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**D I S C U S S I O N**


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## REPLY TO DAVIS

*Michael Martin*

In my paper "Why the Resurrection Is Initially Improbable" the main argument against Steven Davis's claim that it is rational for Christians to believe in the Resurrection is based on two theses. First, even for Christians the initial probability of the Resurrection is very low. Second, the historical evidence for the Resurrection is not strong enough to overcome this initial improbability. In his reply to my paper Davis denies both theses. Although he seems prepared to admit that the initial probability of the Resurrection is not high, he denies that it is so low that historical evidence for the Resurrection would not make the Resurrection worthy of rational belief. In particular, he stresses that alternative theories do not provide as good an explanation of the historical evidence as the Resurrection account. My thesis, however, is that to make my case alternative accounts do not have to be good explanations. They are only required not to be very poor.

Put more precisely, assume:

R = The Resurrection  
 K = Background theory  
 A = Alternative theories  
 EH = Historical Evidence

Suppose that the initial probability of the Resurrection is very low, for example,  $\text{Prob} (R/K) = .15$ , and that the Resurrection completely explains the historical evidence [ $\text{Prob} (EH/K\&R) = 1.$ ] Then belief in the Resurrection is not rational [ $\text{Prob} (R/K\&EH) < .5$ ] even if the probability of alternative theories is low, for example,  $\text{Prob} (EH/K\&A) = .2$ . Davis would find both my

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examples— $\text{Prob}(R/K) = .15$  and  $\text{Prob}(EH/K\&A) = .2$ —implausible. He would say that the latter is too low whereas the former is too high.<sup>1</sup>

Let us see if Davis refutes my two theses.

## 1. THE LOW INITIAL PROBABILITY THESIS

A. *An Inconsistency?* The first thing to note about Davis's reply is that it is in *prima facie* conflict with what he says in his book. There Davis wrote, "Christians need to recover a sense of the shocking absurdity of the resurrection." This striking claim is inexplicably omitted from his reply to my paper where we find him denying that the Resurrection is initially improbable for "Christian supernaturalists." I do not understand how Davis can believe that for Christians the Resurrection is shockingly absurd yet that it is not initially improbable. To make matters more confusing Davis says that with "one exception"—which is unrelated to the point at issue—I have his position right. By implication, then, I was correct to interpret him as supposing that since the Resurrection is shockingly absurd for Christians it is initially improbable.

B. *The Particular Time and Place Argument.* Davis raises objections to what he calls "the particular time and place argument." Before I evaluate his critique, it is important to notice that my argument is a special case of a more general and familiar point: the more specific a hypothesis the less its initial probability, while the less specific a hypothesis the more its initial probability. For example, it is more probable initially that a king will be drawn from a deck of cards than that the king of hearts will be drawn; it is more likely initially that a bird will be seen in my backyard than that a bluebird will be seen; it is more initially probable that I will receive a phone call at some time or other in the next year than that I will receive one on July 4 at 2 P.M.; it is more likely that I will receive a letter today from somewhere or other in the United States than that I will receive one from New York City.

Very unspecific claims often but not always have a rather high initial probability, and very specific claims a very low initial probability. For example, given the background knowledge about my health, the unspecific claim that I will get a cold sometime in the next decade is very high while the claim that I will get a cold on October 5, 2005, is initially unlikely. On the other hand, given our background knowledge the unspecific claim that some human or other will turn into a fish at sometime or other in the next hundred years is initially improbable even though the specific claim that Dan Rather will turn into a swordfish on July 4, 2003, is even more unlikely initially. In contrast, the specific claim that July 4, 2001, in Phoenix, Arizona will be hot and sunny is initially high but not as initially high as the less specific claim that some day or other in the next century it will be hot and sunny somewhere in Arizona.

Looked at in this light, my argument should cause no puzzle. Let us suppose that relative to Christian supernaturalism's background beliefs the following rather unspecific claim is initially probable:

1. Some redeeming event or other has occurred or will occur at some

time and place on Earth.

