

# ‘RESURRECTING JESUS’ AND CRITICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: WILLIAM LANE CRAIG AND DALE ALLISON IN DIALOGUE

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The historical status of Jesus’ rising from the dead has been queried, every now and again, even by those who accept the resurrection. Although Dale Allison, for instance, personally believes that God raised Jesus from the dead, he has strongly challenged William Lane Craig’s historical justification for affirming the resurrection hypothesis over its competing causal theories.<sup>1</sup> Craig himself has acknowledged the strength of this challenge: ‘I have never seen a more persuasive case for scepticism about the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection than Allison’s presentation of the arguments. He is far more persuasive than Crossan, Lüdemann, Goulder and the rest who deny the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection’.<sup>2</sup>

Was the resurrection of Jesus then an historical event, as much as the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC or the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70? While we know through faith that the resurrection has occurred,<sup>3</sup> can historical investigation provide support for this belief and show the resurrection to be an event of history?

I will argue that Craig’s justification for the resurrection hypothesis defeats Allison’s scepticism (as well as arguments from other critics to be discussed below), provided we recognize the former to be a ‘soft’ apologist. A soft apologist is someone who seeks to demonstrate the rationality of the resurrection hypothesis, not someone who attempts to demonstrate the irrationality of non-Christian alternatives.<sup>4</sup> Both belief and unbelief can be rational. Craig’s apologetic is found at the stronger end of the soft apologetic spectrum: his resurrection hypothesis outstrips other rational hypotheses. Allison’s contentions are, for the most part, compatible with Craig’s argument. Allison is ultimately mistaken to conclude, however, that historians and apologists such as N.T. Wright, Richard Swinburne, and Craig himself cannot show convincingly that the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation of the evidence. Craig and other apologists argue for the best explanation of the evidence, not the only explanation. In this article I will attend not only to Allison’s challenges but also to those of other critics.

When they fail to make a conscientious distinction between soft and hard forms of apologetics, apologists like Craig, who in fact propose soft apologetic arguments, can become overly confident about their case for Jesus’ resurrection. By wording their arguments with greater precision, soft apologists could become more persuasive to contemporary, postmodern audiences. In proposing this approach, I do not deny that through faith individuals can be convinced that Jesus’ resurrection occurred. Nor do I doubt that, as an historical hypothesis the resurrection can be affirmed as the best explanation of the known evidence. Before addressing the Craig-Allison debate, let me sketch its broader context, which will also shed further light on Craig’s arguments.

## I. JESUS' RESURRECTION AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Some Catholics and other Christians have been hesitant to affirm and defend the resurrection of Jesus as an historical event. This hesitation stems, in part, from the abuses of Neo-Scholastic resurrection apologetics that prevailed roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). According to these scholars, the Neo-scholastic approach all too easily interpreted Jesus' resurrection as a mere resuscitation or reanimation of a corpse, not allowing it to be seen as a central mystery of the Christian faith.<sup>5</sup> As a result, they have called the resurrection a 'meta-historical' or 'trans-historical' occurrence, not an event within history.<sup>6</sup> They recognize genuine continuity between the earthly body of Jesus and his glorious, incorruptible body in an other-worldly realm of existence, but this transition should not be affirmed as historical in any proper sense of that term.<sup>7</sup> This shift away from the historical understanding of Jesus' resurrection may be partly responsible for some writers simply denying the bodily nature of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>8</sup>

In an earlier number of this journal, Craig has convincingly challenged advocates of the meta-historical view of the resurrection such as John Meier.<sup>9</sup> Since Meier categorizes Jesus' resurrection as an actual, bodily occurrence that did not take place in time and space but 'above and beyond' the spatio-temporal realm, he concludes that we cannot approach the resurrection as an historical question. This view prompts three observations.

First, this interpretation of the resurrection as a meta-historical event is difficult to square with Catholic teaching. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remarks: 'Christ's Resurrection cannot be interpreted as something outside the physical order, and it is impossible not to acknowledge it as an historical fact'.<sup>10</sup> Pope John Paul II described the resurrection as, 'in the first place, an historical event. It took place in a precise context of time and place'.<sup>11</sup> He went on to note that 'while the resurrection is an event determined according to time and place, nevertheless it transcends and stands above history . . . Christ's Resurrection is the greatest Event in the history of salvation, and indeed, we can say in the history of humanity, since it gives definitive meaning to the world. The whole world revolves around the Cross, but only in the Resurrection does the cross reach its full significance of salvific Event'.<sup>12</sup> While speaking of the resurrection as transcending history, it remains an event 'in the history of humanity' and is 'an event determined according to time and space'. If more nuanced, the late Pope seems in substantial accord with the *Catechism*.

