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James A. Keller

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# CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN DOUBTS ABOUT THE RESURRECTION

James A. Keller

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, Stephen Davis argues that it is rational for supernaturalists, though not for naturalists, to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ in (roughly) the sense of an event which happened to Jesus in which Jesus, though he had truly died, was restored to life and consciousness and after which his living body left the tomb. After making some clarifications regarding supernaturalism and the concept of a miracle, I argue that Davis has not shown this. My case against Davis rests essentially on two claims: (1) we cannot today reconstruct what the resurrection involved because there is no clear, historically reliable account of what the resurrection was thought to be by those who directly experienced the Easter event; and (2) we do not have sufficient evidence to make it rational to believe that the resurrection is part of a pattern of nonnatural events in which God has acted for similar ends, yet belief that there is such a pattern is needed if belief in the resurrection in Davis' sense is to be rational

In a recent issue of this journal Stephen Davis discusses whether or not it is possible for a person of today rationally to believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.<sup>1</sup> Although nowhere in the article does Davis explain just what he understands the resurrection to have been, his comments at various points in the article suggest that by 'resurrection' Davis is referring to an event which happened to Jesus (and not just to his followers) in which Jesus, though he had truly died, was restored to life and consciousness and after which his living body left the tomb. He answers his question by claiming that it can be rational so to believe and also rational not so to believe; conversely, neither position can be shown to be irrational. Davis explains that this apparently paradoxical conclusion occurs because of the different world-views which believers and non-believers accept, in terms of which their judgments about the rationality of believing in the resurrection are determined (p. 147).

I have considerable sympathy with Davis' overall approach and with many of his conclusions. It seems to me correct to say that the rationality of particular beliefs is relative to the world-views of the people who hold those beliefs. Whether or not the world-views themselves are subject to rational assessment is an issue which Davis does not discuss in his paper. I am inclined to think that they are, but their assessment is so complex and difficult that it would be very



difficult to show that any of a number of well-articulated world-views is irrational. Hence, I am inclined to accept Davis' claim that soft apologetics (showing that Christian belief is rational) is both possible and useful, but hard apologetics (showing that unbelief is irrational) is at best an unpromising undertaking (p. 147).

Within this overall approach, Davis distinguishes between supernaturalism, a Christian world-view within which the resurrection (and other miracles) can rationally be believed to have occurred, and naturalism, a non-Christian world-view within which it is rational to believe that the resurrection did not occur (p. 154). Davis tends to categorize professed Christians who interpret the resurrection as not involving the restoration of Jesus to life as basically naturalists, who are also theists (p. 156). It is here that my differences with Davis become significant. I believe that the problems with showing that it is rational to believe that the resurrection in something like Davis' sense actually occurred are much more numerous and complex than Davis suggests. Davis seems to think that the most serious bar to believing that the resurrection (in his sense) occurred is the difficulty in accepting the occurrence of a miracle; the problems about the clarity and historical reliability of the New Testament documents—documents on which (I take it) he relies—receive only scant mention and no discussion. But I believe that these problems by themselves constitute a serious bar to believing in the resurrection (in his sense);<sup>2</sup> moreover, they can be shown to exist even when one accepts epistemological principles which Davis accepts and even when one does not rule out *a priori* the possibility of miracles. In particular I want to highlight two sorts of problems: (1) we cannot today reconstruct what the resurrection involved because there is no clear, historically reliable account of what the resurrection was thought to be by those who directly experienced the Easter event; and (2) we do not have sufficient evidence to make it rational to believe that the resurrection is part of a pattern of nonnatural events in which God has acted for similar ends, yet belief that there is such a pattern is needed if belief in the resurrection in Davis' sense is to be rational.

Most of the balance of this paper is devoted to explicating and defending these claims. In so doing, I will inevitably have to draw on the results of current research into the New Testament accounts of the resurrection, but I intend (to try) not to use any results which presuppose a commitment to naturalism. But they do presuppose a commitment to certain canons of rationality in historical investigations—e.g., (1) that eyewitness accounts are generally more reliable than second- or third-hand accounts, (2) that of two accounts of an event, the earlier one is generally to be preferred over the later one, (3) that independent testimonies which agree are generally more credible than either one alone or than the two testimonies would be if one were dependent on the other, and (4) that it is in general possible to discern an author's purposes in writing a work and that it is legitimate to use an understanding of these purposes in assessing

the reliability of the work. Perhaps none of these canons holds without exception, but all of them are employed by historians in assessing accounts of clearly non-miraculous events; thus, the use of canons such as these would not seem to prejudice the case one way or the other. And if there are not any neutral canons such as these, then any purported assessment of the rationality of believing in the resurrection in Davis' sense is only a sham.

### *Naturalism, Supernaturalism, and Miracles*

Before turning to my two main claims, however, some further discussion of Davis' distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism is necessary. Davis defines naturalism as the belief that nature (1) alone exists, (2) is uncreated, (3) is uniform, and (4) consists wholly of events which are explicable by methods similar to those used in the natural sciences. Supernaturalism is the belief that (1) something besides nature exists (God), (2) nature depends on God for its existence, (3) the regularity of nature can be and occasionally is interrupted by miraculous acts of God, and (4) such events are humanly quite unpredictable and inexplicable (p. 154). The latter definition presupposes that it is possible to make a sharp distinction between natural processes and miraculous events, though the attempt to do so encounters serious problems.

Some indication of the problems can be gathered if we consider Davis' distinction between hard and soft miracles.

A *soft miracle* . . . is a miracle which religious skeptics can consistently agree has occurred; it is just that they will disagree with religious believers on its cause and meaning. If Jones, apparently doomed with cancer, is after prayer and fasting found to be well and free of cancer, this may well constitute a soft miracle. Skeptics can consistently agree that Jones was gravely ill but now is well—they will simply deny that Jones' recovery was due to God. A *hard miracle*, on the other hand, is one which is very difficult for religious skeptics to explain naturalistically and so skeptics will not want to allow that it has occurred. (p. 152)

Davis goes on to say that the resurrection (that is, as he understands it) is a hard miracle; skeptics argue that it has not occurred rather than try to explain it naturalistically.

