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RESPONSE TO DAVIS

James A. Keller

I appreciate Davis' gracious reply to my paper. The responses it has evoked from him and others have taught me much, and I am now much more prepared to grant that it can be rational for a Christian to believe in the resurrection in Davis' sense. I still do not think that view is without serious problems, but there are also good historical reasons for it, which create problems for one who denies or minimizes these reasons, as I did. These reasons are summarized in Davis' Section IV. Of them, the ones I find most troublesome to a Christian who doubts Davis' view are those supporting the belief that the tomb was empty. Though this is not the basic reason for affirming the resurrection in some sense, it does contribute more to defining the sense in which Jesus was raised than do the claims that Jesus appeared to various people.¹

On the other hand, Davis' original paper also suggested that those who doubt the resurrection in his sense do so primarily because of a commitment to antisupernaturalism.² This suggestion was an important reason for my writing my original paper. I wanted to point out some of the historical and literary problems with his view of the resurrection, problems which he barely mentioned in his original paper. I still do not believe that his suggestion about the importance of antisupernaturalism is correct, though I do admit that typically it is *one* factor, among others, which influences Christians to seek or adopt some other understanding of the resurrection. But this factor does not usually stand alone, nor is it necessarily basic. Rather, like supernaturalism, it is embedded in a total understanding of Christian faith. The reasons why a person accepts some particular understanding of Christian faith rather than another are typically very complex, and any one factor—such as antisupernaturalism (or supernaturalism)—will be of differing importance in the thought of different people. I would have been far more sympathetic to Davis' suggestion as it relates to Christians who differ from him on the resurrection if he had spoken in terms of this total understanding of Christian faith rather than in terms of antisupernaturalism (or naturalism). But even so, I would still think that the historical and literary problems with his view can play a larger role than he suggests. In my earlier paper I pointed out some of these problems, and some more will appear here in my reply to Davis. Space precludes a full reply to all his points, but I will focus on what seem to me to be the most important places where I still differ from him.



In my earlier paper I did not argue that the mere fact that the Gospels were written years after the event implies that they are unreliable. But it does allow a gap in which elaborations, distortions, and outright additions may have been made to the earliest traditions. I admit that very early material may be found at various points in the Gospels. But this general admission does not settle the issue of whether this or that detail is historically reliable, and on such matters even New Testament scholars often disagree. I do not claim to have the expertise to contribute to settling them, but I would like to comment on one principle which Davis (and others) sometimes suggest in defense of the historical reliability of various narratives.

This principle is that if some document reached canonical form (or some element of tradition existed) during the lifetime of an eyewitness, then our justification in taking it as historically reliable is increased, for if it were not accurate, the eyewitness would have criticized it. I concede that there are contexts in which this claim has some merit, for it is unlikely that anyone in the community, *other than another eyewitness*, would deliberately disagree with what some eyewitness said, particularly if the eyewitness were a person of some prominence. (It should not be forgotten how often even eyewitnesses themselves disagree about an event.) And being an eyewitness of Jesus was itself likely to give the person some prominence.

But from the fact that some element of tradition has come down to us today with no indication of its being challenged in the New Testament community, all we can conclude is that no eyewitness made an objection to it effectively known in the community. But his not doing this need not imply that he agreed with the tradition. The tradition may not have come to his attention; this possibility must be kept in mind, given the spread of the New Testament church and difficulties in reproducing and transmitting documents.³ Even if it did come to his attention, the discrepancies may not have seemed to him to be of sufficient importance to say anything. And even if he did say something, his criticism may not have been picked up by later writers. Unless we have reason to rule out these possibilities in relation to a particular element of tradition, we cannot use the fact that it includes statements which an eyewitness could have refuted as a basis for confidence in the historical reliability of the statements.

As I said, I do not deny that the principle can sometimes be usefully employed, particularly when we can trace the *origin* of the tradition to a community in which there were eyewitnesses. Thus, I think it is most likely to be useful in relation to an element of the tradition which can be traced to Jerusalem in the first few years of the Christian community. For then we can be confident that there were eyewitnesses in the community in which the tradition originated; this contrasts with situations in which the eyewitnesses were in a different community and could at most have criticized the tradition only after it had gained enough stability to begin to circulate.

Davis misunderstands my point in claiming that the resurrection was an inference

from certain experiences which certain disciples claimed to have. He correctly points out (p. 102) that something's being an inference is no reason to doubt it. But my point was not to question the truth of the claim that Jesus had been raised, but rather its meaning. If a claim is an inference, then its meaning may well depend at least in part on the premises from which the inference is made, particularly if there is some unclarity in the claim itself. In my earlier paper, I claimed that the meaning of "resurrection" in first-century Palestine was somewhat unclear; in making this claim, I was relying on Marxsen's argument that the influence of Hellenistic Judaism on this matter had by then already made itself felt in Palestine and on the possibility that Christians might have originally used the term in a somewhat special sense.⁴ If either is correct, we might be able to reduce the unclarity if we knew what the experiences were like which led the church to say that Jesus had been raised. Here questions about the reliability of the Gospel accounts of the appearances and the empty tomb become apparent. The former are questioned even by some defenders of the resurrection in Davis' sense.⁵ Thus, though I admit that the term 'resurrection' (or its Greek equivalent) was used very early to explain how the disciples' experiences could occur, that does not mean that in these first uses the term had the same meaning which it had when the Gospels were written. At that later time, the meaning had been developed in a certain way, but was that meaning the original one? It may have been, but I do not believe that this can simply be assumed. Of course, Davis does not simply assume it, but his reasons are claims about the appearances and the empty tomb and the meaning of the concept in first-century Palestine.⁶