Second, the meta-historical view can hardly claim much precedent in the history of Jewish and Christian thought. N.T. Wright has shown that the ahistorical view of Jesus' resurrection, which tends to reduce it to exaltation, is the product of modern theology: 'the idea that there was originally no difference for the earliest Christians between resurrection and exaltation/ascension is a twentieth century fiction, based on a misreading of Paul'.<sup>13</sup> Peter Carnley agrees with Wright: 'For many centuries the accepted and, indeed, quite unchallenged way of understanding the resurrection of Jesus . . . was to regard it as an historical event . . . Regardless of whether one relied on an authoritatively-backed, transmitted tradition or a more scientifically based reconstruction, supported by evidence and rational inference from it, the assertion that the resurrection of Jesus was an historical event of the past has been offered to men and women as the distinctive substance of Christian belief'.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the meta-historical view involves, in the words of Craig, 'a patent misreading of the gospel narratives, not to speak of Jewish texts'.<sup>15</sup> Scholars who deny the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, in effect, turn it into 'Jesus' translation into heaven on the pattern of Enoch and Elijah, a quite different category than resurrection of the dead'.<sup>16</sup>

Third, even if the corpse of Jesus disappeared into an otherworldly state of incorruptible existence, this would not mean we should refrain from recognizing a historical transition. As Craig argues:

Transitional events like stopping, exiting, and dying do not occur at any single spacetime point. That the sorites paradoxes are, indeed, the culprit here, and not the nature of the resurrection, is evident from the fact that even if the resurrection were conceived as a transformation wholly within space and time, one could not specify a single spacetime point at which it happened. Nevertheless, just as it is perfectly acceptable to say that the shopper exited the building, say, through the front door rather than the rear entrance, so Jesus' transformation to his glorified state can be similarly located in the sense that one can specify the spacetime point at which his corruptible existence ended. So just as the historian can determine where someone exited a building or when someone died, there is no in principle objection to the historian's determining where and when Jesus' resurrection occurred. It would be very much like determining on the basis of testimony and evidence where and when the children in C.S. Lewis' tale first stepped from this world into Narnia.<sup>17</sup>

Thus proponents of the ahistorical view are hard put to escape from an historical understanding of Jesus' resurrection.

Even if Jesus' resurrection is not *of* the historical process, it occurred *in* history and is open to historical investigation. While, as a miraculous event, it is *more* than historical, it is not *less* than historical. But here, as always, historians' arguments and methods are affected by philosophical presuppositions. Craig claims that Meier's refusal to face the historicity of the resurrection stems from a 'remarkable naïve bifurcation between philosophy and history'. 'Meier's definition of the miraculous, his prohibition of historian's judgements concerning the miraculous nature of events, his several distinctions concerning the historical and the real Jesus, his argument that the resurrection is not a historical event, are . . . the result of philosophical judgements on Meier's part'.<sup>18</sup> Let us turn now to Craig's own case for the resurrection and examine it in the context of other similar studies.

## II. CRAIG'S CASE FOR THE RESURRECTION

Craig argues that the majority of scholars who have studied the resurrection as an historical event maintain that there are four facts they must account for: (1) the burial of Jesus; (2) the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb; (3) the post-mortem appearances; and (4), the origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection despite their predispositions to the contrary. Gary R. Habermas and John M.G. Barclay, who have surveyed the landscape of resurrection studies, show how this judgment characterizes contemporary scholarship.<sup>19</sup> But as Craig adds, one should argue not only on the basis of the scholarly consensus but also from the evidence of the New Testament itself.<sup>20</sup> Craig then argues that, after various naturalistic hypotheses have been tried and found wanting, the resurrection hypothesis remains the best explanation of the facts.

In its attempt to demonstrate the irrationality of competing theories, Craig's case may appear similar to the manualist style of apologetics.<sup>21</sup> Yet his aim is only to affirm that the resurrection is the best explanation of the facts. In developing his 'soft' apologetics, he is not in a minority of one. In fact, few scholars would attempt to make hard apologetic claims regarding the resurrection today.<sup>22</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, a ranking Christologist, affirms that Catholic fundamental theologians who endorse the credibility

of the resurrection are now using softer forms of apologetics.<sup>23</sup> Stephen Davis concurs with Fiorenza's assessment of the contemporary scene: it is a mistake in contemporary apologetics discourse to argue either that accepting Jesus' resurrection is never rational or that it is the only rational view.<sup>24</sup>

Various considerations show that Craig's claim constitutes a soft apologetics case. First, in any attempt to establish and describe a past event, historians must (1) choose which sources should be used, (2) interpret them within the context in which they were composed, and (3) then explain how they came about in the form in which they did. The fact that unknown evidence could alter the historical argument for the resurrection, or that we do not have absolute certainty when it comes to understanding each piece of evidence, or that the resurrection is a miracle claim does not mean that historians and other critics should refrain from using the evidence that is currently at their disposal. Craig himself uses the New Testament to garner the relevant evidence and then attempts to account for it. His scholarly work proceeds on the assumption that other hypotheses are rational, but he argues that they are not as rationally warranted as the Christian hypothesis. N.T. Wright arrives at the same conclusion as Craig, claiming that his own argument does not constitute 'proof of the resurrection in terms of some neutral standpoint. It is, rather, an historical challenge to other explanations, other worldviews'.<sup>25</sup>