Hard miracles are events which seem to defy naturalistic explanation. Soft miracles, however, do not seem to defy naturalistic explanation, perhaps because we do not know enough about the event or the processes involved to determine that they do not accord with naturalistic processes as we understand them. But if one does not have good reason to think that a naturalistic explanation could not be given (as one typically does not, in regard to soft miracles), why should

one resort to a nonnaturalistic explanation? Davis himself admits that our prejudice should always be toward a naturalistic explanation; we should accept a non-naturalistic explanation only when nothing else seems adequate.<sup>3</sup> The very fact that an unbeliever could accept the fact that Jones had recovered while not accepting the resurrection would suggest that Jones' recovery is no strong indication that a miraculous event has occurred. Thus, it would seem that on Davis' own principles the only sort of event which could provide rational ground for belief that a miracle had occurred would be a well documented hard miracle.

Although Davis does give us a way to distinguish between hard and soft miracles, he does not discuss why an unbeliever would have trouble giving a naturalistic explanation of some events and not others. I suspect that the reason is that we have a good understanding of the natural processes involved in the former and that the laws which operated in the former seem rather deterministic, not statistical; neither of these conditions is true of the events involved in soft miracles. Contrast Jones' recovery from cancer with Jesus' resurrection. We are far from a complete understanding of the processes involved in the progress and remission of cancer; surprises happen often. But we are far more familiar with the processes involved in the degeneration of tissue after death; aside from a few disputed cases like Jesus, there are no surprises in post-mortem developments. Now, if I am correct about the reason for the distinction between hard and soft miracles, then the line between them will change with the progress of human knowledge: as knowledge grows, the scope for hard miracles will also grow.

There is also the problem of explicating the distinction between God's relation to non-miraculous events and God's relation to miraculous events. The necessity for such an explication arises from the fact that a miraculous event must be one which is caused by God in some special sense.<sup>4</sup> But the idea of a 'special sense' requires some ordinary sense with which it can be contrasted. Only if one draws the distinction between these two senses in which God is related to events can one sustain the sharp distinction between miraculous and nonmiraculous events which Davis' approach presupposes.<sup>5</sup> For only if this distinction can be explicated can the distinction between the regularity of nature and its interruption be explicated; and without the latter, there is no basis for the part of distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism indicated in points (3) and (4) of their definitions. And without that distinction, one is left with what Davis called the "*basically naturalist*" position of people like Bultmann (p. 156, his italics).

Thus, the distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism raises problems which need further work. But in what follows I shall try to work with the distinction in Davis' sense with one exception. I shall assume that there is a God who *can* interrupt the order of nature, but I shall not assume that God has done so. The evidence that God has done so would, as I have argued, have to come from well documented hard miracles. And the resurrection is probably one of

the best documented instances of a possible hard miracle. So we shall look at the evidence for it with the assumption of supernaturalism in this sense.<sup>6</sup> If a good case for a hard miracle cannot be made in relation to the resurrection of Jesus, it is doubtful that it can be made at all.

Before examining that case, one more thing must be said about the resurrection as a hard miracle. Thus far I have been treating the resurrection in Davis' sense as an example of a hard miracle, and throughout most of his article Davis so treats it. But there is one point at which he seems willing to accept another way of conceptualizing the resurrection. There he claims that its being a miracle is not the crucial point; in response to the objection that laws of nature are human descriptions of observed regularities, he grants that in this sense it is not necessary that events such as the resurrection be inexplicable naturalistically. He writes:

For Christians won't mind one bit if it turns out, through some sound process of reasoning, that no miracles occur, i.e. that no true natural laws are ever violated but rather that some weak ones are just occasionally discovered to be inadequate. As long as it is still true, for example, that Jesus was born of a virgin, was raised from the dead, healed people, turned water into wine, etc., it will be a matter of profound indifference to them whether natural laws are ever violated. (p. 151)

This, however, is not Davis' basic position, but rather a concession to a possible objection based on an understanding of natural laws as purely (summary) descriptions of what has occurred.

Nevertheless, because of the importance which I understand Davis to be giving to the distinction between naturalistic and nonnaturalistic explanations, I must say something more about this matter. Of course, if laws of nature are understood as merely descriptions of observed regularities, then no event can ever violate a (correct) law of nature, and an event which seemed to do so would *ipso facto* show that supposed law of nature to be incorrect. But it seems to me that we require more of a law of nature than merely that it be a correct description of observed regularities; it must integrate with other laws of nature and must not contain references to named particulars. (E.g., the following would not be an acceptable candidate for a law of nature: "When a human being dies, he remains dead unless he is Jesus of Nazareth.") These further requirements for a law of nature enable us to see that an event could occur which would furnish rational grounds for believing that it required a nonnaturalistic explanation. For example, suppose that we had a system of interrelated proposed laws of nature which we had very good grounds to take to be correct (such as the laws which describe certain of the physiological processes of living organisms and the physiological changes which occur upon the death of an organism) and that we had one well confirmed exception to these laws (such as the resurrection of Jesus) which

continued to defy subsumption under any set of laws which we could formulate; then we might well want to conclude that the explanation of that event must be nonnaturalistic (though some people might want to continue to hope that a naturalistic explanation would eventually be found).

On the other hand, if we found a naturalistic explanation of the event—i.e., if we were able to formulate a satisfactory set of laws under which the event could be subsumed—then we would have no miracle and that event would give us no reason to believe that God acts in miraculous ways. And if the resurrection could be so explained, what would become of Davis' position? What is crucial to Christianity as Davis understands it? That Jesus came back to life perhaps through some process which we do not yet understand but which, if we did understand, we might well duplicate and thereby restore many people, even perhaps everyone, to life? Or that Jesus was restored to life in a way which never will be explained naturalistically (because it was done by God)? The answer to this question is not clear in his paper. The passage on p. 151 might seem to suggest that the former would be enough. But I think not. For if that were to occur, then Bultmann might well be able to agree that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but he still would not be a supernaturalist. Indeed, the basic difference between Davis and his opponents would vanish. Thus I conclude that the impossibility of a naturalistic explanation of the resurrection is crucial to Davis' position, and I will so assume in the remainder of this paper.

I have argued that Davis is committed to the idea that Jesus' resurrection is a hard miracle, an event which cannot be explained naturalistically. But why should one so understand the resurrection? Certainly it has been so understood by many Christians, but what sort of reasons might support the rationality of so understanding it? One such reason might be a claim that this was the way in which the first Christians understood it or that this is the most plausible way to understand what they said about it. Let us see what evidence there is for such a claim.