This statement is unspecific in just the sense considered above. The statement does not specify how God plans to redeem humanity. Resurrection is merely one among many ways of redemption. Moreover, if the redeeming event is a Resurrection, the statement does not specify the form the Resurrection would take and when or where it would take place. In addition, in contrast to a hot and sunny day in Arizona, this redeeming event is unique and singular: there is only one such event of this kind. In short, although I may be initially probable

2. There was a redeeming Resurrection of Jesus in first-century Palestine.

or the equivalent of 2

- 2'. The Resurrection occurred.

is initially improbable.

Davis tries unsuccessfully to show that my argument leads to an absurdity. First, he says that it would make the initial probability low for virtually any future event. This is nonsense, as my example of a particular hot and sunny day in Phoenix indicates. An indefinite number of examples similar to my Phoenix one could be given.

Davis's example of my sneezing rests on a misunderstanding. If my sneezing *on any particular occasion* is very low, it does not follow that over the next three years the probability of my sneezing *on some occasion* or other is very low. Why he thinks I am committed to this absurd view is a mystery. Of course it is likely that I will sneeze at some time or other and at some place or other in the next three years. However, this is compatible with it being unlikely that I will sneeze in Cambridge when I wake up on the morning of July 4, 2001. In precisely the same way, although for theists it may be likely that God will bring about some redeeming event or other, it is initially unlikely that he will bring about the Resurrection of Jesus in first-century Palestine.

Davis says I use a bizarre notion of probability. In fact, the notion I use is a standard one compatible with the probability calculus and various interpretations of it.<sup>2</sup>

C. *The No Plausible Atonement Theory Argument.* Christian philosophers argue that it is likely that God who created human beings would make it possible for them to atone for their sins and, consequently, it is likely that God's Son would become incarnated as a human and would die in order to do this. I have argued in detail elsewhere that all the historically important theories of the Atonement fail one or the other of two crucial tests: either they do not explain why God sacrificed His Son for the salvation of sinners or they make the sacrifice seem arbitrary.<sup>3</sup> This failure indirectly makes the Resurrection of Jesus initially unlikely since it calls into question the prevailing rationales for

theory, any of the other theories could have been cited.<sup>4</sup>

Davis does not attempt to refute any of my arguments against the Ransom theory, let alone refute any of my arguments against the other theories of the Atonement that I criticize in my book. Rather, he says that the Ransom theory is not true and that practically all modern Christians have rejected it. However, he does not say what theory of the Atonement he and other Christians now hold to be true. Instead he maintains that a Christian who embraced the Ransom theory could defend it against my criticism and that the only thing my criticism shows is that the assumptions of the Ransom theory are not theologically plausible to me.

How he can hold this position is a mystery. In his paper he says that some of my arguments against the Ransom theory “would be accepted by the vast majority of contemporary Christians.” This point aside, presumably any plausible theory of the Atonement acceptable to rational Christians would not fail either of the two tests mentioned above. Whether I am correct that all theories of the Atonement fail one of these tests, of course, is the crucial issue. But nothing Davis says shows that I am not. Indeed, he does not even try to show that I am not.

D. *The Free Will Objection.* Davis seems to suppose that his car lot example shows that since God’s choice of the Resurrection is free, the initial probability of the Resurrection is not low. However, Davis’s example is based on a confusion. Consider the initial probability of Davis’s free choice of the only red car in the lot of nonred cars from the point of view of onlookers who do not know his preference for red cars. The initial probability of choosing this car from a lot of thousands of cars is very low. Of course, if the onlookers knew Davis’s color preferences this would change. By analogy God’s choice to enact some redeeming miracle or other is a free one. But, as far as supernaturalists are concerned, God has numerous options and any *particular* one such as the Resurrection is initially improbable. Perhaps if Christians knew God’s preference this would change. But they don’t. They only believe God wants to redeem humanity.

E. *Another Objection to the Low Initial Probability Claim.* Davis raises another objection to my argument that the initial probability of the Resurrection is low that can be dealt with quickly. He suggests that my claim assumes background beliefs shared by both naturalists and supernaturalists such as:

5. Grass is green

rather than background beliefs shared only by Christian supernaturalists such as:

6. God wants to redeem human beings.

But my argument does not. Allowing 6 as part of the background belief still makes

2'. The Resurrection occurred.

initially improbable for the reasons given above. Indeed, redemption can occur without any Resurrection at all, let alone the Resurrection of Jesus in first-century Palestine.

