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In Reply to Habermas, McGrew, and McCullagh

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Introduction

I would like to express my gratitude to Heath Thomas and *Southeastern Theological Review* for featuring my book *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historical Approach* (ROJ) in this issue. I would also like to thank Gary Habermas, Timothy McGrew, and Behan McCullagh for their remarks. For ROJ to receive this sort of scholarly attention at an early stage is quite exciting and encouraging.

Reply to Gary Habermas

Since I regard Gary Habermas as the world's leading expert on the topic of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, it is a great honor to have him contribute an essay on ROJ. Because of the immense work on Jesus' resurrection he has conducted over several decades, I was able to stand on his shoulders when I wrote chapter four of ROJ and know which facts to examine pertaining to the historical bedrock relevant to the resurrection of Jesus. In personal conversations with Habermas, I never cease to be amazed at the breadth and depth of his knowledge on the subject. There are no forthcoming books for which I have greater anticipation to read than a multi-volume magnum opus on Jesus' resurrection by Habermas.

Habermas' comments over the years have always been and continue to be of immense value to me. I was surprised that he offered no criticisms. During my doctoral research, we had many discussions pertaining to whether historians are within their professional rights to investigate miracle claims. At that time, he seemed to side with the majority on the negative. Since this is a live discussion among professional historians and biblical scholars—as further evidenced by McCullagh's critical essay, I would have liked for Habermas to have commented on the matter to learn where he now stands, given my arguments in chapter two of ROJ.

Habermas offered a few caveats to the “minimal facts” approach that I think helpful for future discussion. One such caveat noted by Habermas is how much historical weight one should place on the appearance to James and the empty tomb. I am satisfied that I did not use either in the historical method employed in ROJ, since neither may be regarded as historical bedrock. However, I believe there is a place for going beyond strictly controlled

method and contending for matters one believes are strongly evidenced but do not enjoy a widespread heterogeneous consensus. In fact, I have taken this route since the publication of ROJ. In my lectures and debates during the past two and a half years, I have been contending that Jesus' disciples proclaimed they had experienced what they perceived was (a) the *bodily/physically* raised Jesus and (b) had done so in group settings. Although I had argued for both of these in ROJ, I did not include them in my relevant historical bedrock. Thus, they did not factor in my final analysis. However, I now have been contending for these in public debates and do not believe they have received any strong replies to date. In the future, I may add the appearance to James, the empty tomb, and Jesus' predictions pertaining to his Passion and resurrection to my historical case for Jesus' resurrection. However, a benefit of not using data outside of the relevant historical bedrock is that one hands far less to resurrection skeptics to contend against and forces them to answer the strongest arguments at hand.

Reply to Timothy McGrew

I first met Tim McGrew and his wife Lydia in November 2009 in New Orleans during the annual meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. I had been preparing for a February debate with an atheist who was claiming to have a "rock solid Bayesian argument" against Jesus' resurrection. I had been searching for help from an expert on Bayes's Theorem (BT). However, my efforts had turned up empty except hearing that the McGrews had written multiple articles and essays on BT but rarely came to these annual meetings. I began praying, asking God to lead me to someone who could assist me.

While still in New Orleans, I was having lunch with a few colleagues in a restaurant when a couple came through the door and stopped in front of our table. When I had the impression they were looking at me, I looked up and the gentleman politely asked if I was Mike Licona. When I said "Yes," he introduced himself as Tim McGrew and his wife Lydia and continued by saying they were very excited about the work I was doing and that they wanted for me to know they would be happy to assist me in any way should I ever need them. I had not met the McGrews prior to that day and they did not know I was searching for an expert on BT. My faith that God answers prayer certainly increased that day! I ended up flying to the McGrews' home the following month and receiving a personal crash course from Tim on BT.

In his review essay, Tim McGrew offered three major criticisms: (a) the possibility of methodological neutrality, (b) the possibility of employing BT in historical inquiry, and (c) my use of the Gospels (or lack thereof) in my historical investigation of Jesus' resurrection.

On the Possibility of Methodological Neutrality

McGrew acknowledges that the idea of methodological neutrality (MN) is “very attractive,” but questions that it is as useful as I imagine.

