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Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate, review

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Terry L. Miethe, ed. *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

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This book could be dismissed as a mere anachronism were it not for the high caliber of its contributors. Based on a 1985 public debate between Gary R. Habermas (Apologetics and Philosophy, Liberty Baptist University) and Antony G. N. Flew (Professor Emeritus, Kiele University), participants argue the merits of the historical evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. The debate is followed by a discussion among Flew, Habermas, Miethe, and W. White Beck (both of Liberty), and responses by Wolfhart Pannenberg (Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Munich), Charles Hartshorne (Ashbel Smith Professor of Philosophy, University of Texas), and James I. Packer (Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Regent College, Vancouver). A closing chapter details Habermas's replies to Pannenberg, Hartshorne, and Packer.

Flew is well-known in philosophical circles. In addition, he is the [393] favorite whipping boy of theists, having often publicly debated Christian philosophers. So notorious is his reputation that Daniel Dennett's humorous *Philosophical Lexicon* defines a "flew" as "an old-fashioned device for blowing smoke into churches." Organizers of the debate could not have chosen a more visible or colorful spokesperson to represent the skeptic's side. However, one comes away from this book wishing that Flew had shown more familiarity with current scholarship concerning the resurrection. At every turn, Habermas shows that he has done his homework, while Flew cites no serious scholarship done within the past century. Despite this deficiency, Flew's arguments are not without merit.

Flew suspends his earlier view that miracles are "strictly self-contradictory" (*God and Philosophy*, Delta, 1966, p. 149) and makes no *a priori* restrictions against miracles (63). His argument rests, rather, with what he takes to be a lack of reliable evidence for the resurrection. The Gospels, for instance, are too far removed from the events they describe to be of much use as historical records. Moreover, they are second-hand testimony and contain numerous contradictions. Paul's testimony (particularly I Cor. 15:3-8—the earliest source for the resurrection) is equally unreliable. Paul fails to mention the details that figure prominently in the Gospels, such as the empty tomb and the apparently physical nature of Jesus' resurrection body. As grounds for believing in the miraculous, these are inadequate. This is not because of any prejudice against the paranormal (cf. Miethe's comments and Flew's reply, 111). It is simply that

greater evidence is needed to establish what we normally believe is impossible than what is within the normal course of events.

Habermas, author of three books on the resurrection and co-author of a book on the Shroud of Turin, bases his case on Paul's testimony and thereby sidesteps Flew's critique of the Gospels. The Shroud is mentioned but is peripheral to the argument. This is just as well since recent carbon-dating tests have conclusively disproved the Shroud's authenticity (cf. Flew's remark 118; *Time* Oct. 24, 1988, 81). Habermas makes the dubious claim that the Pauline evidence is as good as eyewitness testimony (p. 83; Flew's response 114), but his argument does not stand or fall with this claim. The basic argument is that the resurrection is the theory which best fits the events acknowledged as historical by most scholars. These events are Jesus' death by crucifixion, the disciple's claim to have seen the risen Christ, the transformation of the disciples into men willing to die for their faith, and Paul's conversion. While Habermas correctly [394] notes the failure of any naturalistic hypothesis accounting for these facts to gain scholarly support (21), he concludes that the resurrection is, in all probability, true.

What is curious is how Habermas could be well informed about the facts of scholarship and draw the wrong conclusion. Assuming for the sake of argument that the resurrection hypothesis better fits the known facts than any currently available naturalistic account, it does not follow that we have good reason to believe in the resurrection. There may be better reason to remain agnostic or noncommitted than to believe in the resurrection. Pannenberg claims (128-129) and Habermas agrees (155) that "it becomes logically impossible to suspend judgment" about the Easter tradition if one wishes to offer a reconstruction of how the disciples came to hold their beliefs in the risen Christ. While true, it is a *non sequitur* since the question is whether we have better reason to remain agnostic than to believe in the resurrection theory. The question of agnosticism is especially relevant in cases that involve claims to the miraculous. As already noted, such claims require a higher quality of evidence than run-of-the-mill historical events.

Of the three commentators, only Pannenberg has much of value to say concerning the actual content of the debate. Hartshorne touches on larger metaphysical issues concerning God's existence and human immortality. Packer chastises Flew, praises Habermas, and succumbs to hyperbole—"there is more of prejudice and credulity involved in rejecting Christian beliefs than in accepting them . . ." (150). Pannenberg sides with Habermas with the qualification that the case for the resurrection requires more than Habermas's four historical facts. He fudges, however, on the central issue of whether there is strong enough evidence for the resurrection to override the common experience that dead persons do not leave their graves. The answer, he says, "is yes and no" (134). Yes, the evidence is strong; no, there is repeated evidence against resurrections.

A point that none of the participants or commentators notice is that the physical resurrection of Jesus requires the ascension. As C. S. Lewis says, “a phantom can just fade away; but an objective entity must go somewhere—something must happen to it” (*Miracles*, Macmillan, 1947, 154). The Lukan answer to Lewis’s observation is that Jesus ascended into a cloud and will one day return in a similar fashion (Acts 1:9-11). Now, the ascension, however one conceives it, is as miraculous as the resurrection. Thus, it is necessary to explain [395] the logical consequences of one miracle by means of another miracle. Habermas chides those who affirms the resurrection but do not affirm the logical consequences that proceed from it (176). One doubts that even Habermas would argue that there is good historical evidence for the ascension.