In conclusion, given the failure of Davis's arguments against the low estimate of  $\text{Prob}(R/K)$ , the figure of .15 does not seem too low. Indeed, it seems too high given all of the apparent possibilities open to God, as well as Davis's claim that the Resurrection is shockingly absurd,

## 2. THE PROBABILITY OF THE EVIDENCE RELATIVE TO ALTERNATIVE THEORIES

An essential part of Davis's argument is that the probability of the historical evidence (HE) relative to alternative theories (AT) and background assumptions (K) is low. Using the example given above suppose  $\text{Prob}(HE/K \& AT) = .2$ . According to Davis this figure is too high. However, it is important to note that, according to Davis, AT is a disjunct of several other theories. None of these theories taken individually need be as high as .2. For example, suppose there are five alternative mutually exclusive explanations— $AT_1, AT_2, AT_3, AT_4, AT_5$ . Then the average probability of EH relative to each alternative and K could be as low as .04.

In his reply to me Davis provides no supporting reasons for his assumption that the probability of EH relative to AT and K is as low as this but he refers his readers to his book *Risen Indeed*.<sup>5</sup> Let me consider the more elaborate defense of the Resurrection he gives in his book and see if he really shows that, relative to alternative hypotheses, the historical evidence has a probability lower than the initially low probability of the Resurrection.

A. *The General Insufficiency of Most of Davis's Evidence.* In *Risen Indeed* Davis maintains that Jesus' resurrected body has supernatural properties such as being able to walk through walls and move instantaneously from one place to another. Let us call this the "strong sense of Resurrection" and being brought back to life without having such supernatural properties the "weak sense of Resurrection." The claim that Jesus was resurrected in the strong sense has inexplicably dropped out of his reply to me. Most of Davis's arguments in this book, even if free from other problems, give no support to the Resurrection in the strong sense.<sup>6</sup> For example, his appeals to the empty tomb, the conduct of the disciples, many of the post-Resurrection appearances, the rise of Christianity at best support Resurrection in the weak sense. Indeed, the only evidence he gives for Resurrection in the strong sense seems to be *some* descriptions of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances.

This means that the entire burden for the claim that Jesus was resurrected in the strong sense rests on these few descriptions. Someone might well grant the view that Jesus was resurrected in the weak sense but deny that he was resurrected in the strong sense. The question then is whether alternative accounts, when these alternatives are restricted to explanations of reports of Jesus walking through walls and the like, are as low in probability as Davis

thinks. Obviously, *a priori* it is more likely that one or another of the alternative accounts will explain these few reports than that one or another will explain the empty tomb, the conduct of the disciples, all of the post-Resurrection appearances, the rise of Christianity, and so on. In fact, looked at in this way, Davis's claim that the Prob (EH/K&A) is too low relative to Prob (R/ K) for Prob (R/K&EH) < .5 seems increasingly incredible.

However, even if one supposes Davis is talking about Jesus' Resurrection in the weak sense, his case is not strong.

B. *Evidence of the Empty Tomb.* Davis says that the empty tomb story appeared in all four Gospels. Yes, but what historical accuracy do these stories have? Well-known New Testament scholars such as John Dominil Crossan<sup>7</sup> and Gerd Lüdemann<sup>8</sup> argue that the traditional biblical accounts are unlikely. Given Roman crucifixion customs, Jesus was probably not buried at all; even if Jewish customs were followed, Jesus was probably buried ignominiously in an unmarked grave by his enemies. The traditional story of Jesus' burial, according to Crossan, was likely inspired by the hope of a decent burial rather than by historical truth. Lüdemann points out that Jesus' disciples did not know where he was buried, for "given the significance of tombs of saints in the time of Jesus, it can be presupposed that had Jesus' tomb been known, the early Christians would have venerated it and traditions about it would have been preserved."<sup>9</sup> Many other New Testament scholars agree.<sup>10</sup>

Although Davis tries to meet the objection that Jesus was either not buried or was buried in an unknown grave, his defense is unconvincing (pp. 81–82). Davis says that although such scenarios are possible, they are highly improbable. For example, he maintains that the claims about the empty tomb would not have had much apologetic value if they had been made years after the event since opponents could have objected that the tomb was lost. However, for all we know, this is precisely what critics did maintain. As I argue below, zealous disciples are often not persuaded by arguments or by strong negative evidence.

