vast majority of scholars" (92), Habermas implies that at least 90 percent of scholars accept the validity of the fact in mind (94).

In other works, Habermas listed many other facts, as many as twelve, that could be considered part of the accepted historical facts of Jesus's last days on earth.² Habermas also considers these additional facts which he lists in *On the Resurrection: Evidences* (146–147). However, only six of the twelve make the list of minimally accepted facts with the addition of one fact that does not enjoy the high probability held by the other six. These minimal facts include the following:

1. Jesus died due to the effects of Roman crucifixion.
2. The disciples afterwards reported experiences that they thought were actually appearances of the risen Jesus.
3. These experiences accounted for the disciples' lives becoming thoroughly transformed, even to the point of being willing to die for their belief.
4. The proclamation of Jesus's resurrection and appearances took place very early, soon after the experiences themselves.
5. James, the brother of Jesus and a skeptic before his conversion, most likely believed after he also thought that he saw the risen Jesus.

¹ Sean McDowell, Interview with Gary Habermas, "50 Years Studying the Resurrection: Magnum Opus by Gary Habermas," YouTube (Jan. 16, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoSOoqSRPvg&t=5375s>, accessed on March 8, 2024.

² Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), 158.

6. Just a few years later, Saul of Tarsus (Paul) also became a Christian believer due to an experience that he also concluded was an appearance of the risen Jesus to him.

+ 1 The private tomb in which Jesus was probably buried was discovered to be empty shortly after his death (149).

The overarching basis of the first volume is to list, defend, and explain each of the minimal facts, while also highlighting the historical methodology used to validate certain facts of history against those that are less defensible.

Summary

On the Resurrection: Evidences is broken up into five parts. The first part discusses the nature of historical research and consists of five chapters. The first chapter peers into the philosophy of history. In this chapter, the reader is exposed to the theoretical and academic questions related to history itself, including answering how history is to be understood. Habermas deduces along with Evans, Gilderhus, and Novak that many facts of history can be studied, investigated, and known according to the probability that such an event occurred (32). The second chapter engages the concept of historiography—that is, how much of history can be known, and what kind of tools can be used to determine an event's historicity (35)? Habermas asserts that the historian has many tools available at their disposal, comprising early source attestation (44), eyewitness testimony (45), multiple attestation (46), double dissimilarity (47), Aramaic substrata of a Palestinian origin (49), the principle of embarrassment (50), enemy attestation (51), and coherence (52). The third chapter examines the influence of postmodernism on historical studies. The fourth chapter introduces the minimal facts, whereas the fifth chapter lists the minimal historical facts related to the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

The second section engages some preliminary discussions about the life of Jesus before moving into the minimal facts. The section comprises three chapters. Chapter 6 discusses the historicity of Jesus. Contrary to the bizarre claims of Jesus Mythicists, Habermas deduces that plenty of evidence from both archaeological findings and written materials from both Christian and non-Christian sources alike make a strong case for the historicity of Jesus. When adding the empty tomb and the early persecution of the church to the equation, the evidence for the historicity of Jesus is beyond reasonable doubt. In Chapter 7, the author affords a definition of a miracle, leading to his argument in Chapter 8 showing the strong likelihood that Jesus was a miracle worker.

The third section contains six chapters and examines each of the minimal facts. Chapter 9 explores the evidence for the death of Jesus, and Chapter 10

discusses the experiences of the disciples as they reported having seen the risen Jesus. Chapter 11 peers into the church's early proclamation of the gospel with an added excursus on the early creedal traditions. Chapter 12 evaluates the evidence for the disciples' transformation. Chapters 13 and 14 outline the individual conversions of James and Paul.

The fourth section informs the reader of the six additional historical facts and offers evidence for each one. Chapters 15 and 16 consider the evidence for the empty tomb and burial of Jesus. Chapter 17 explores the other four historical facts. The fifth and final section of the book consists of seven chapters, rounding out the book with a discussion of the testimonies found in the four Gospels, Acts 1:1–11, and noncanonical Christian authors.

Evaluation

Very rarely does anything live up to the excitement that precedes a publication or a live event. Years ago, boxing spectators expected to see the fight of a lifetime when “Iron” Mike Tyson was set to face Michael Spinks. Spinks appeared to be a major contender to Tyson's throne. However, spectators were shocked when the fight ended in the first round with a powerful Tyson uppercut to Spinks, landing Spinks on the mat, and ending a Tyson knockout victory.

Contrary to the Tyson/Spinks bout, the first volume of Habermas's magnum opus lives up to the hype. He more than validates the use of the minimal facts approach and fuels the assurance that believers hold that the resurrection is a genuine historical event. Habermas systematically defends each of the minimal facts with great precision, while also bolstering the validity of the six additional historical facts. Students of Habermas's classes in the Ph.D. program at Liberty University will be reminded of the material they covered during their coveted time with him, while also finding new avenues of exploration.

However, the primary criticism that the book could likely receive would stem from those who dismiss the minimal facts approach altogether, or from those who do not accept the value of said methodology. Lydia McGrew is one of the more vocal opponents of the minimal facts argument, instead arguing for a methodology she coins the maximal data argument.³ But even McGrew confesses

³ The maximal data argument has been condensed as follows: (1) Either the disciples were deceivers, deceived, or they were telling the truth. (2) They were not deceivers. (3) They were not merely mistaken or deceived. (4) Therefore, they were telling the truth. Erik Manning, “Learn to Make a Maximal Case for the Resurrection,” *CrossExamined.org* (Nov. 29, 2021), <https://crossexamined.org/learn-to-make-a-maximal-case-for-the-resurrection/>, accessed on March 9, 2024.

that the minimal facts approach enjoys a “widespread use” among modern Christian circles.⁴

When contemplating the two approaches, the criticisms afforded by those of the maximal data approach lessen when one considers that well-intended people can be mistaken about the facts they report. Just proving that the disciples were not deceived nor mistaken does not necessitate that the facts they reported are true. For instance, at one time in history, many well-intended theologians and scientists thought that the earth was flat. Despite their good intentions and heartfelt desire to be true in what they reported, they were flawed. A better approach would be to establish the validity of the historical data in mind, and then build upon those facts. In this reviewer’s mind, the best approach would be to blend both arguments, beginning by establishing the legitimacy of the minimal facts, established by Habermas, and then building upon such a case with the maximal data approach as presented by Lydia McGrew. All being said, the critiques of Habermas’s naysayers are not as profound as one might think, thereby only solidifying his approach and his current work.

The only reservation that could be offered is that those who are not well-read on historical matters and methodologies may struggle with the opening three chapters. The case for the minimal facts does not take off until around midway through the book. Thus, the reader must wade through some preliminary material before making it to the heart of the material. But rest assured, the journey is worth the effort. This book is especially recommended for those who are interested in historical apologetics and, particularly, the resurrection of Jesus.

⁴ Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: Dewald, 2017), 220–221, also noted in Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 95, fn. 14.

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