#### *What Is The Resurrection?*

Our basic questions in this section are these: what was the original understanding of Jesus' resurrection by those involved in the Easter event, and what conclusions about the resurrection can we draw from their understanding? To answer the first question, we need to discover what was believed about the resurrection by those involved in the Easter event at about the time they first believed,<sup>8</sup> not those who were converted through their ministry nor even they themselves several years later. Any historian would have to regard the ideas of the people in these latter categories as less reliable testimony regarding what the resurrection involved than the contemporary testimony of those involved in the

event. Of course, the ideas of people in the latter categories may coincide with the ideas of the very earliest believers, but the historian cannot assume this; she must look for the understanding of those involved in the Easter event at about the time they first believed.<sup>9</sup> (Again I might comment that this preference for the ideas of the very earliest believers has nothing to do with the sort of event in question; a historian would have a similar preference for the contemporary testimony of those involved in any event.)

How then did the original believers in the resurrection understand this event? When we attempt to answer this question, we discover something which is disturbing to a historian: according to any records which Christians accept (or are known to any historians, for that matter), there were no eyewitnesses to the resurrection itself. (There were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus, but not to the event of Jesus being resurrected.) Therefore, to say that Jesus was resurrected is to express the conclusion of an inference, either based solely on the claims that certain people saw the Risen Lord or based on these claims and also on the story of the empty tomb.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, from a historian's standpoint the situation is even worse than that. We do not even have any contemporary accounts of either the appearances of the resurrected Jesus or of the seeing of the empty tomb written by eyewitnesses.<sup>11</sup> All we have is other people's accounts of what the eyewitnesses purportedly saw, and these accounts are typically sketchy and were written many years later. Thus, the historian who wants to understand what the resurrection event was must use later, sketchy, second-hand accounts of what the eyewitnesses saw, and from these accounts he must try to determine what the resurrection event was. These points about the only available basis for constructing a historical understanding of the resurrection do not in any way presuppose naturalism, yet they seem to me to have the important consequence that we cannot arrive at a historically reliable understanding of what the very earliest believers understood by the event which they (and we) name by the word 'resurrection.' Let me explain why.

First, we should note that 'resurrection' is not a term which refers to a process with which we or they were familiar in the way in which we and they are familiar with, e.g., the process referred to as crucifixion. The latter process has occurred many times and can (in principle at least) be studied. The only instance of a resurrection of which we know is Jesus', so we must learn what it involved by looking at it, not by reflecting on the term, as we could if it referred to a process with which we are familiar. Moreover, the early Christians spoke of Jesus' resurrection not because they had seen it occur, but because of other experiences which certain Christians had had (being appeared to by Jesus and possibly seeing his empty tomb). Thus, to determine the original understanding of the resurrection, we must look at the eyewitnesses' understanding of the experience(s) which led them to speak of it. But on this matter our lack of demonstrably reliable



eyewitness accounts is crucial.

Look first at what is said about the appearances. Appearances by the Risen Jesus are mentioned by Paul in I Cor. 15 and narrated in all the Gospels except for Mark.<sup>12</sup> Paul's account is at least twenty years after the crucifixion; the accounts in the Gospels are probably at least thirty years after Paul's, or fifty years after the event. Not only were these accounts written many years after the events, but except for Paul's testimony about his own experience, they are not eyewitness testimony. Let us examine briefly the earliest of these accounts, that by Paul. Even if what Paul says were a verbatim report of what the eyewitnesses said, it is not all that helpful in enabling us to understand what they experienced. According to I Cor. 15, Jesus "appeared to" (or "was seen by") Peter (and others). What sort of event does the statement refer to? The verb which is used (*ophthe*) is patent of many meanings.<sup>13</sup> It is well known that skeptics suggest that Peter (and the others) were hallucinating. But what is the difference between a hallucination and a veridical perception of Jesus by Peter? Presumably at least that the latter involved light rays, which had been reflected off the body of Jesus, entering Peter's eyes and resulting in the experience of Peter's seeing. Does the resurrected Jesus have a body which reflects light waves? If not, Peter could not "see" Jesus in the normal sense. If the body does reflect light waves, then Jesus would have appeared to anyone else with normal eyesight who had been present when Jesus appeared and had been looking in the right direction. Would this have happened? We do not know, and we have no way to know.<sup>14</sup> Thus we do not know from the verb what is meant, nor do we know from a general understanding of the situation what the term means. Nor does Paul, who also used the term in relation to his experience of the Risen Lord, tell us, either here or elsewhere, what that experience was like. (If the accounts in Acts of Paul's experience of the Risen Jesus are accurate—an admittedly questionable hypothesis—then Paul did not even see Jesus at all, despite Paul's use of *ophthe* in I Cor. 15; all he saw was a light, though he is reported also to have heard a voice.) Thus, this passage does not show that to say that Jesus appeared means that he was seen as a normal person or physical object is seen. (I do not claim that he was not so seen, only that we do not have good grounds for thinking that he was so seen.)

Some Gospel accounts are more full. Some of them seem to imply that the writer (and presumably the community of which he was a part) understood the resurrection to involve Jesus' having a physical body (though even here there are problems—sometimes he cannot be recognized until the disciples' eyes "are opened," and the body seems able to pass through closed doors, and only one Evangelist deals with the question of what happened to the body of the Risen Lord).<sup>15</sup> But the major problems concern the historical reliability of the accounts of post-resurrection appearances. Entirely apart from the question of whether

nonnatural events can occur, many New Testament scholars find ample reasons for doubting the historical reliability of these accounts.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, space precludes a discussion of these problems here (the interested reader should refer to the works mentioned in the previous note), but they are sufficient to show that it is at least not clear that the Gospel writers give historically reliable accounts of what happened.

Appearance stories are one sort of reason in the tradition for speaking of a resurrection; the other sort is the empty tomb stories. They probably show something about the understanding of the resurrection held by those who told the stories. But what implications they have for the understanding of the resurrection among the very earliest believers—those involved in the Easter event at about the time of that event—depends on when the stories of the empty tomb originated. And on this issue there is disagreement. Werner Kümmel argues that they are relatively late; Hugh Anderson reaches the same conclusion and cites other concurring experts. Marxsen thinks the idea of the empty tomb to be an “externalization” or “interpretation” in visual terms of an already existing faith in the resurrection, but he does not think the evidence enables us to determine whether it entered the tradition early or late; Fuller, on the other hand, believes that it entered the tradition early and that the disciples “welcomed it as congruous with the resurrection faith.”<sup>17</sup> Given this diversity of expert opinion, we cannot with any confidence use the empty tomb stories as a basis for concluding how those involved in the Easter event understood the resurrection.