Davis argues that the empty tomb could not have been invented by later Christians since the tomb was discovered by women "whose value as legal witnesses in the culture of the day was virtually negligible" (p.182). However, in Jewish society women were qualified to give testimony if no male witnesses were available.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the care and anointing of bodies was women's work at that time so it is to be expected that a writer of fiction would depict women as the ones who went to seek Jesus' body.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Davis maintains that Christians could not have falsely claimed that the tomb was empty for their enemies could have produced Jesus' body. However, this assumes that Jesus was buried and that the place of burial was known. Moreover, as Robert Price has pointed out: "the only estimate the New Testament gives as to how long after Jesus' death the disciples went public with their preaching is a full fifty days later on Pentecost! After seven weeks, I submit, it would have been moot to produce the remains of Jesus."<sup>13</sup> In this period of time Jesus' corpse would have decayed sufficiently to have made identification impossible. In addition, the estimate of fifty days might

be wrong since, for all we know, the empty tomb stories may have emerged many months after Jesus' death.

C. *The Evidence of the Conduct of the Disciples*. Professor Davis attempts to refute the deliberate fraud theory of the Resurrection by arguing that the behavior of the early Christians indicates that they sincerely believed the Resurrection was true. However, there are not just two alternatives: either the Resurrection was a deliberate fraud or it was true. People down through the ages have sincerely believed strange and irrational things despite the evidence. Their beliefs have been based on self-delusion and wishful thinking in which legends grow, feed on themselves, and are mistaken for reality. One illuminating example of the growth of a religious legend is the movement associated with Sabbatai Sevi, a seventeenth-century Jewish messianic pretender who eventually converted to Islam. Because of his conversion the movement associated with Sevi suffered a setback but surprisingly it did not die away. Indeed, within weeks of his public appearance a surge of miracle legends appeared.<sup>14</sup> In this case and in many others, religious disciples were not deliberately perpetrating a fraud and yet their beliefs were completely out of touch with reality.<sup>15</sup>

Professor Davis says that, if the Resurrection story was invented within the lifetime of eyewitnesses to the events, they could have easily refuted the false claims. But as Price points out, such a view of the apostles is anachronistic since it assumes them "to be a sort of squad of ethnographer-detectives, ranging over Palestine, sniffing out legends and clamping the lid on any they discover."<sup>16</sup> In any case, Davis apparently thinks such a refutation was not accomplished for, if it had been, Christianity would not have prospered. But Davis's assumption that religious believers would have given up their beliefs in the light of negative evidence is mistaken. Consider what happened to religious movements such as the Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Sabbatainism where negative evidence had no effect on the zeal of the followers. In the case of Sevi the efforts of the chief apostle, Nathan of Gaza, could do nothing to stop true believers from producing a legend complete with stories of miracles.<sup>17</sup> In any case, as I have already mentioned, the detailed story of the Resurrection seems to have been unknown to Paul and other early Christian letter writers, and the Gospel stories with all their details appeared generations after Jesus' death when many eyewitnesses were either dead or very old.

D. *The Evidence of Agreement Between Gospels*. Professor Davis says that, despite many discrepancies in the New Testament account, there is agreement on many of the details concerning the death and Resurrection of Jesus and no Resurrection text questions these. He also suggests that even the discrepancies themselves "testify in a left-handed way to the accuracy of the essential story: if the resurrection of Jesus were a story invented by the later Christian Church, or by certain members of it, no discrepancies would be allowed" (p. 181).

To doubt the reality of the Resurrection is not necessarily to assume that the story was deliberately invented by the Christian church. The story might

be in large part legendary, and legends, although not true, are not intentionally created. Various versions of the same legends might well agree on the main points but vary widely in detail. Their discrepancies do not testify in a left-handed way to their historical accuracy concerning the points on which they agree, but rather to the piecemeal and fragmentary way in which legends grow.