It is rare indeed that we come to any interesting inquiry in the entire absence of relevant information, and that information often conditions how we should accept assertions from different quarters.

[S]ometimes the mere fact that someone of ordinary credibility has made a claim suffices to discharge whatever burden of proof there might be. If my wife tells me that there are apples in the refrigerator, I will not approach the matter with the assumption that her claim is false until I check for myself.

McGrew makes some fine points. However, I think he misses what I meant by neutrality. I am not suggesting one must ignore relevant information when coming into an investigation and, thus, be neutral as though with no opinions. I am suggesting by neutrality that no one gets a free pass on shouldering burden of proof. This means, for example, that conservative Christian historians should not approach the Gospels as being historically reliable until proven otherwise (methodological credulity) and that skeptical historians should not approach the Gospels as being historically unreliable until proven otherwise (methodological skepticism, hereafter). In MN, it is the responsibility of the historian to argue for the historical reliability or unreliability of the Gospels.

McGrew, however, has exposed a flaw in my approach. Contrary to what I wrote in ROJ, I see no reason why a claim must be assumed to be false until sufficient evidence is provided to the contrary.¹ To make such an assumption is methodological skepticism rather than neutrality. There is much reported by ancient historians and biographers that may be correct but for which no corroborating data is available. Historians regard such reports as unverified rather than false.

McGrew is likewise correct that when someone of ordinary credibility makes a claim of an ordinary nature, such as Mrs. McGrew’s informing him of the presence of apples in the refrigerator, the burden of proof is sufficiently discharged. However, when historians approach the Gospels, it is not so clear that their authors are of ordinary credibility since we do not know them. And they provide many reports that are far from an ordinary nature. McGrew is correct when saying, “If a perfect stranger tells me that there has just been a serious accident on the nearby interstate, then in the absence of further evidence, I will probably accept his assertion.” However, if a stranger tells him that a spaceship has just landed on the nearby interstate, would McGrew accept his assertion in the absence of further evidence?

¹ Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 97.

McGrew may reply with agreement but note that I was not taking into account the nature of the report when defining MN and only treated miracle claims and burden of proof in a later section.² Granted. However, it is often the case that even ordinary events reported by historians of ordinary credibility are problematic. Plutarch informs his readers there are three conflicting accounts pertaining to the death of Scipio Africanus, the famous Roman general who defeated Hannibal.³ Historians cannot a priori assume any one of the three are correct.

When approaching the biblical literature in general and the Gospels in particular, the matter of genre is of immense importance. The genre of the Gospels differs from any we have today and scholars continue in their attempts to understand it in a fuller sense. This should motivate historians to be even more careful to apply MN to the Gospels and even to how they may interpret them.

On the Possibility of Employing Bayes's Theorem (BT) in Historical Inquiry

Since McGrew is unquestionably an expert on BT and because my knowledge of BT comes largely from him, I realize I am treading on uncertain ground when assessing his arguments on the matter. McGrew regards as mistaken my contention that the prior probability of Jesus' resurrection is inscrutable. He argues that if one can take a reasonable stance on God's existence on the basis of natural theology, "then there is no obvious reason that one may not *start there* in considering the impact of further evidence." He continues,

As William Paley pointed out over two centuries ago, the probability of a visible miracle may be reasonably estimated (at least for a lower bound) by the joint probability of two claims: that there is a God who has intended a future state of existence for his creation, and that he should desire to acquaint them with it in some fashion that could not reasonably be dismissed as the operation of nature or the result of mere human sagacity. For there is no other way for God to stamp his endorsement on a communication than for him to sign it with the one act that distinguishes him from all of his creation, the act of sovereignty.

I have no hesitations toward including evidence for God's existence within the background knowledge to be taken into consideration for assessing the prior probability (prior). But McGrew appears to make a leap when appealing to Paley. It is one thing to appeal to evidence for the existence of God. It is entirely another to claim God "has intended a future state of existence for his creation" and that he desires "to acquaint them with it." One may accept the

² Licona, *The Resurrection*, 192-7.

³ Plutarch, *Romulus* 27.4-5.

biblical testimony and believe these things. However, I do not see how one could demonstrate them with evidence to justify including them in our background knowledge.