In this section, I have been arguing that our sources do not allow us to reconstruct with any confidence how the eyewitnesses understood the resurrection.<sup>18</sup> I have not argued that Davis’ understanding (or any other understanding) of the resurrection is clearly incorrect. For if I am right about the sources, no such argument about Davis’ understanding can be made; on the other hand, if I am right about the sources, Davis also cannot show that his understanding conforms to that of the eyewitnesses. Moreover, even if one could show that one’s understanding agreed with theirs, showing that their understanding corresponded with what had happened would involve another step. Let me suggest briefly what further problems this would involve.

At the base of all these problems perhaps lies the claim by many contemporary biblical scholars that the biblical documents provide dubious grounds for reconstructing the events of Jesus’ career.<sup>19</sup> Most of them would claim that the accounts we have of his career were elaborated, after his death, in ways that reflect and express the faith of the Christian community; therefore, while certain incidents in his career are very certain, others are doubtful. I have already indicated some of the doubts about the meaning and the historical reliability of some of the post-resurrection narratives. Scholars who reach these conclusions do not intend thereby to impugn the honesty or intelligence of the biblical writers; rather, they

claim that our modern understanding of historiography simply did not exist among the New Testament writers (or among their secular contemporaries either, for that matter). Rather than seeing the documents as unreliable (and therefore unsuccessful) histories, these scholars see them as reliable (and therefore successful) expressions of faith. This understanding of the aim and achievement of the New Testament writers is the result of decades of detailed analysis of the documents. With respect to the Gospels, in particular, it is the result of detailed analyses of each of the Gospels and a comparison of the Gospels with each other; in this way, the interests of each Evangelist can be discerned and conclusions drawn about how he handled the traditions on which he based his writing. It is neither possible nor necessary to go into these analyses here; suffice it to say that they do not in general presuppose naturalism.<sup>20</sup>

Among these scholars there is general agreement that the earliest stratum of the tradition regarding the appearances consisted simply of the claim that Jesus appeared to Peter (and perhaps to others). But it did not contain narratives of the appearances; these came later.<sup>21</sup> These narratives expressed the faith of the community, but we have no basis for concluding that they are historically accurate accounts of even what the people named in them would say, to say nothing of their being accurate accounts of the events. Thus, all that the historian of today can reliably conclude is that certain first-century Christians said that Jesus appeared to certain people. And I have already indicated that we cannot be sure how those to whom he appeared would have described the appearances. Finally, even if we had access to first-hand accounts by the recipients of these appearances, the historian would have to assess the probability that their understanding was accurate; in the absence of such accounts, this cannot be done.

What about the empty tomb narratives? I admitted that they probably involve the idea that something unusual happened to the body. But is this tradition relatively early or late? If we cannot answer this question with historical reliability, then we cannot claim with historical reliability that certain women claimed that the tomb was empty. But even if the historian could show on good historical grounds that some women had claimed that the tomb was empty, could he go any further? Could he show that the women were reliable witnesses? How? He does not know how long after the crucifixion they first made this claim, how many made this claim, under what circumstances they made it, how closely their accounts agreed, what they stood to gain or lose by making the claim, etc.

Sometimes a different sort of argument is attempted regarding the empty tomb: it is said that the tomb must have been empty; otherwise, when the resurrection—and the empty tomb—were proclaimed on Pentecost, it would have been easy for the opponents of Jesus' followers to go to the tomb and produce the body, thus silencing the new movement decisively. But this argument assumes that Acts gives us a historically reliable account of events right after Jesus' death—an

assumption which many New Testament scholars would dispute (again for reasons which have nothing to do with naturalism). Certainly, by the time the Gospels were written, it was believed within the Christian community (and, to judge by Matt 28:11-15, evidently by at least some of their Jewish opponents) that the tomb was empty. But this does not enable the historian to conclude that the claim about the empty tomb was made in the days shortly after the crucifixion. We must beware of reading back into a time which lacked modern critical techniques our contemporary methods of, and interest in, checking and challenging claims which today are employed by neutral and even hostile audiences. If it is said that those who believed in the resurrection must have believed in the empty tomb, it should be replied that this assumes that the very earliest believers in the resurrection understood it to involve an empty tomb—and this is part of what needs to be proved.<sup>22</sup> For my claim in this section of the paper is precisely that we do not have a historically reliable account of what the very earliest believers in the resurrection understood it to involve.

The argument of this section draws heavily on contemporary conclusions about the origin and interpretation of various New Testament documents. However, as I indicated above, some conservative New Testament scholars would challenge these conclusions and would contend that the Gospels intended and achieved a much higher degree of historical reliability than that involved in my argument. Does their challenge undermine my argument against Davis? I think not. For Davis' claim is that belief in the resurrection (in his sense) is rationally justified. But he also admits that even the supernaturalist should require very strong evidence before believing that a nonnatural event has occurred. (And I would add that to give up on this requirement is to open oneself to uncritical credulity about claims about the occurrence of nonnatural events made by the ignorant and the deceitful.) Thus, insofar as the biblical materials are part of that evidence, the case for an understanding of them which would support the rationality of believing in the resurrection in Davis' sense must be very strong; this seems to me to imply that in relation to passages used to conclude that a hard miracle has occurred, the conservative view of the documents must be very much better supported than alternative views. In other words, in relation to other views of these passages the conservative view must not only be an alternative with some *prima facie* plausibility; it must be shown to be very likely. No defense of the rationality of believing in the resurrection as a hard miracle is adequate unless this is shown. But given where the burden of proof lies, my case against Davis' view does not require showing that the conservative view is highly unlikely. My case requires only that there be reasons to doubt the historical reliability of the Easter stories which do not rest on naturalistic assumptions. I believe that I have shown this.

*Is It Rational to Believe That God Has Caused a Nonnatural Event?*

In the previous section I argued that one cannot derive from the biblical documents sufficient historically reliable information to provide rational justification for the belief that the resurrection in Davis' sense occurred. But even if the evidence were much stronger than I believe it to be, evidence of another sort would be required to complete the case for the belief that God had acted in the Easter event in a nonnaturalistic way. The other sort of evidence would be evidence that *God* has in the past *acted in nonnatural events for similar ends*.<sup>23</sup> (Given the same evidence that Nero or Hitler—or even, as Davis asks, John Lennon—had risen from the dead, would the same supernaturalists who believe that God resurrected Jesus also believe that God resurrected Nero and Hitler and Lennon?) This sort of evidence is required because a miracle is more than just an event which seems to defy naturalistic explanation; it is an event brought about in some special way by God. And we need some reason other than just the nonnaturalness of the event to justify the claim that God brought it about; this other reason would be the event's fitting into (what we take to be) a pattern of divine activity. We need a pattern of activity because we identify God (a non-bodied agent) in terms of his purposes as revealed in his deeds;<sup>24</sup> and unless some of the events in the pattern are nonnatural, the task of defending the rationality of believing in the occurrence of one particular nonnatural event (e.g., the resurrection) is complicated by the need to explain why it is the only nonnatural event.

