



Habermas, Gary R. and Michael R. Licona

The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
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The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus is a popular level apologetic for the resurrection of Christ. There is hardly a doctrine of the Christian faith as foundational as the resurrection of Jesus and Habermas and Licona do well in equipping laypersons to defend it. Their approach is novel in that it takes into account the "minimal facts" and uses them to build a case for the New Testament's testimony of Jesus' resurrection as being the best explanation of the data that we have.

The authors are very honest in admitting that "[w]hen it comes to history, we can speak of probability, not 100 percent certainty." (31) But they are quick to point out that this isn't a problem for Christian faith alone, indeed, all religions and world-views share the same challenge. But this book is an examination of how probable an explanation the resurrection really is.

They begin with a primer on the criteria that historians employ to determine whether or not an account of history is credible, listing five historical principles which speak to resurrection. They are:

1. Multiple, independent sources.
2. Attestation by an enemy.
3. Embarrassing admissions.
4. Eyewitness testimony.
5. Early testimony. (35-39)

This is to say that if we have multiple sources all saying the same thing independently of one another then there is a good chance that the thing they are reporting actually happened. If an unsympathetic source corroborates sympathetic sources then there is good reason to believe that the event happened. If something that would cause an event, person, or saying to look bad is reported, it tends toward truth because if the story were fabricated the tendency would be to make it look as good as possible, not to look bad. And of course eyewitness testimony is as good as it gets, but early testimony close to the

event is good as well. In all of these points they use familiar illustrations of car accidents, police officers, and people waiting at the bus stop to make their point clear, and clear they make it.

After this we are introduced to the "minimal facts approach" which only considers data that meets two criteria:

1. The data are strongly evidenced.
 2. The data are granted by virtually all scholars on the subject, even the skeptical ones.
- (47)

They then spend the next few chapters laying out the five minimal facts that they believe meet these two criteria. These facts are:

1. Jesus died by crucifixion.
2. Jesus' disciples believed that he rose from the dead.
3. Paul was suddenly changed.
4. James, the brother of Jesus was suddenly changed.
5. The tomb was empty. (ch. 3-4)

They cite various ancient sources (both Christian and non-Christian) in support of these claims to include Josephus, Lucian, Tacitus, Mara Bar-Serapion, and the Talmud (all non-Christian sources), as well as the Gospels and the Apostolic Fathers. The rationale behind this approach is basically this:

Jesus must have died in order for his disciples to believe that he had risen from the dead. Now whether or not he actually did rise from the dead is inconsequential to their genuine belief that he did. But not only did his disciples believe this, two skeptics became believers. One was Paul who persecuted the Church for preaching the resurrection and the other was Jesus' own brother who had only thought him an ordinary man. Now of course these radical conversions don't prove that Jesus rose from the dead, but they do prove that Paul and James were convinced that he did. And the empty tomb is self-explanatory. There could be many explanations for why it is empty, but the fact remains that it is empty. All of these facts when considered apart aren't exactly smoking guns, but when considered together they have a cumulative effect that makes one seriously consider the resurrection as a plausible explanation.

The authors go on to interact with arguments against the resurrection such as the "Swoon Theory" (99-103), mass hallucination or delusion (104-10), and even Naturalism (132-50). But when the minimal facts are taken into account, the first few theories don't present the best explanation of the data and the last argument (for naturalism) involves certain presuppositions that need to be challenged.

Chapter 10 can be described as a mini-Christology where the titles "Son of Man" and "Son of God" are looked at briefly. They say of the "Son of Man" title that *"[i]t is generally agreed that Jesus used the phrase in three senses: (1) as a reference to his*

earthly ministry; (2) as a reference to his death and resurrection; and (3) as a reference to a future coming in judgment and glory." (167) They continue with the "Son of God" title concluding, contra John Hick (who argues that the title doesn't necessarily denote deity and belief in Jesus' deity developed at the end of the 1st c.) and J.D. Crossan (who argues that the title meant less than divine and Jesus was just a great man), that Jesus did use it of himself and "*claimed to occupy a unique sonship with the God of the universe...*" (167-68)

A philosophical/logical defense for the existence of God follows. They conclude that "*[i]n a world where God probably exists, there are no good reasons for rejecting the possibility of the Resurrection.*" (181) This leads into some sage advice for sharing your faith in the resurrection.

They offer tidbits of wisdom by telling readers to be loving and humble. Listen to others and their views before responding. Stick to the subject and talk about the resurrection rather than going off on rabbit trails which lead to irrelevant issues. They urge the reader to become familiar with some common objections and get comfortable answering them. But my favorite piece of advice (and this is advice I received years ago that has benefited me greatly) is to be prepared to address an argument that you don't have the answer to. Basically all this means is that you should be willing to say, I don't know, but I'll look into it and get back to you. It's better to admit ignorance than to fake your way through an answer that ends up hurting your cause.

There's more but this is sufficient to show the worth of such advice. One thing I really appreciated about this book is the various charts that are found throughout its pages. These help to aid in memorizing the key points that you'll bring into a discussion. It was also a nice surprise to receive this book and find out that it comes with an interactive game CD. The game is set up like a game show in which you get to choose your category and then answer questions from that category. Some are multiple choices and some are write-ins, but they all pertain to the minimal facts, historical criteria, and witnessing advice given throughout the book. This makes learning fun and on the strength of the CD alone I'd recommend this volume to children over the age of 11 or 12.

My one criticism is endnotes. I don't understand why authors/editors/publishers feel the need to place the notes at the end of the book forcing the reader to use two book marks and keep flipping back and forth. Just because a title is aimed at a popular audience doesn't mean that footnotes will turn the reader off. I would have also liked to see some of the notes included in the main body of the text as there are times when the note is longer and more pertinent than the main text itself. These criticisms aside, I would recommend this title to any interested layperson or budding apologist. Those more academically oriented would do better to read something a little more intended for such an audience such as N.T. Wright's *Resurrection of the Son of God*.