With that said, I have continued to wrestle over this issue during the past two years since completing the final manuscript for ROJ. We might say that the prior is similar to the initial plausibility of a hypothesis, which is one of the five criteria historians typically employ for assessing hypotheses. I'm presently leaning toward including (a) the arguments of natural theology with (b) the historical evidence for Jesus' claims to being God's chosen agent to usher in his kingdom, (c) that he performed deeds that astonished crowds and that both he and his followers regarded as divine miracles and exorcisms, and (d) that he predicted his imminent and violent death would be followed shortly thereafter by his resurrection. These four items create a context in which we might expect a god to act. They give an initial plausibility to the resurrection hypothesis or a prior that may be assessed as being quite high, at least by those of us who grant the validity of (a) through (d). The challenge of this is that two of the four items I have just mentioned (a and d) belong to the relevant historical bedrock. Thus, had I included them in my historical investigation of Jesus' resurrection I would have violated my own precautionary actions for minimizing the impact of my horizon on my investigation, a component that involves a bit of subjectivity.⁴ More specifically, the method I proposed in ROJ requires including only the relevant historical bedrock, at least initially. Should the historical investigation then end with two or more hypotheses being nearly equal in fulfilling the criteria for the best explanation, additional data may then be brought in and the exercise repeated.

That said, I do not think the move suggested by McGrew to assess the prior for the resurrection hypothesis is an illegitimate one. However, there are more ways than one to skin a cat. Mine is to employ strictly controlled historical method and I remain unconvinced that I could assess the prior of the Resurrection Hypothesis (RH) fairly while staying within the parameters of the historical method proposed in ROJ.

McGrew then suggests that when priors are difficult to assess, one can table the prior and focus on the likelihoods, "asking, in effect, 'How strongly should we expect these data, supposing that the hypothesis were true; and how strongly should we expect them, supposing that it were false?'" I agree. But asking how strongly we would expect our data given the truth of a hypothesis is, in essence, to assess its explanatory power, which is only one of the five criteria employed when assessing hypotheses by inference to the best explanation. Thus, historical method may benefit from the use of BT in determining the explanatory power of a hypothesis. However, its value may be

⁴ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 56-8; 466-9.

limited to that unless the prior probability of that hypothesis' being true can be determined.

On Historical Bedrock and the Historical Reliability of the Gospels

McGrew confesses feeling uneasy with my method that places much weight upon the historical bedrock, since this leaves data “hostage to the current consensus in biblical studies. . . . And the point that I wish to stress is that the consensus of the scholarly community is at best a contingent marker for the weight of the evidence. It should never be substituted for the evidence itself.”

Here I am in strong agreement with McGrew. It is the responsibility of scholars to argue for their views, which may often lie outside of the relevant historical bedrock. I have done so in ROJ related to several topics, such as the historicity of Jesus' predictions pertaining to his imminent Passion and resurrection and that the proclamation of Jesus' physical resurrection was part of the apostolic proclamation.⁵ I am persuaded that the historical evidence renders these conclusions as virtually assured, not to mention the appearance to James and the empty tomb. However, since none of these belong to the relevant historical bedrock, I did not include them in my first run of weighing hypotheses. Had two or more ended in a near tie, it would then be proper to introduce other strongly evidenced facts that do not enjoy agreement by the strong consensus of scholarship. In this manner, I have made an honest effort to keep a check on my personal biases throughout my investigation while not placing myself in a position where I am held hostage by the present consensus opinions.

It is difficult for a historian to be too careful in recognizing the presence of personal biases resulting from one's horizon. Biases are the single most serious challenge to the integrity of historical investigation. And if that is true of investigations of ordinary matters, it is even truer of those involving extraordinary ones. Christians carry biases as much as skeptics. So, Christian historians who are interested in discovering truth, even when the possibility is present that it may challenge rather than reinforce a cherished position, need to keep this in mind.