The belief that God has acted to interrupt natural processes for certain purposes amounts to a particular religious world-view (though it may not be well developed or well articulated). But if this framework is essential to determining the rationality of believing that God raised Jesus, then one cannot determine that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is rational without also determining that it is rational to believe in the tradition that God has acted in certain ways for certain ends.<sup>25</sup>

I think that Davis might agree with this point,<sup>26</sup> but I am not sure that he appreciates its implications for the rationality of belief in the resurrection. Does God intervene in nonnaturalistic ways for the sort of ends which Christians understand to be the purpose of the resurrection? Not *can* God do so, but *does* God do so? Has God done so in the past? What is the evidence that God has? Davis does not say, but I presume that he would cite Scriptural accounts of God's other miraculous actions. If he would, then the assessment of the rationality of the belief in Jesus' resurrection is not independent of the assessment of the rationality of the belief in other nonnatural events. But here we must take note of the fact that the historically reliable factual evidence for any other nonnatural event in the Scriptures is probably no stronger and in most cases weaker than the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, yet we have seen that this evidence is itself

not strong enough. But belief in these other events is necessary to provide the context within which it is rational to believe that God does act nonnaturally for the ends which Davis understands the Easter event to manifest; apart from this context, there would be no justification for taking the Easter event to be an action of God, however much it might defy naturalistic explanation.

This necessity for belief in other nonnatural events in which God has acted would also apply to first-century Christians. In this context it is significant that Davis claims that first-century Christians tended to explain most events naturalistically just as we do today. He does not defend this claim, but I suspect that any defense would rest on an equation of the first-century distinction between ordinary events and mighty works, signs, wonders, etc. with our contemporary distinction between natural and nonnatural events. If this is the right way to understand their concepts, then it is probable that the number of nonnatural events which they believed occurred in their everyday lives and within their observation was far greater than the number in which we believe today. This would have made it easier and perhaps more rational for them to understand what they experienced and were told relating to the Easter event as pointing to a nonnatural event than it would be for us to do so today. Thus, even if Davis is right that first-century Christians tended to explain most events naturalistically, there are important differences between their context and ours that affect the degree to which it is rational for them and for us to believe that a particular event was nonnatural.

But there is a much more serious problem with making the comparison between first-century Christians and us today which Davis suggests. The comparison assumes that first-century Christians had (at least roughly) the same concepts of miracles and of naturalistic and nonnaturalistic explanation as we have today, but it is virtually certain that they did not. They lacked the concept of nature and of natural law which is presupposed in Davis' concept of miracles.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, there is no New Testament concept (or Old Testament concept, for that matter) corresponding to our concept of 'miracle.' The New Testament uses four terms which might be connected with miracles in our sense: *dunameis* (mighty deeds), *semeia* (signs), *terata* (*wonders—often used in conjunction with signs*), and *erga* (works). But none of these terms necessarily involves a nonnatural event in our sense; instead, they indicate some event in which God's activity is seen.<sup>28</sup> Thus, instead of our distinction between events which are explained naturalistically and those which are explained nonnaturalistically, New Testament Christians employed a distinction between events in which God was manifested and those in which God was not. Therefore, it is highly questionable to draw the conclusion that an event was a miracle in our sense on the grounds that first-century Christians called it a mighty deed, sign, etc.

But suppose that we have no good evidence for a nonnatural event prior to

the Easter event. Why could it not have been the first such event for which we have good evidence? (Presumably if there are any such events for which we have evidence that makes it rational for us to believe that they occurred, there must have been some first such event.) Why might not the Easter event be the first clear evidence that God does act in these ways and thus initiate a tradition in which we find other instances of God's acting in these ways? Aside from the fact that Christians traditionally have not understood the Easter event as marking this sort of a radical innovation in God's activity, this suggestion seems to me to create more problems than support for Davis' understanding of the Easter event. How often do rational, critical Christians today claim that they have observed God acting nonnaturalistically in their own times? I know of few, if any.<sup>29</sup> And this must inevitably prompt the question: why does not God sometimes so act in events which we can observe? If God really does on occasion act so as to produce a hard miracle, why do we not observe it? Our failure to observe hard miracles on occasions when our understanding of God's purposes suggests that they would be appropriate or to be expected (e.g., stopping the holocaust) must suggest (though not prove) that God does not so act. To be sure, it can be replied that we do not understand all of God's purposes, that God's ways are not our ways, etc. And if the problem were just the occasional non-occurrence of hard miracles when they might be expected, this answer would be adequate. But our problem is that they (apparently) never occur. If not, why not? Again, I claim that our repeated failure to observe their occurrence must be taken as some reason to think that they do not occur.<sup>30</sup>

But am I being too hasty in claiming that rational Christians today do not claim that God is producing nonnatural events in their lives? This might seem to be simply an empirical question to be answered by sociologists. Surely some contemporary Christians say that God has done things in their lives. But are they claiming that the events in question are nonnatural events? In most cases, I suspect that the issue does not even arise in those terms. An event occurred in which the person sees "the hand of God"; perhaps it was an event for which the person had prayed. In such contexts, no one (or almost no one) will ask whether the event was a nonnatural event. But if somehow the issue did arise and if someone were to claim that the event is a nonnatural event, are they being rational when they say this? That is a matter which is more difficult for sociologists to determine and one which we cannot attempt to answer in this paper.<sup>31</sup> Here I will simply record the fact that I know of no Christian who rationally claims that God has produced a *clearly* nonnatural event in his life or within the range of his experience.