As far as (1), the choice of sources, goes, there may be so far unknown evidence that could, in theory, radically alter either the overall balance of the evidence or one's understanding of the evidence. In light of this possibility, historians should not make hard apologetic claims. But the fact that unknown evidence might alter the argument for the resurrection does not mean that historians should refrain from using the evidence that is currently available. They should use the evidence they have rather than construct hypotheses on the basis of sheer possibility or of silence. According to the Oxford philosopher, Richard Swinburne, 'in the absence of counter-evidence . . . testimony ought to be believed. If someone says, "I saw so-and-so happen," we ought to believe that they saw so-and-so happen, unless we have positive reason to suppose that they didn't'.<sup>26</sup> Since ancient historians rarely offer new sources to supplement the present evidence, soft apologists are justified in drawing on the New Testament to develop their arguments. Unless critics can provide positive evidence to establish that the early Christian movement remained deliberately silent about some alleged, hitherto unknown source, historians remain within their rights to use the New Testament to make arguments regarding the origins of Christianity. These documents are, in point of fact, the only direct sources that we have to assess the resurrection hypothesis and its competitors.<sup>27</sup>

When it comes to (2), understanding and interpreting the sources, historians should acknowledge personal bias that may affect their understanding of history. Undoubtedly the best insights of postmodernism have enabled historians to realize that they should be cautious in making assertions about the past, for historical arguments and conclusions are always tentative and capable of revision. That having been said, a proper historical 'relativism' does not mean that critical historians should give up the attempt to retrieve the shape of the past in the best way they can. Such considerations should also discourage contemporary apologists from making hard apologetic claims. Although historians may argue over how much evidence is needed to draw conclusions about the undeniability of some past event, it is still accurate to say that history discloses truth. Historical truth, however, does not have the same status as mathematical or logical truth. As Gerald O'Collins, a theological expert on the resurrection, explains, 'one can very well argue that, although they cannot be demonstrated by mathematical calculations, repeated scientific

experiments, or philosophical logic, historical truths can certainly be established beyond any reasonable doubt . . . There are very many historically certain truths from which we can argue and draw conclusions'.<sup>28</sup> More to the point, he says that 'There are very many historically certain truths from which we can argue and draw conclusions, including those which affect faith'.<sup>29</sup>

Sceptics are completely within their epistemological rights to insist that all the evidence for the resurrection comes from individuals who already believed in the risen Jesus. However, they are mistaken if they conclude that the biblical authors' beliefs about the resurrection of Jesus prevent us from having reliable information about the origins of Christianity. In fact, the New Testament witnesses' beliefs might be an even *greater* indication of historical accuracy. As I. Howard Marshall observes: 'If Jesus meant so much to his followers, then it is overwhelmingly improbable that they remembered so little about him, or that they so completely refashioned the content of their memories'.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, reliable documents can contain some inaccurate information, and unreliable documents can contain accurate information. Even so, the responsible thing for historians to do is utilize the sources they have to establish what they think should count as reliable evidence. And this is precisely what Craig has done in his argument. Allison, it should be noted, does not dispute Craig's case up to this point. He agrees with Craig's use of the New Testament documents and the way in which he reads them.<sup>31</sup> This essay is not dedicated to defending the evidence as much as it is concerned to argue for what best accounts for it.

When it comes to (3) determining the cause(s) of the evidence, historians normally appeal to law-like regularities, not miraculous events. In a sense, however, all events are unique and without parallel. So if a naturalistic explanation does not seem to account for the facts because the evidence is pulling in a direction which strongly suggests that a miracle has occurred, and if the context in which the event is thought to have happened is religiously oriented, then it would be open to an historian who believes in a God who would reveal himself in human history to conclude that a miracle has happened. Troeltsch's 'principle of analogy' is not a hard and fast rule. It can be qualified and subsequently recast in a way that is open to the possibility of miracles. Historicism is no longer a prevailing view in the academy in the postmodern age. As Avery Dulles wrote: 'According to a positivist view that was widely accepted fifty or a hundred years ago, history is a science analogous to physics or chemistry. It proceeds on the assumption that the world is a closed system in which causes and effects are connected by strict necessity. History, in that view, leaves no place for the unique, the exceptional, and especially not for events brought about by God's direct activity'.<sup>32</sup> Such a view of history, however, has been widely abandoned.

All of the above requirements (namely, choosing the sources to use, understanding them accurately, and explaining what accounts for them) should not prevent historians from making what they believe to be a 'best explanation' for the historical evidence. Should historians such as Wright and Craig stop stating conclusions because there are other possibilities that *might* account for the evidence? Of course not. What is interesting for critical historians is not to posit a range of historical possibilities, but rather the opportunity to develop arguments that outstrip rival hypotheses and may then convince those who think otherwise.<sup>33</sup>

For instance, a few writers have proposed the swoon theory (according to which Jesus merely appeared to die on the cross, was taken down alive and recovered). While such a theory is an historical possibility, other hypotheses are more plausible and defensible. In particular, the soft apologist argues that the resurrection hypothesis is the most epistemologically respectable hypothesis and ought to be accepted over its rivals.