McGrew is correct that “the tradeoff . . . is that one's basis is not so rich as it might have been and perhaps should be.” I want to be clear that I think one can argue for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection in a number of ways and that one way is to create a comprehensive case that includes the historical reliability of the Passion and resurrection narratives in the canonical Gospels as McGrew would have it. In one sense, such a case would be stronger than the one I presented. Yet, in another, it would be weaker, since it includes

⁵ Against the majority opinion, I have argued in chapter 2 of ROJ that historians are within their professional rights to investigate miracle claims.

conclusions that are less historically certain. If one can answer the question pertaining to the historicity of Jesus' resurrection using only the relevant historical bedrock, why must one feel compelled to continue to pile on additional data?

I suppose it is a matter of preference. Let us suppose I have just built a moderate sized house with building materials of the highest quality. Some time later I am faced with a decision: (a) Leave the house as is, comprised entirely of materials of the highest quality or (b) Increase the size using building materials that are of a good but lesser quality than those used in the original house. The average person driving by may not notice a difference, although builders with a keen eye driving by certainly will. I do not fault McGrew for the path he prefers (b). But I do not think I should be faulted for preferring a different path (a). It is a path that was paved by Habermas and has proven over time to be quite sound and effective.

McGrew writes,

I suspect that Licona's fairly negative rating of the resurrection narratives in the Gospels reflects not so much his personal judgment regarding their historical value as his awareness of the magnitude of the task that confronts anyone who wants to answer, in detail, the wide array of arguments against the substantial historicity of the resurrection narratives. *That* project could fill many substantial volumes, and this one is already long enough. But if this was his reason for trying to see how much could be done without making use of those narratives, then I wish that he had indicated his intentions in some other, less deprecatory fashion.

McGrew is entirely correct. There is much good literature supporting the historical reliability of the Gospels and I can think of none better than those works McGrew mentioned by Craig Blomberg and Craig Keener. Admittedly, it has only been within the past three and a half years that I have become a more intensive student of the Gospels in terms of their historical reliability. So, when I wrote ROJ I recognized that broaching the topic of the historical reliability of the Gospels would be far too much for the project at hand. Moreover, as with the empty tomb, I knew up front there would be only a limited amount mined from the Gospels that could be counted as historical bedrock relevant to Jesus' resurrection. Accordingly, I assessed that it would be a distraction to myself and to my readers to devote too much time to the subject.

McGrew is correct that my assessment of the Gospels as "possible" in terms of preserving apostolic testimony pertaining to Jesus' death and resurrection was not so much my personal judgment as it was a reflection of my awareness of the massive task of dealing with the issue in depth and providing a sort of neutral answer in order to avoid getting hung up on a topic that would require far more work than I could devote at that time.

McGrew makes a few valuable observations pertaining to some of the methodology currently employed by many of those in the guild of biblical

scholarship. His provision of a dozen historical examples provides a powerful critique of the argument from silence and his suggestions for possible causes for the omissions should cause all serious historians to hesitate in the future before appealing to silence in ancient reports.

He is likewise perceptive when observing the “elaborate theories on slight literary parallels [that] has an alarming grip on the New Testament studies community.” I have often been amused by skeptical scholars who accuse believers of being credulous for being open to the supernatural while the same skeptical scholars simultaneously offer counter proposals that border on unbridled fantasy and with pathetically little to no supporting data. There is hypocrisy in such an approach. And it needs to be pointed out often and with specifics. I attempted to do that in ROJ when assessing several of the hypotheses in chapter five.

Reply to Behan McCullagh

I was thrilled when informed that Behan McCullagh had accepted the invitation to write an essay for this volume. Of all the philosophers of history I read during my research, none impressed me more than McCullagh. His books *Justifying Historical Descriptions* and *The Logic of History* are marvelous history primers and *The Truth of History* is a powerful challenge to postmodernist approaches to history that Richard Evans of Cambridge University has called “the most cogent and comprehensive critique” of extreme postmodernist positions.⁶ Similar to what we read in McCullagh’s books, his numerous articles that have appeared in *History and Theory* are written with great clarity. I have learned much from him.

Therefore, it was with hesitation and great caution that I offered criticisms in ROJ of his view that Jesus’ resurrection cannot be verified by historians.⁷ I have been looking forward to interacting with this great philosopher of history on the matter and, with continuing hesitation, great caution and enduring admiration of him, offer the following remarks in reply.