The absence of any *clearly* nonnatural events today, even in circumstances in which our understanding of God's purposes might lead us to expect them, raises problems for the view that God occasionally brings them about. To avoid any

misunderstanding, let me admit at the outset that I find no logical incoherence in the view that most events happen in accordance with natural causality but that occasionally God produces a nonnatural event, one which does not accord with natural causality. But though this is not an incoherent position, I wonder what reason there might be for holding it. One might, I guess, hold the position for no reason other than that it is a logical possibility. But this would hardly be reason enough to make one's holding the position rational, for there are other logical possibilities too—e.g., that natural causality always obtains, that it seldom obtains, etc. Which of these possibilities shall we believe characterizes the actual world, and why shall we believe that possibility rather than another characterizes this world? I presume that if we rationally believe that natural causality does not always obtain, we must have in mind some instance or instances when (we believe) it has not obtained and some reason(s) to believe that it has not obtained in these instances.

What are these instances? I argued earlier in the paper that we do not have adequate reason to believe that the resurrection was such an event. I would add that we lack historically reliable evidence that any other event mentioned in the Bible is clearly nonnatural.<sup>32</sup> I have also claimed that we do not have strong evidence for clearly nonnatural events in our own lives or in the lives of others in our own time. Here again I take it that the burden of proof is on someone who would disagree with me. Such a person would have to cite events which are clearly nonnatural. If no clearly nonnatural events can be cited in biblical events or in our own lives, how can it be rational to believe that they *actually* occur, not just are possible?<sup>33</sup>

In this way one might come to naturalism as a conclusion based on the lack of clear-cut evidence for nonnatural events. I would repeat that I do not think that such evidence is in principle unobtainable; I just know of none. As I said earlier, the difficulty with believing that occasional nonnatural events occur is not a logical difficulty: we can always believe that they occur somewhere. But if we are rationally to believe that some nonnatural events occur, we must have in mind some events which we believe are nonnatural events. And they must be clearly nonnatural events if we are to be rational in believing that nonnatural events occur, for (as even Davis insists) our predisposition should be toward giving a naturalistic explanation of events whenever possible.

Does the previous paragraph show me at last in my true colors as what Davis would call “basically naturalist”? (In fact, I am not; I share with the process thinkers mentioned earlier a rejection of the sharp distinction between natural and nonnatural events.) Even if it did, I do not think that would be relevant to my case against the rationality of believing that the resurrection in Davis' sense occurred. For that case rested on reasons which do not presuppose naturalism.

To recapitulate briefly, I suggested that, assuming that there is a God who



could interfere with natural processes, the factors which would make rational a belief in Jesus' resurrection in Davis' sense would be (1) the factual evidence for details about the event which would provide a rational basis for thinking it to be a nonnatural event and (2) evidence that God has on other occasions interfered with natural processes for similar purposes. In the previous section I argued that the factual evidence that the resurrection event occurred as Davis understands it is not very strong. This is not to say that the evidence provides strong support for any alternative reconstruction of that event; it simply does not provide strong evidence for any view of the event. And in this section I have raised what I consider to be serious difficulties with the second factor. Let me reemphasize that my doubts about this second factor are not based on some presumption about the inviolability of natural law. Rather they are based on the weakness of the historical evidence for any hard miracles in the biblical documents and the absence of such events in our own lives. An given Davis' principle (which I accept) that rational people will require very strong evidence before they believe that a miracle has occurred, I do not find it rational to believe that the resurrection was a hard miracle.

The foregoing may not prove conclusively that it is not rational for a contemporary Christian to believe that the resurrection occurred in Davis' sense, but I do think that it shows that even for a supernaturalist it is more difficult to show that such a belief is rational than Davis' article suggests. Furthermore, I think it helps to explain why a person might try to be a Christian, a follower of Christ and one who understands God's purposes and will to be as Christ proclaimed and exemplified, and still rationally doubt that the resurrection in Davis' sense occurred. I regard the attempt to do this and therefore to develop an alternative understanding of the resurrection as not necessarily an uncritical following of contemporary naturalism, but at least sometimes as the result of an honest effort to come to terms with the Christian Scriptures in light of all we can learn.

*Wofford College*

## NOTES

1. Stephen T. Davis, "Is It Possible to Know That Jesus Was Raised from the Dead?" *Faith and Philosophy*, I, 2 (April 1984), 147-59. Page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this article.

2. I must stress that I am claiming that it is *in Davis' sense* of the resurrection that they constitute a bar to believing rationally that the resurrection occurred. I make no claims about other senses in which the resurrection has been understood. Similarly, when I refer in the title to doubts about the resurrection, I mean doubts about the resurrection in Davis' sense.

3. Davis says that “rational people will require very strong evidence indeed before they will believe that a miracle has occurred” (p. 148). He also indicates his sympathy with those who would require very strong evidence before they believed reports that a building had levitated or that John Lennon had been resurrected (p. 158).

4. In the above quotation Davis speaks of Jones’ recovery being due to God. Davis does not explicate in what sense it is due to God, but presumably it must be something more than God’s ordinary maintenance of the natural order.

5. This is not the place to go into this very complex matter. But it is worth noting here that the inability to explicate this distinction was one of the major reasons for the decline of the biblical theology movement of the 1950s and 1960s; see Langdon B. Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *Journal of Religion*, XLI (July 1961), 194-205. It might also be worth mentioning that other theistic ontologies can explicate a clear sense in which God acts in historical events without presupposing this sort of sharp distinction between miraculous and non-miraculous events; e.g., in process theologies God is a partial cause of every event—more of some than of others—and there is no sharp line between ordinary events and miraculous events. Can it really be that the biblical materials *require* us to assume the correctness of an ontology which makes the sort of sharp distinction which Davis’ approach involves?

6. Davis might object that I am biasing the case in favor of a naturalistic understanding of the resurrection by not assuming that God has interfered with natural processes in some events. I might reply with a *tu quoque*; his version of supernaturalism biases the case in favor of supernaturalistic understanding. But Davis might well admit this and point out that he insisted that one’s world-view shaped one’s understanding of the resurrection; that is why it is rational for some people to believe in the resurrection, but not others. So I would prefer to answer that each of the other events which allegedly involve a hard miracle would also have to be examined. I would claim about each of them, as I claim about the resurrection, that there is no good historical evidence for the occurrence of an event which would be a hard miracle. And I would make this claim about the evidence, not because the event could not have happened as recorded, but because there is good reason to doubt details of the occurrence on the grounds of canons of historiography of the sort mentioned above. This sort of reason to doubt that a hard miracle has occurred is not based on the assumption of naturalism (though it may involve the sort of predisposition toward a naturalistic explanation which even Davis regards as legitimate), and it has nothing to do with whether or not miracles occurred in other events. However, as we shall see, the case for a miracle in one event cannot be completely divorced from the issue of whether or not it is rational to believe that miracles have occurred in other events (though it normally can be divorced from any one other particular event). Having good evidence for a miraculous intervention by God in some other events makes it more rational to believe that it has occurred in the event in question. But what could this good evidence be other than other well documented events which involved hard miracles? And so the documentation of these events would require careful scrutiny.