Craig describes his position in 'soft apologetics' terms in the way this has been described. In a public debate with John Dominic Crossan, Craig states:

I do not assert that belief in the resurrection of Jesus 'is the only reasonable option, and thus it would be irrational not to believe in it.' Rather, I argue that four established facts . . . 'provide adequate inductive grounds for inferring Jesus' resurrection,' and that 'it's very difficult to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation.' of these four facts . . . These statements are carefully chosen and indicate that I am employing inductive reasoning understood according to the model of inference to the best explanation. This model holds that there may be a number of reasonable explanations for a body of evidence, and that one is to choose from this pool of live options that explanation which is the best, that is, which most successfully meets such criteria as having explanatory power, explanatory scope, and not being ad hoc . . . Again, I did not say that it is irrational to fail to believe in the resurrection.<sup>34</sup>

Craig concedes that the evidence is not established beyond a shadow of a doubt: 'Bob Gundry complains that I should have said "reported" facts (p. 104) rather than "established" facts. I'm happy to accept the revision'.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, according to Gundry, the four facts are 'spongier than whatever hard facts may underlie them'.<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, Craig says 'That Jesus rose naturally from the dead, that is to say, that all of the cells in his body spontaneously came back to life again, is a hypothesis so absurdly improbable that virtually any other explanation – hallucinations, apparent death, even E.T. abduction – will be more probable'.<sup>37</sup> Notice that Craig believes that some naturalistic hypotheses are more reasonable than others. Such theories in competition with the resurrection hypothesis are not irrational, but need to account responsibly for the data.

For years Craig has maintained that on the basis of the evidence, the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead is far and away the best explanation that we have. Let us now turn to Allison's arguments and see whether they in fact undercut the soft apologists' contention, that the resurrection hypothesis is 'the best explanation of the evidence'.

### III. WILLIAM LANE CRAIG AND DALE ALLISON IN DIALOGUE

When discussing the resurrection, Allison is primarily concerned to rule out two extremes, hard apologetic claims and complete scepticism. 'I tend to focus on the extremes,' he proclaims, 'the convinced believer and the strident unbeliever'.<sup>38</sup> While Craig is a believer, this does not necessarily affect the soft form his historical apologetics takes. Allison, it must be remembered, is also a believer; what he denies is the credibility of the historical case for the resurrection. Craig would therefore have no problem with Allison's position. Explanations competing with the resurrection hypothesis are not dismissed as irrational. The more interesting question is whether naturalistic explanations ought to be preferred over the resurrection hypothesis, given the evidence that both he and Allison agree on. While most of Allison's book can be commended by defenders of Christian faith, he has unwittingly taken his concerns about 'the convinced believer' and projected them onto historical apologists (such as Craig and Wright) who have never attempted to cast the historical argument for Jesus' resurrection as an inescapable logical conclusion.<sup>39</sup>

(1) First, Allison misunderstands Wright for holding, along with Craig, that the resurrection hypothesis is the 'best historical explanation'.<sup>40</sup> Allison thinks that Wright is trying to prove Jesus' resurrection like a hard apologist; Allison places him in the same camp as William M. Hetherington, a rationalistic apologist from the late nineteenth century. Both Craig and Wright argue, however, that the resurrection hypothesis is the

best historical explanation, not in the sense that non-Christian explanations are irrational, but in the sense that it is the best explanation for the available evidence.

The Jewish scholar Alan Segal has a similar approach to Allison's: 'the vast majority of modern historians looking at the very same story would say that *no evidence at all would ever demonstrate that a unique resurrection took place*'.<sup>41</sup> Segal's presupposition steers him in a direction that prevents him from examining seriously the credibility of Jesus' resurrection. He says instead that the issue is a matter of pure faith: 'For me, this is the mark of faith; it does not depend on reason. If it did, it would be reason, not faith.'<sup>42</sup> Like Allison, Segal overreacts to the perennial enterprise of historical apologetics, because Jesus' resurrection cannot be demonstrated strictly. Soft apologists such as Craig and Wright concede that the resurrection cannot be proven absolutely; however, this should not be invoked as an excuse to stop making historical arguments. Most historical conclusions are tentative and, in theory, capable of revision. Saying that Jesus' resurrection is the best explanation of the known evidence is not a hard apologetic claim, but a piece of inductive reasoning that historians can and should accept.

Allison leaves Wright to critique Stephen Davis, whose position resembles Craig's: 'one can still land upon a new book or article with the assertion that "alternative theories that have been proposed are not only weaker but far weaker at explaining the available historical evidence than the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead"'.<sup>43</sup> But here too Allison misses Davis's point. Davis is not saying that the resurrection is the best explanation *tout court*, but that the resurrection is the best inference to make in the light of the agreed-upon evidence. The inference is not presented as airtight. But are scholars then supposed to refrain from making arguments and reaching conclusions on the basis of the evidence available? None of these scholars – Wright, Davis, and Craig – are pretending to do apologetics in the hard sense of the term.