McCullagh offers three major criticisms of my historical case for the resurrection of Jesus then provides his own approach. His first major criticism pertains to the nature of Jesus’ resurrection body. He contends that my conclusion that the risen Jesus probably had a physical resurrection body is problematic and unconvincing. For (a) the Gospels report the risen Jesus doing things difficult for a physical body, such as passing through locked doors, vanishing at will (John 20:26; Luke 24:31) and (b) ascending bodily into heaven is problematic (Acts 1:9). McCullagh asks, “Do we really think he is still hovering up there waiting to return to earth to judge the quick and the

⁶ Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 263.

⁷ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 153-60.

dead?”⁸ He concludes, “If we cannot tell how Jesus appeared to his disciples, it seems wisest to leave the method unexplained. It is enough to say just that he did appear to them, in order to convince them of his continuing existence.”⁹

In ROJ, I define the Resurrection Hypothesis (RH) as follows: “*Following a supernatural event of an indeterminate nature and cause, Jesus appeared to a number of people, in individual and group settings and to friends and foes, in no less than an objective vision and perhaps within ordinary vision in his bodily raised corpse* [ital. in original].”¹⁰ In order to avoid ambiguity, which impacts the explanatory power of a hypothesis, there are places where I assess both RH as seeing Jesus within an objective vision (RH-V) and seeing Jesus within ordinary vision (RH-B).¹¹ However, when I assess RH against other hypotheses, it is usually RH and not the more precisely defined RH-B that I am proposing.¹² Thus, McCullagh’s first objection is problematic from the start, since RH states that Jesus actually rose from the dead and appeared to others without specifically defining the nature of Jesus’ resurrection body. In other words, I am not guilty of his charge.

The two reasons McCullagh offers for his conclusion are also problematic. He appears to agree with my conclusion that Paul imagines resurrection to be an event that involves natural bodies being altered.¹³ Yet, he regards reports of Jesus passing through locked doors, disappearing at will, and His ascension into heaven to be in tension with Paul’s view. I fail to see the tension. If Jesus’ corpse was raised and altered to include supernatural elements, why could it not be able to do these things? Quantum theory allows for the disappearance of subatomic particles and their simultaneous reappearance at another location. Is it difficult to believe that a supernatural body could at least keep up with Quantum mechanics? Moreover, McCullagh suggests that I came to the view that Jesus had been raised bodily from the Gospels/Acts and Paul’s letters.¹⁴ While it is true that Paul’s letters led me to that conclusion. I did not use the Gospels/Acts, which were all probably written later

⁸ See: McCullagh’s essay in the present volume.

⁹ He also writes, “It is not clear that the Jesus whom the disciples experienced had a physical body; and to explain Jesus’ resurrection as an act of God is quite *ad hoc* and so unconvincing.” McCullagh never explains how the hypothesis that Jesus was raised bodily is *ad hoc*.

¹⁰ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 583.

¹¹ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 584.

¹² Licona, *The Resurrection*, 600-9; 623-41. Although I have argued extensively that Jesus’ disciples and Paul taught that Jesus had been raised physically (Licona, *The Resurrection*, 400-37), this conclusion does not enjoy consensus agreement among scholars. Accordingly, I did not include it among the relevant historical bedrock (Licona, *The Resurrection*, 464).

¹³ See: McCullagh’s essay in the present volume.

¹⁴ See: McCullagh’s essay in the present volume.

than Paul's letters.¹⁵ Accordingly, even if the Gospels/Acts were problematic to Paul—and I do not believe they are¹⁶—it would have no impact on the historical case I made for the first Christian leaders' belief that Jesus had been raised bodily.

Is Jesus' present existence *always* in physical form? I do not know and have not contended the matter for one way or the other. The point to grasp here is that something happened on that first Easter that convinced Jesus' disciples that his corpse had been raised and transformed into something special.

McCullagh's second major criticism concerns my "claim that the best explanation of Jesus' resurrection is that it was an act of God."¹⁷ He contends that the hypothesis "God raised Jesus" is of questionable plausibility and is *ad hoc*.