7. For example, suppose that we discovered that everyone whose early occupation was carpentry but who became an itinerant preacher in his late twenties and who was put to death by the authorities came back to life and then in a few days floated up out of human sight. Jesus’ resurrection would be an instance of an event explained by this law. Would Davis really be satisfied with this explanation of Jesus’ resurrection?

8. An example of such a person would be Peter at and shortly after the time when Jesus appeared to him (if the tradition about the order of the appearances in I Cor. 15 is reliable, as it is generally

thought to be).

9. Here it might be worth noting a related point about a historiographically unjustified practice of some Christians today. When they read some portion of the New Testament, often they do so with the rest of the New Testament in mind as a context and as a basis for interpreting the passage being read. This procedure is historiographically suspect because for many parts of the New Testament neither the author nor his original readers knew about any other portions of the New Testament. Thus, we cannot simply assume that every New Testament writer who spoke of the resurrection understood it as did every other New Testament author; even less can we assume this of every believer mentioned by a New Testament writer. Of course, they all may have understood it in the same way, but this must be shown, not assumed. Thus, we must be careful about reading into early accounts of the resurrection something which dates from a later period in the history of the tradition.

10. The view that the inference is based solely on the claims about the appearances is a common view, at least among scholars other than conservative ones. Cf., e.g., Werner Georg Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament*, tr. John Steely (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), pp. 98-99 and Hugh Anderson *Jesus and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 192-95. Willi Marxsen traces all the resurrection stories back to the claim that Peter believed and "the assertion of the early church that this faith was grounded on the seeing of Jesus" (*The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, tr. Margaret Kohl [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970], p. 96). Even Reginald H. Fuller, though he does not believe that the empty tomb stories derive from the appearance stories, says that "for the disciples, faith in the resurrection did not rest upon the empty tomb, but upon their revelatory encounters with the Risen One" (*The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980], p. 171).

11. Paul might seem to be an exception to this statement. But we do not have any description by Paul of the Risen Jesus. Paul does claim to have seen the Risen Jesus, but he never describes what he saw or what the experience was like. There is a description in Acts, but that is not by Paul. I Cor. 15:35-50 is a metaphorical account of what a resurrected body is like, but it is not—and does not purport to be—a description of the resurrected Jesus; moreover, it was written about twenty years after Paul's encounter with the Risen Jesus.

12. As is well known, our best text of Mark ends at 16:8. The remaining verses 9-20, which appear in some late manuscripts and which are printed in some English translations, are not part of the original. Whether Mark's original had additional verses after 16:8 is uncertain. No textual evidence for them exists in our best ancient manuscripts. The major reasons for suspecting that there were originally other verses is that 16:8 would make a somewhat abrupt ending and that the other Gospels contain appearance stories. But Mark also begins abruptly. And the comparison with the other Gospels must be used with care, particularly if the point under discussion is the history of the origin and transmission of the appearance stories. Perhaps Mark ended with 16:8 because the appearance stories were not used in his community.

13. See the entry under *horao* in William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). Cf. also Marxsen, *op. cit.*, p. 98. Any more specific proposal about the meaning of the term cannot be the basis for an understanding of the resurrection; on the contrary, it has to be based on some understanding of the resurrection derived from some other source, as is illustrated by Fuller's proposal, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

14. That it was later reported that Jesus appeared to over 500 at once does not show that the Risen Jesus could be seen by anyone who was present at the right time and looking in the right direction. We know too little about the event to draw this conclusion from the report. By then the story about

the appearance to Peter was known among Christians. Perhaps some one or two persons there might have claimed that Jesus was appearing to them and then others gradually joined in, not wanting to seem to lack faith or insight. Moreover, it is noteworthy that neither here nor any place else in the New Testament is it said that the Risen Jesus appeared to anyone who remained an unbeliever; and Paul is the only one who is said to have been an unbeliever at the time of the appearance.

15. The fact that only one Evangelist feels it necessary to discuss what happened to the body of the Risen Jesus is surely curious if the Evangelists all understood the resurrection to involve Jesus' having a physical body. For the others did not expect that their readers would refer to Luke's Gospel to find out what happened to the body. Yet if they (and their readers) understood it to be a physical body, it would seem that they would have to say something about where that body is now.

16. It is interesting that Willi Marxsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22, to name only one, explicitly rejects naturalism as a criterion for New Testament interpretation and criticism. His *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* lays out his method of argument very nicely; at no point does he reject a passage or propose an interpretation because of trouble with an event which seems to require a nonnaturalistic explanation. Rather, his approach may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. He notes that the narratives of the post-Easter events in the four Gospels do not agree. He concludes that not only would each be at best incomplete if it were intended as a history, but that they cannot be harmonized in detail (pp. 71-74).
2. He compares the changes which Matthew and Luke made in Mark (which they knew), and compares the tendencies revealed in changes made in these Gospel's treatments of pre-Easter events. Thus he concludes that certain theological purposes shaped the narratives.
3. Finally, he points out that the post-Easter stories (like the rest of the Gospels) circulated as individual stories before they were gathered and put into written form. Then he tries to reconstruct the history of these stories and to get at their earliest versions.

Marxsen admits that the result of using this approach is only a hypothesis, to be judged by how well it accounts for the evidence. But he insists that any other account of the earliest versions of the traditions is also a hypothesis. I would add that the debate between naturalism and supernaturalism is irrelevant to deciding between the competing hypotheses.

Marxsen's analysis of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances is found on pp. 36-78; on pp. 79-97, he attempts to reconstruct the history of the tradition prior to the writing of the Gospels. Other analyses of the Gospel accounts of the appearances which question their historical reliability for reasons which have nothing to do with naturalistic assumptions may be found in Kümmel, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-105; Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-240; and Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-154.

17. Kümmel, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-95. Marxsen, *op. cit.*, p. 161. Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 171. But even Fuller does not think that the disciples checked on the women's story (p. 171); cf. Fuller's analysis of the accounts of the disciples going to the tomb in Lk. 24:12 (pp. 100-103). One major problem for those who think that the empty tomb stories are early is Paul's failure to mention the empty tomb in I Cor. 15 when he was arguing so vigorously for the resurrection. Either he did not know the stories or he did not think them worth mentioning. The latter seems inexplicable, and the former is very unlikely if the stories are early.