(2) Second, Allison maintains that parapsychological experiences, to which the post-resurrection 'appearances' can be likened, weaken the historians' case for Jesus' resurrection.<sup>44</sup> Yet Allison agrees that the disciples saw the risen Jesus alive – and that *Jesus* saw them.<sup>45</sup> In light of this agreement, I will assume that Allison's position is that the appearances were objective and veridical, exceeding purely mental phenomena. Allison's admission that Jesus saw the disciples after his death seems tantamount to providing historical proof for the resurrection – something that he does not want to accept. In the words of Walter Kasper: 'If this designation of Jesus as the object of the seeing is allowed to stand unabbreviated, then the statement of his Resurrection has to be accepted as a logical conclusion. The question, therefore, around which everything revolves, is whether the accounts of the appearances only represent legitimizing formulas so that the work of Jesus can be continued, or whether they express the experience of a new reality and therefore possess a substance of their own.'<sup>46</sup> By accepting that *Jesus* saw the disciples in what can be called post-mortem encounters from the dead, Allison undercuts his own opposition to the resurrection being the best available hypothesis.

Yet Allison argues that we do not have enough evidence to make a convincing case for Jesus' resurrection.<sup>47</sup> Unquestionably, miracles are difficult to establish on historical grounds when the evidence is slight. But what one historian thinks is a small amount of evidence may be a lot to another. More important for our purposes is that Allison does not seem to notice that his complaint about the limits in evidence does not mitigate the force of Craig's argument. Let us grant that the evidence is meager. How much evidence is needed before one will proceed to test all available hypotheses? Nowhere, however, does Allison assess the amount of evidence available. Moreover, he does not seem to realize that in

historical matters 'a lot of evidence' can sometimes make it even *more* difficult to reach defensible historical conclusions – even when some alleged event is recent, has numerous witnesses, and is relatively simple. A lot of evidence does not necessarily make things easier for the critical historian.

(3) Third, Allison limits himself to possibilities instead of taking the initiative and presenting a defensible position that accounts for the four reported facts mentioned above. Allison has explained everything and so has explained nothing: 'one can draw any number of curves through a finite set of points to create a thousand different pictures'.<sup>48</sup> But the issue is not whether historians *can* construct viable hypotheses that *can* compete with the resurrection hypothesis, but rather whether alternative hypotheses outstrip the latter through defensible arguments. Allison retorts: even if the resurrection happened, this does not mean that we can show that it happened; and if the resurrection did not happen, this would not mean that we can show that it did not happen.<sup>49</sup>

We must insist, however, that the more interesting project is to develop an argument that could persuade others when they look at the available evidence. Allison reflects on what might count as legitimate evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, and concludes that some facts are relevant. Why then does he refuse to propose an hypothesis that could account for them?

(4) Fourth, Allison misunderstands Craig's use of Occam's razor: 'Occam's razor is not the skeletal key to everything. Historical events typically have multiple, complex causes'.<sup>50</sup> Craig, however, has never argued that Occam's razor is a key to everything. Rather, simplicity is only one of the criteria that Craig uses to establish the plausibility of causal theories. The early Church could have more than one cause for its existence, but this would not prevent historians from positing Jesus' resurrection as the ultimate cause that set off a chain reaction of additional causal conditions that brought the Christian movement into full bloom. Various causes have different values and contribute variously to forming historical phenomena. True, historians rarely affirm that entire movements can be accounted for by a single cause. Many conditions surrounding the primary event under consideration, the resurrection of Jesus, contributed to its ongoing influence.

Larry Hurtado has recently outlined and explained some of the many reasons why the earliest Christian movement spread at the astounding rate it did. First, it began in Jerusalem – a city that allowed for many persons to hear the Good News in order for the first disciples to take the message out to a wider world.<sup>51</sup> Outsiders found the strict nature of Christian worship attractive,<sup>52</sup> including its exclusive stance with respect to Christianity's relationship to all other religions.<sup>53</sup> Christianity, moreover, was unlike any other religion at the time. It did not discriminate on the basis of gender or social class. It called on everyone to repent and believe in the Gospel.<sup>54</sup> Christian worship was more intense than the conventional liturgies of Judaism.<sup>55</sup> The earliest Christian worship featured the belief that God was active in the midst of ritual action.<sup>56</sup> Lastly, says Hurtado, the Christian attitude in worship was not passive, but one in which the believer could expect to be changed by the Spirit. The early Church's intense charismatic experience of the risen Jesus in the context of worship was attractive to outsiders.<sup>57</sup> Further features in earliest Christianity could be cited to account for its remarkably rapid spread.