A hypothesis is plausible if it is implied by some accepted truths and contradicted by very few. And it is *ad hoc* if there are no reasons for thinking it true besides the fact that it would explain the available data. The hypothesis that God exists and cared about Jesus is of questionable plausibility; the hypothesis that he wanted to raise Jesus from the dead and reveal him to the disciples and others is almost entirely *ad hoc*.¹⁸

In reply, I want to note primarily that this objection is a straw man. ROJ concerns historical inquiry into the question of Jesus' resurrection. I did not contend that historical inquiry can verify that Jesus' resurrection was an act of God. In fact, I wrote in ROJ,

Since the claim that it was *God* who raised Jesus is incapable of verification, we will not make *any* claims pertaining to the cause of the event other than it must have been supernatural. Accordingly I herein define the resurrection hypothesis as follows: *Following a supernatural event of an indeterminate nature and cause, Jesus appeared to a number of people, in individual and*

¹⁵ For Paul's views on Jesus' resurrection body, see Licona, *The Resurrection*, 400-37. For my use of the canonical Gospels in my investigation, see Licona, *The Resurrection*, 201-08. I address the concerns of some that Acts presents a view of Jesus' resurrection that differs from Paul's in Licona, *The Resurrection*, 382-97.

¹⁶ See Licona, *The Resurrection*, 400-37 (436).

¹⁷ See: McCullagh's essay in the present volume.

¹⁸ Later McCullagh likewise writes, "Without good evidence of God's intentions, we have no good reason for thinking that he might have raised Jesus from the dead. If we assume that Jesus physical body was raised, against the laws of nature, we might ask who or what could have brought this about except God? But this begs the question against the alternative possibility, that the experiences of the disciples were not of the risen body of Jesus but were of a spiritual being or were a hallucination of some kind [...] So while the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead would imply that he was able to appear to his disciples, that hypothesis is weakened by the fact that it is entirely *ad hoc*."

group settings and to friends and foes, in no less than an objective vision and perhaps within ordinary vision in his bodily raised corpse [italics in original].¹⁹

I also contended in ROJ that there are two ways of approaching the issue of the cause of Jesus' resurrection: One leaves the cause undetermined, a common practice in historical inquiry, or posit a theoretical entity.²⁰ In ROJ, I opt for the former but regard the latter as a live option.²¹ McCullagh did not reply to the former. Pertaining to the latter, McCullagh objects to appealing to the practice in science of employing theoretical entities, since theoretical entities are predictable whereas God is not. Thus, "an appeal to God as the cause of the resurrection of Jesus is implausible," since "we know too little about him to predict what he will do."²²

The difference noted by McCullagh is clear. Whether it is germane to the topic at hand is not. Theoretical entities in science are predictable because they are impersonal. Personal beings, which are almost always the subject of historical inquiry, often act in ways that surprise us and are, therefore, often unpredictable. Moreover, black holes were not predicted. They were posited by cosmologists after they observed new phenomena. In other words, scientists observe certain phenomena and posit theoretical entities (e.g., black holes) in order to account for them.

Something similar may be said of the hypothetical "Q" source in Gospel studies. Q was not predicted. There are no manuscripts resembling Q and there are no known ancient sources mentioning a Gospel resembling Q. Many New Testament scholars observe the phenomenon of material common to Matthew and Luke but absent from Mark and posit a hypothetical source called Q in order to account for these. In a similar manner, historians observe certain phenomena (e.g., reports, artifacts, states of affairs) and posit hypothetical pasts in order to account for them. Theoretical entities, hypothetical sources and hypothetical pasts are all unobservable. None are predictable. And none may be said to rely on non-evidenced assumptions but are instead based on the observation of data. Accordingly, I do not see an *ad hoc* component present in RH, at least, as I understand the term *ad hoc*.

I would also like to assess McCullagh's criticisms on his own grounds. Is the hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead" implausible and *ad hoc* as he defines them? The hypothesis "The corpse of Abraham Lincoln has decomposed" is plausible because it is suggested by the accepted truths of science

¹⁹ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 583. McCullagh (Essay) cites me writing "the hypothesis is that Jesus was raised *supernaturally* (i.e., by God) from the dead" (Licona, *The Resurrection*, 176). I admit the presence of some ambiguity at this point in ROJ that is probably responsible for a misunderstanding on McCullagh's part. I am reiterating Craig's reply to Ehrman at that point rather than providing my own argument.