18. It might be suggested that we should understand the term 'resurrection' in the sense which it had in Palestine in Jesus' day. But there are two problems with this suggestion. First, it has been argued that the term had more than one sense in Palestine at that time (Marxsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-37, especially p. 136). Second, though Christians did choose the term 'resurrection' to express their idea, that does not mean that it had exactly the same sense which it bore in non-Christian contexts.

To take an analogy, Christians gave a distinctive sense to *agape*, but they nowhere pointed out that they were doing this. Rather, we can determine that they gave *agape* a distinctive sense by comparing how they used it with how non-Christians used it. To do this, however, requires that we have a clear idea of how Christians used it, and as I have argued, we cannot determine what those involved in the Easter event understood the resurrection to involve.

19. Admittedly, there are (conservative) scholars who dispute this claim and the analyses on which it is based. Later I shall ask what difference their disagreement makes.

20. For example, see the outline of Marxsen's method given in note 16 above. At the level of generality in that note, his method is typical of many New Testament scholars.

21. Cf., e.g., Fuller's claim (*op. cit.*, p. 66) that the assumption that Mark had appearance stories at his disposal "ought to be questioned," for "the earliest church did not narrate resurrection appearances, but proclaimed the resurrection."

22. Did Paul understand the resurrection to involve an empty tomb? If so, his failure to mention it in I Cor. 15 (when he was arguing for the resurrection) is perplexing.

23. I say "similar," not "identical," or we could never admit that God does anything new. Thus, I am not suggesting that there must be evidence for previous resurrections, each of which indicates God had reconciled the world to himself. But there should be evidence that God had acted nonnaturally in certain previous events to do things like redeem people or reveal himself to have the sort of intentions which are manifested in raising Jesus. (It is logically possible that the resurrection was the first nonnatural event and served as the beginning of a wholly new way of understanding God. This possibility is at variance with any recognizable Christian view, but we shall discuss it later.)

24. This point is well argued in Thomas F. Tracy, *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 75-80. Of course, as Tracy points out, it is possible to identify God as an agent by a logically individuating description (e.g., the creator of heaven and earth); but as he also points out, only identifying God as the agent in a pattern of events will "give our talk of God some concrete content" (p. 76). This concrete content is needed if talk of God is to be religiously significant, and I take it that the matters under discussion in Davis' paper and mine are intended to be religiously significant.

25. Given this principle, someone might well ask how any such tradition could get started. For it must begin with a first miraculous event, and there would be no tradition prior to that event. The rationality of belief in the miraculousness of the first event would be assessed in light of later miraculous events, in which God is seen to act in similar ways and for similar purposes. Later I shall discuss briefly the possibility that the resurrection itself might be such a first event.

26. He agrees that "rational expectation of what will happen is based on our best available knowledge of what *has* happened" (p. 148. his italics).

27. On their lack of these concepts, see S. V. McCasland, "Miracles," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Buttrick *et. al.* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. III, p. 397.

28. This point is a commonplace among most biblical scholars. For instance, S. V. McCasland writes of miracles in the biblical sense: "A miracle is not necessarily an event outside nature or in violation of its laws, but is any occurrence whatever which arouses a feeling of awe, amazement, terror, or wonder, and causes the one who beholds it to see, not merely the phenomenon of nature, but God, whose being it expresses" (*ibid.*, p. 398). McCasland's conclusion is all the more significant since he believes that miracles in Davis' sense do occur; thus, his claim about the biblical concept cannot be challenged on the grounds that he is a naturalist whose presuppositions have biased his conclusions (though his conclusions might of course be challenged on philological or other grounds).

It is worth noting too that in his article on “Signs and Wonders” in the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, B. W. Anderson agrees very closely with McCasland: “In the biblical sense, then, a miracle is an unusual, marvelous event which testifies to God’s active presence in the world. This does not mean, however, that the miracle is a disruption of the natural order, which, according to the modern understanding, is governed by the law of cause and effect” (Vol. IV, p. 348). An examination of the references to biblical passages given in these articles shows that some events which we would regard as very ordinary natural events could be regarded as instances of these concepts—e.g., the prophet Isaiah and his family could be regarded as “a sign and a wonder” (Isa. 8:18).

29. It is interesting that the rate at which saints have been canonized in the Roman Catholic Church has dropped markedly in our century. Is this because we have fewer saintly people—an admitted possibility—or because there are fewer claimed miracles which even in the view of the appropriate authorities in that church can be confirmed?

30. It might be suggested that it was appropriate for God to perform a hard miracle in connection with Jesus to get Christianity started, but that now no hard miracles are needed, for we have the testimony to what God did then. But if it is important to believe that the resurrection in Davis’ sense occurred, why did not God cause it to be better attested? And why should those who had experienced the purported hard miracle be in an epistemically privileged relation to God and his activity? Why should they, and they alone, be witnesses to a hard miracle?

31. Consider the difficulties in rationally believing (or claiming) that a nonnatural event occurred. Suppose we knew of an event which we were inclined to think might be a nonnatural event. To determine whether or not it really was a nonnatural event we must determine whether there occurred in it some sequence which did not occur in accordance with natural processes. But to do this, we must both understand the relevant natural processes well and know in detail what sequences occurred. The better we understand the natural processes and the more detail we know about what sequences occurred, the more clearly a nonnatural event would stand out if one occurred. But does anyone who understands the processes and knows the sequences well claim that a nonnatural event occurred? I admit that someone might do this and might do it with good reason—that is a logical possibility. I just don’t know of anyone who does. Thus I claim that there are no clear-cut evidences of nonnatural events occurring in the lives of people today.

32. Space limitations preclude any argument for this claim in the paper, but here again I have the support of much modern biblical scholarship; moreover, the burden of proof rests with the person who would claim that one of the biblical events is clearly nonnatural. I think even Davis would agree on that matter.

33. Here we confront again a major difference between ourselves and first-century Christians. Neither in our history (except for the resurrection, which is the case in point, and certain other biblical events, whose historical details are, I would claim, not reliably ascertainable) nor in our own lives do we find it rational to believe in the occurrence of nonnatural events (though we may find it rational to believe in the occurrence of miraculous events in some other sense). Thus, the context within which we understand the Easter event is very different from that in which first-century Christians thought about it.