(5) Fifth, Allison argues against soft apologists by noting that our sources represent only one point of view.<sup>58</sup> Segal makes the same comment as Allison: 'To me, it is absolutely crucial that every one of those who believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus as historical fact is also a believer in Christianity.'<sup>59</sup> In other words, all the evidence we have comes from individuals who already believed in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Does this mean that the New Testament writings can in no way be trusted, because their authors'

beliefs might distort the 'hard' historical evidence? Few, if any, historians would want to stop at this point, throw up their hands and quit because the sources may have been shaped by passionate believers. Testimonies and other artifacts of history, whether oral or written, are often transmitted because the original compiler(s) firmly believed in their truth. Historians cannot escape such sources. If the resurrection occurred, then we would expect his followers to transmit zealously such a message about Jesus to subsequent generations. An absence of personal commitment on the part of the original witnesses would actually render their testimony less than credible.

(6) Sixth, Allison observes that the Gospels were written too long after Jesus' life to be considered reliable.<sup>60</sup> But surely Allison knows that later sources can be just as reliable as earlier sources; firsthand reports are not necessarily preferable to subsequent witnesses to and interpreters of the tradition. Sometimes later interpreters understand the original events better than the eyewitnesses themselves. Instead of always valuing firsthand accounts over subsequent reports therefore, contemporary historians recognize that in times of upheaval people may not immediately write things down and that later compilers may be in a better position to grasp earlier events than the eyewitnesses themselves. As Dulles has reasoned, 'Anglicans and Orthodox, as well as Roman Catholics, have generally rejected the Protestant position, in so far as this is purely Biblicist, and have insisted that the Bible cannot be the rule of faith except when conjoined with a continuous Church tradition. In this perspective, which is fundamentally Catholic, the very sections of the New Testament which the liberals tend to discount as too far removed from the events can be seen as providing privileged interpretations, for, as [John Henry] Newman pointed out, events of great importance require a considerable span of time in order to be rightly comprehended'.<sup>61</sup> Later compilers may have more well-rounded evidence from various perspectives at their disposal to determine what should be included in the most up to date reporting. Historians do not need earlier sources to ensure that their case is more historically trustworthy.<sup>62</sup>

In short, Allison should engage the evidence and account for it, rather than dismiss it for being limited, one-sided or coming too far after the alleged original event.

(7) In a seventh and final argument Allison maintains that apologists are already biased in favor of orthodox conclusions about the resurrection.<sup>63</sup> He endorses an allegedly 'impartial' ideal: 'we should try to establish the historical truth whether or not it upholds our theology'. This leads him to defend his sceptical procedure and results: 'I question the notion that I found what I was looking for, or that my theological uncertainty unduly infected my historical thinking'.<sup>64</sup> Yet no scholars are simply 'impartial'. It is with their own presuppositions that they approach issues and interpret reality, and these presuppositions can be modified and changed through argument and experience. While apologists, like anyone else, must work with a certain set of presuppositions, this does not exclude the possibility of the resurrection hypothesis being the best explanation of the given evidence, when it is weighed and assessed. As the scientist-theologian, John Polkinghorne, insists, believers can retain their presuppositions when comparing and contrasting their views with competing claims. The issue is rather: whose worldview or particular position makes the most sense out of the agreed-upon evidence. Simply put, for Allison and everyone else, there is no such thing as a 'purely historical', presuppositionless approach to Jesus' life or resurrection.<sup>65</sup>

Yet Allison maintains: 'pure historical reasoning is not going to show us that God raised Jesus from the dead'.<sup>66</sup> But is 'pure historical reasoning' either desirable or even possible? Critical historians inevitably develop their arguments on the basis of some philosophical presuppositions, including some that pertain to religion. Allison himself plans to be as skeptical

as possible: 'the subject matter demands this'.<sup>67</sup> In effect Allison privileges his presupposition, skepticism, as embodying the 'purely historical' ideal. While Allison is quick to fault the orthodox for finding what they were looking for, should the same be said about him?

Yet Allison does not completely rule out the contribution of philosophy to historical enquiry: 'In like fashion, I understand why Richard Swinburne, in his recent defense of the resurrection, commences by first seeking to establish the existence of a certain sort of God and the likelihood of this God communicating with and redeeming the human race'.<sup>68</sup> What shape does Swinburne's natural theology take and how does it bear on his evidential approach to the resurrection?<sup>69</sup> Swinburne's first step in his overall argument for the resurrection consists of showing how God might want to become a human being and do certain things in human history. These are his 'a priori reasons' which, in his words, arise 'from the very nature of God and from the general condition of the human race' and which suggest 'why we should expect them to be true'.<sup>70</sup> While it is not necessary for God to become human, there are still good reasons to think that he would do such a thing. It would be appropriate for God to identify himself with human beings; such an act would provide reasons for thinking that people have intrinsic dignity and would reveal the extent to which God loves the human race. The incarnate God would live an exemplary human life in terms of teaching the truth about God and being supremely moral. A divine stamp of approval would rest on his life, vindicating his central message. The nature of God and the human race provide us with reason to think that God is likely to reveal himself at least once in human history. More importantly, according to Swinburne we can discern a general form in which this revelation might take place. After the a priori reasons, Swinburne turns to what he dubs the 'a posteriori evidence' for resurrection faith (the empty tomb, the appearances, and so forth). Swinburne then concludes that the a posteriori evidence for Jesus' resurrection resonates with the a priori reasons better than any other hypothesis that excludes the resurrection. He concludes: 'Alternative hypotheses have always seemed to me to give far less satisfactory accounts of the historical evidence than does the traditional account'.<sup>71</sup>