²⁰ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 168-70, 177-8.

²¹ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 168-70; cf. 102-4.

²² See: McCullagh's essay in the present volume.

pertaining to what happens to bodies after death and because there is no reason to contradict it. The hypothesis “The corpse of Abraham Lincoln has been resurrected,” is implausible because it is not suggested by the accepted truths of science pertaining to what happens to bodies after death and because there is much to contradict it (e.g., the location of Lincoln’s grave is known and others have viewed his corpse).

Why then do I regard differently the hypothesis “The corpse of Jesus has been resurrected”? Since the accepted truths of science pertaining to what happens to bodies after death apply to Jesus as much as they do to Lincoln, RH is likewise implausible. Right? We would answer in the affirmative if we were to understand RH as “The corpse of Jesus has been resurrected *unassisted*,” that is, by natural causes. To illustrate this important nuance, let us consider the plausibility of the statement “Ralph walked on water *unassisted*” (WU). It is not suggested by the accepted truths of science and there is little outside of these truths to contradict it. But let us say the hypothesis is “Ralph walked on water *assisted*” (WA) and that Ralph is a three-year-old, that his dad has held Ralph’s hands above his head supporting his weight over a swimming pool allowing him to walk on water. This changes our scenario significantly and places Ralph in an entirely different category than those unable to walk on water unassisted. In the same manner, the implausibility of rising from the dead unassisted (i.e., by a natural cause) tells us nothing pertaining to the plausibility/implausibility of rising from the dead assisted (i.e., by a supernatural cause). And Jesus’ resurrection would be in the latter category: assisted. There are no accepted truths of science suggesting that a supernatural being such as God could not raise Jesus from the dead if he desired. Outside, the accepted truths of science, there is little to contradict the hypothesis “The corpse of Jesus has been resurrected by a supernatural being.” Accordingly, RH is not implausible.

But is RH plausible? Are there any accepted truths of philosophy or history that suggest Jesus’ supernatural return to life? Perhaps a cumulative case can be made. I previously mentioned in my reply to McGrew that one might appeal to arguments for God’s existence from natural theology and consider the context in which the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection occurred. Virtually all historians of Jesus are confident that he claimed to have a special and intimate relationship with God who had chosen him to usher in his kingdom and that he performed astonishing acts that both he and others regarded as divine miracles and exorcisms.²³ Accordingly, if these are authentic, we have a

²³ See: Licona, *The Resurrection*, 281-4.

context in which we might expect a god to act.²⁴ This would furnish RH with plausibility.²⁵

Of course, we should not presuppose the truth and authenticity of these particular claims and actions of Jesus. However, neither should we *a priori* exclude them. When I speak of these claims as belonging to the accepted truths, I am referring to our ability to confirm the historical Jesus made such claims and performed such deeds. One need not demonstrate that Jesus actually had such a relationship with God, that he had truly been selected by God to usher in his kingdom, and that the nature of his astonishing acts were divine. It is sufficient to observe that the context of these accepted truths about the historical Jesus fit hand in glove with his resurrection. Thus, RH can be said to possess a degree of plausibility. Notwithstanding, I hesitated in ROJ to go this far, since conclusions provided by the arguments from natural theology do not belong to historical bedrock. Accordingly, in keeping with my method, I was content to conclude that the plausibility of RH is inscrutable.

McCullagh also objects that RH is *ad hoc*, since there is no evidence that God would want to raise Jesus. The purpose of the *ad hoc* criterion is to avoid hypotheses containing non-evidenced assumptions. For example, the hypothesis “An alien from the planet Vulcan raised Jesus who deceived his disciples into believing he had a special relationship with God” is equal to RH in its explanatory scope, explanatory power, and is not implausible in terms of the accepted truths of science.²⁶ However, it is *ad hoc*, since there are no reasons for thinking it true besides the fact that it would explain the available data. After all, there have been no credible claims that Jesus was an alien. On the other hand, the earliest proclamation from the Christians was “God raised Jesus.” RH was not created to account for the data. It was present from the very beginning. Moreover, as articulated above, the data pertaining to Jesus’ resurrection appear in a strong historical context in which we might expect a god to act. Accordingly, RH is not *ad hoc*.