Davis says (p. 102-103) that certain early Christians (Mary Magdelene, Peter, Thomas) did not have to rely on the experiences of other Christians, for they saw the risen Jesus. I agree that some early Christians must have had an experience which the church called "seeing the risen Jesus." But this admission does not imply that we have an eyewitness account of what that seeing involved or an accurate later account of it. We do not have the former, and we may not have the latter. As I said earlier, I do not deny that the term 'resurrection' was used early, but the question is what this term meant. We should note that we have no reason to think that what Paul refers to as an appearing of the risen Jesus to him even involved seeing Jesus' body. Paul does not describe the experience, and the second-hand account in Acts 9:3-6 does not mention Paul's seeing Jesus' body. I do not claim that this proves that such appearances did not involve seeing Jesus' body, only that they may not have. Moreover, I can grant Davis' point (p. 101-102) that sometimes only later does a person appreciate the significance of some event, but this does not imply that the person's memory of details of the event also improves with time. Indeed, his then-current convictions about the significance may contribute to an unconscious altering of his memory-impressions.

Davis correctly states my reason for claiming that there must be a pattern of

miraculous events into which a claimed miracle fits, but I do not think that I push it as far as he thinks I do.⁷ I do not demand *proof* of other miraculous events, for that requirement would indeed lead to the sort of infinite regress Davis mentions. What I require is the rational belief that there occurred a pattern of clearly nonnatural events which are rationally believed to have been caused by God. Grounds for the former belief would be the details of the events and one's current understanding of natural processes; grounds for the latter would be one's understanding of God's purposes and power. Davis accepts something similar: "that I rationally believe that God has acted nonnaturally and similarly in the past" (p. 105), but he does not tell us what rational grounds he thinks there are for this belief. I continue to hold that the grounds must include good reason to believe that events have occurred for which a naturalistic explanation is very unlikely. And apart from divine revelation that they have occurred without specification of when and where (and I know of no claims to this effect), I can think of no such reason other than beliefs about the occurrence of specific events which are apparently nonnatural.

We could seek such events in the Bible or in contemporary life. In my earlier paper, I claimed that neither source looks promising. Davis disagrees, claiming that there are events in both places "whose best explanation is that they are miraculous acts of God" (p. 106). But his only specific example is a case from a book of miracles of healing. I readily grant that dramatic cases of healing, sometimes in the context of prayer for the sick, do occur, and that some of these cases are such that each one, *considered solely in the context of its own circumstances and of certain religious beliefs*, can plausibly be seen as a soft miracle. The problems I have with such examples come from putting them in a larger context. Often in apparently similar cases healing does not occur, despite prayer. Sometimes it occurs without prayer. Sometimes it occurs in the context of "positive thinking" or various self-help disciplines. Given this diversity, is miraculous healing by God really the best explanation for some or all of the healings? I do not think so. (As for biblical miracles, their details are generally much less well-attested than is the resurrection and thus of doubtful value in giving rational grounds for believing that nonnatural events occur.) Thus, I still do not believe we have good grounds for thinking that nonnatural events occur in any pattern which can reasonably be seen as the effects of God.⁸

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NOTES

1. In allocating the force of these considerations as I do, I am in agreement with Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Response," *The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (New York: Harper, 1987), pp. 130-31.

2. In that paper Davis spoke of naturalism rather than of antisupernaturalism. But given the way he defined naturalism (as essentially involving atheism), I need another term to speak of Christians who are not supernaturalists. Thus, I use 'antisupernaturalists' to refer to them and to naturalists. Perhaps Davis' terminology suggests that his original focus was on non-Christians who deny the resurrection rather than on Christians who affirm it in a different sense, who were important in my paper.

3. This consideration also tells against Davis' claim that minor discrepancies are evidence that a story is genuine, for if it had been a deliberate fabrication, no discrepancies would have been permitted (p. 107). While I am not defending the idea that the disciples sat down and deliberately fabricated stories, even if they had, there is no reason to think that they could have so controlled their dissemination as to prevent minor or even major discrepancies from creeping in.

4. Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 135-36. In my original paper, I pointed out (n. 18) that 'resurrection' might have been the closest available term, which Christian adopted for their purposes as they adopted *agape*, which they gave a new meaning. But the new meaning of the latter term could be defined by behavior; this sort of control would not have been available for 'resurrection.'

5. E.g., Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-32.

6. Davis' claim (p. 107) that early Christians died for their faith in the resurrection is surely an overstatement (if he means the resurrection in his sense). They died for their faith, but the aspect of their faith that provoked martyrdom generally was not the resurrection; it was refusal to participate in the official cult of the Empire. If they had participated, the Romans would not have cared what the Christians believed about Jesus after his death.

7. Davis does not cite any text where I require proof that other miracles occurred, nor can I find any. Perhaps my strongest expression is that there must be "clearly nonnatural events." Davis correctly points out that something can be clear to one person and not to another (p. 106), thus raising the question of my standard for 'clear.' I ask for events whose details we have good reason to believe are such as to make it at least difficult to imagine that there is a naturalistic explanation. I claimed that neither in the Bible nor in ordinary life do we find such events.

8. Davis confuses the issue with his mention (p. 106) of a religious person's seeing a sunrise as evidence of God's presence. Surely this occurs, but the sunrise is not a nonnatural event. Seeing God's presence in an event does not imply that one judges the event to be a miracle in the sense of an event which contravenes some natural law.