Yet Allison, after showing some initial openness, refuses to consider Swinburne's natural theology as a framework for a historical examination of the resurrection and seems to remain agnostic about this natural theology.<sup>72</sup> At times he brushes aside philosophy when it comes to 'doing history'. But philosophy, including the arguments of natural theology, deserve to influence historical thinking and argument, especially in a postmodern age which stresses academic collaboration and interdisciplinarity. If historians follow philosophers in acknowledging good reasons to think that God might reveal himself to us in a particular way, then that could rightly predispose them to see God at work in the person of Jesus.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

When William Lane Craig is understood as a 'soft apologist', then his argument for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus easily wards off the scepticism of Dale Allison and can reasonably conclude that the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation of the available evidence. In its Constitution for the Church in the Modern World, the Second Vatican Council 'courteously' invited 'atheists to examine the Gospel of Christ with an open mind'.<sup>73</sup> One might apply this conciliar statement to the case for the resurrection and join Craig in inviting non-believers to analyze the relevant evidence; they might then perceive the force of the arguments for Jesus' message and resurrection.

Where the hard apologists endorse a naïve realism, soft apologists, like Craig, Davis, O'Collins, Swinburne and Wright develop their arguments in terms of critical realism. Just as there is no single epistemology in critical historiography, there is no universal form of rationality that soft apologists embrace in defense of the historic Christian faith. Given the postmodern awareness of the multidimensionality of human perspectives, soft apologists maintain that intellectually satisfying arguments which can outstrip rival hypotheses form a more honest and efficacious way of reaching contemporary persons than what is offered by hard apologists who claim to have achieved 'knockdown proof' for the resurrection.

## Notes

1 Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2005); idem, 'The Resurrection of Jesus and Rational Apologetics', *Philosophia Christi* 10: 2 (2008), pp. 315–35.

2 William Lane Craig, 'Dale Allison on Jesus' Empty Tomb, His Postmortem Appearances, and the Origin of the Disciples' Belief in His Resurrection', *Philosophia Christi* 10: 2 (2008), p. 293.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 157.

4 For a similar distinction between soft and hard forms of apologetics, see Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 168–190. My definition of soft and hard forms of apologetics differs from Davis's understanding in that I hold that soft apologists can affirm and defend one causal theory over its competitors.

5 Cf. Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1973), pp. 125, 126.

6 Other orthodox believing scholars who deny the historical character of the resurrection include Thomas P. Rausch, *Who Is Jesus?: An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 119, and George E. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), p. 101; cf. p. 127.

7 For contemporary perspectives on the bodily resurrection of Jesus by Catholic systematic theologians, see Bernard P. Prusak, 'Bodily Resurrection in Catholic Perspectives', *Theological Studies* 61 (2000), pp. 64–105.

8 For a discussion, see Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 148–182.

9 For William Lane Craig's response to the metahistorical view of the resurrection, see his 'Noli Me Tangere: Why John Meier Won't Touch the Risen Lord', *Heythrop Journal* 50: 1 (2009), pp. 91–97.

10 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N. 643.

11 Pope John Paul II, *Weekly Catechesis*, March 1, 1989, 24; from *Talks of John Paul II*, 13 (Pro Ecclesia, 509 Madison Ave. New York 10022) 15 (1989).

12 Ibid. 13, 14.

13 N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 625.

14 Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, pp. 29, 30.

15 William Lane Craig, 'Noli Me Tangere: Why John Meier Won't Touch the Risen Lord' 94.

16 Ibid., 94.

17 Ibid., 95.

18 Ibid., 92.

19 Gary R. Habermas, 'Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3: 2 (2005), pp. 135–53. See also John M. G. Barclay, 'The Resurrection in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship', in Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996), pp. 13–30.

20 William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Publishing, 2008), pp. 350–400.

21 Cf. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Resurrection of Jesus and Roman Catholic Fundamental Theology' in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 216.

22 One advocate of what I am calling 'hard apologetics' is Gary R. Habermas. See his 'Knowing That Jesus' Resurrection Occurred: A Response to Davis', *Faith and Philosophy* 2: 3 (1984), pp. 295–302.

23 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Resurrection of Jesus', 216.

24 Stephen Davis, *Risen Indeed*, p. 20 cf. p. 169.

25 N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 717. Cf. 8, 10, 686, 718, 720.

26 Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God-Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4.; cf. pp. 70, 76, 79.