In the end, McCullagh’s second major criticism is a straw man. However, even if it were not, I have provided reasons for holding that his assessment of RH as both implausible and *ad hoc* is mistaken.

McCullagh’s third major criticism is that Jesus’ resurrection is an interpretation of an event rather than a historically verifiable fact. “When there are more than one equally valid descriptions of a subject, each one can be called an interpretation of that subject.”²⁷ A few paragraphs later he writes,

²⁴ The context is even stronger if Jesus predicted his imminent death and resurrection as I have contended in Licona, *The Resurrection*, 284-301.

²⁵ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 602-03.

²⁶ Those scientists who argue against the likelihood of complex life existing anywhere outside of Earth would regard this hypothesis as implausible.

²⁷ See: McCullagh’s essay in the present volume.

If one could prove that one explanation was true and the other false, then rather than have two interpretations we would have two possible explanations, one true and the other false. When there are two or more explanations of certain events and one cannot prove any of them true or false, then one may call them interpretations of why those events occurred. Those who say that people who saw the risen Jesus saw his physical body, or had a subjective or objective vision of him are all offering an interpretation of why Jesus appeared as he did.²⁸

I agree with McCullagh that when two or more historical descriptions exist and none of them can be proven or disconfirmed they should be referred to as interpretations rather than a verified historical description. However, I do not think this is the state of affairs in our investigation of Jesus' resurrection. In ROJ I argued in detail why RH decisively surpasses several leading alternatives, such as the subjective vision hypothesis (i.e., hallucination), and is quite clearly the best explanation of the relevant historical bedrock.²⁹ The alternatives are not "equally valid."

Moreover, when McCullagh speaks of proving a hypothesis as being true or false, he must be speaking of conclusions reached via arguments of inference to the best explanation, which are, of course, not absolute. For, elsewhere he has written that at the end of the day we must take on faith that inductive inferences regularly lead us to truths about the world.³⁰

McCullagh concludes his essay with an alternative to historical evidence as a ground for faith. He writes that Jesus' resurrection as "an interpretation of the experience of the disciples and others" is worth believing, because it provides hope for life after death and is "an essential condition of a Christian way of life."³¹

But one might ask whether the Christian way of life is worth living if Jesus was not actually raised. After all, the apostle Paul wrote, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless. You are still in your sins. Therefore, also those who have died as Christians have been forever lost" (1 Cor. 15:17; cf. 15:14-15, 32). If Jesus was not actually raised, any hope for life after death held by Christians may be tragically misplaced.

Most Christians do not require a ground for their faith. And that is fine, in my opinion. But some Christians, like me, have a personality that prompts us to examine our faith and ask whether it is true in light of the many objections advanced by skeptics and the existence of competing worldviews. If the apostolic preaching in Acts is genuine, the apostles proclaimed that the gos-

²⁸ See: McCullagh's essay in the present volume.

²⁹ For my assessment of these, see Licona, *The Resurrection*, 479-519, 600-6. The hypothesis that the resurrected Jesus appeared to others in an objective vision is included within RH and is abbreviated as RH-V.

³⁰ McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 33.

³¹ See: McCullagh's essay in the present volume.

pel could be believed because of the evidence before them of Jesus' miracles and resurrection (Acts 2:22; 17:30-31). I agree that the disciples' interpretation of their experiences as appearances of the resurrected Jesus is worth believing given the resulting benefits; but only if Jesus was actually raised. We may accept Jesus' resurrection purely on faith as most Christians do. For me, I have wanted to know if Jesus' resurrection could be confirmed by a historical investigation employing strictly controlled method. Having concluded such an investigation, I remain persuaded that it can. Despite my disagreements with McCullagh on the matter of whether historians can investigate miracle claims in general and Jesus' resurrection in particular, he remains at the top of my list when it comes to philosophers of history.