27 Ibid., p. 69.

- 28 Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 8, 9.
- 29 Gerald O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: The Paulist Press, 2003), p. 34.
- 30 I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), p. 219.
- 31 See Craig, 'Dale Allison on Jesus' Empty Tomb' pp. 293–301.
- 32 Cf. Avery Dulles, 'Historians and the Reality of Christ', *First Things* 28 (1992), p. 21.
- 33 Craig should state that, on the basis of the historical evidence *which comes from believers*, the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation of the facts.
- 34 William Lane Craig, 'Resurrection and the Real Jesus', in Paul Copan (ed.), *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 160.
- 35 William Lane Craig, 'Closing Response', in Paul Copan and Ronald Tacelli, (eds.), *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2000), p. 163.
- 36 Robert Gundry, 'Trimming the Debate', in *ibid.*, p. 105.
- 37 Craig, 'Closing Response', in *ibid.*, p. 186.
- 38 Allison, 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', pp. 327, 328.
- 39 As seen in *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 345. I relay Allison's arguments against Craig and other soft apologists in this section. Allison shows in detail how he disagrees with Craig in 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', pp. 320–328. While Allison conclusively demonstrates the errors of hard apologetics, he mistakenly projects these concerns onto the arguments provided by contemporary soft apologists.
- 40 Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, pp. 345, 346.
- 41 Alan Segal, 'The Resurrection: Faith or History', in Robert B. Stewart (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 135.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 43 Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 345.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 347: 'Ostensible encounters with the newly departed are, . . . not uncommon, however one explains them. Further, although Wright does not register the fact, people often perceive apparitions not as ghostly shades, but as solid, wholly real. So what prevents the unorthodox . . . from regarding the resurrection appearances as some wider phenomenon? Mix in a little Jewish eschatology and the pre-Easter expectations of the disciples and one might claim, there it is.'
- 45 Allison, 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', p. 315; *idem*, *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 346.
- 46 Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 134.
- 47 Allison, 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', pp. 325, 326.
- 48 Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 339.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 338.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 347.
- 51 Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 195, 196.
- 52 Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 4; *idem*, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 483, 484, 650.
- 53 Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, p. 18; cf. p. 39; *idem*, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 77, 402.
- 54 Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, p. 46.
- 55 *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 55.
- 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 57.
- 57 Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 134–53; 619–24; 649–53.
- 58 Allison, 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', p. 326.
- 59 Segal, 'The Resurrection: Faith or History', p. 136.
- 60 Allison, 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', pp. 325, 326.
- 61 Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 97.
- 62 Cf. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, pp. 75–77.
- 63 Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 342.
- 64 Allison, 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', p. 320.
- 65 John C. Polkinghorne, 'Physics and Metaphysics in a Trinitarian Perspective', *Theology and Science* 1 (2003), pp. 33–49.
- 66 Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 342.
- 67 Allison, 'Rational Apologetics and the Resurrection of Jesus', p. 321.
- 68 Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, p. 341.
- 69 Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God-Incarnate*, pp. 33–68.
- 70 Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 5.
- 71 Richard Swinburne, 'Evidence for the Resurrection', in Davis, Kendall, and O'Collins (eds.), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 201.
- 72 Personal conversation in Allison's office at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Fall 2007.
- 73 Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975), *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 21.

20 and 22; and in Michael Martin, "Review of The Resurrection of God Incarnate by Richard Swinburne," *Religious Studies* (2004): 367-71; and both defended and criticized in Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), e.g. pp. 314 n. 451, 318 n. 468, 319 n. 473, 326. If Victor Reppert, Stephen T. Davis, Norman Geisler, Lee Strobel, Tim and Lydia McGrew, Mike Licona, Charles Foster, Josh and Sean McDowell, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Wes Morriston, Michael Martin, Robert M. Price, Ted Drange, Keith Parsons, Richard Carrier, Robert Greg Cavin, and Evan Fales think Lowder is worthy of being cited or critiqued, or collaborating with on a book, then why is he not worthy of a debate with William Lane Craig? 'Resurrecting Jesus' and critical historiography: William Lane Craig and Dale Allison in dialogue. Glenn B. Siniscalchi. *Heythrop Journal* 52 (3):362-373 (2011). *Time and Time Again: Two Volumes by William Lane Craig* William Lane Craig the Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination. Synthese Library Volume 293. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000). "Professor Dale Allison's learned work offers an impressive contribution to the most important questions regarding Jesus and Christian origins. Rich with literary and historical detail, finely nuanced in its assessment of complicated and often very contentious issues, and here and there written from an autobiographical perspective, *Resurrecting Jesus* is a joy to read." In dialog with an amazing number of post-enlightenment authors and an unusually large array of patristic works, Allison exhibits a striking degree of critical candor and historical humility in pursuing his historical and exegetical inquiries, providing occasional autobiographical glimpses of his own intellectual struggles and faith commitment. Dr. William Lane Craig's Response. So, for example, when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, an N.T. Wright or a Dale Allison or a Michael Licona will not and should not be cowed by the authority of his peers but feels free to disagree with them when after careful study, he thinks that they have failed correctly to assess the evidence. Gary Habermas, Michael Licona, and I argue that Jesus' resurrection is both the best explanation of the evidence as well as a good explanation. (iv) Fourth, the foregoing consideration highlights a critical distinction in a historical case for the resurrection that has been obscured so far by vague talk about "evidence for the resurrection."