E. *Evidence that Resurrection Appearances Are Not Hallucinations*. Professor Davis claims that many factors indicate that the Resurrection appearances of Jesus were not hallucinations: the disciples were not expecting the Resurrection, the idea of the Resurrection of one individual before the end of the world was not found in the Jewish tradition, the resurrected Jesus was not immediately recognized, some who saw him doubted, many different people saw the risen Jesus at different times and in different circumstances, and there were none of the usual causes such as drugs, lack of food, water, sleep, and so on. He also seems to reject the idea that one person's hallucination could start a chain reaction among other members of the group (p. 183 n30).

However, the historical reality of the Resurrection is not the only alternative to the hallucination theory. Stories about Jesus' appearances in the Gospels may be legends that cannot be completely traced to hallucinations. Recall that the detailed stories of Jesus' appearances do not appear in Paul and other earlier letter writers. This is surprising in relation to the theory that the appearances are historically accurate, but not in relation to the theory that details of a legend are developed over time.

In fact, resurrection stories were common in Jesus' era and before.<sup>18</sup> Ancient heroes such as Romulus and Hercules were rewarded by being taken up into heaven and made divine beings. Romulus' ascent was seen by "eye-witnesses." In other cases the hero's ascent was shown by the lack of bodily remains. Sometimes the hero might return to earth and appear to his friends. Similar legends have been associated with more recent or contemporary personages such as Apollonius of Tyana, the prophet Peregrinus, and the Emperor Augustus.<sup>19</sup>

According to Professor Davis, doubters and skeptics of the Resurrection in the Gospel stories themselves testify to the truth of the stories. But this is questionable. In some legends the skepticism of characters is used as a literary device to stress the reality of miracles performed by the hero.<sup>20</sup> Given this background, it is not surprising that the Resurrection story would develop complete with skeptical characters. It hardly seems to matter, as Professor Davis thinks, that the Christian story might have some elements not found in the Jewish tradition. There are other traditions not mentioned including Egyptian, Zoroastrian, and Greek that might have influenced Christian legends. However, suppose that it is shown that Christianity has elements not found in any other tradition. Legend making is to some extent creative. From the fact that a story contains elements that cannot be traced to older myths and legends nothing follows about whether these elements reflect historical reality.



Moreover, it is not clear that the hallucination theory can be so easily dismissed. Hallucinations plus legends can explain more than either phenomenon can taken in isolation. Despite what Professor Davis suggests, collective hallucinations are well-known phenomena and there is every reason to suppose that they can occur without “usual causes” being present. Moreover, we know that one hallucination can trigger others. The history of witchcraft indicates that people who were thought to be bewitched had hallucinations that caused those around them to have hallucinations also.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Sevi the visions of his followers were infectious, one person’s vision triggering hundreds of others.<sup>22</sup> In a series of visions of the Virgin Mary in Dordogne, France, in 1889 one child’s vision triggered similar visions in other children, and then in a large number of peasants.<sup>23</sup> In these cases, there is no reason to suppose that Davis’s usual causes were present.

Professor Davis argues that hallucinations are ruled out by the fact that neither Jesus nor his disciples were expecting the Resurrection, that Jesus was not immediately recognized, and that different people in different times and circumstances saw him. With respect to the first point we know from the gospels that people did believe in the resurrection of individuals before the general resurrection at the end of time. The public appearance of Jesus was interpreted as the resurrection of John (Mark 6:14) and some suspected that John was the Messiah (Luke 3:15).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Professor Davis’s argument assumes that the historical account is accurate. What if part of the story is legendary? Legends of the time and earlier suggest that heroes are resurrected, ascend to heaven, and sometimes return to earth. So was it really true that the disciples could not expect some sort of resurrection? These legends also indicate that skepticism is used as a literary device to authenticate miracles. The stories of the initial failure to recognize Jesus surely could function in a similar way.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the evidence cited here shows that collective hallucinations do not always occur in a particular place or in one group of people.

*F. Evidence of the Rise of Christianity.* Professor Davis argues that only the historical reality of the Resurrection can explain why or how the Christian church came into existence proclaiming the Resurrection. Without the reality of the Resurrection, he says, there would not have been a Christian movement or at least it would have taken a different form. The faith of disciples was new, not traceable to Jewish sources, and not explicable by Jesus’ life or teachings. The real Resurrection provides an explanation of the Easter Faith, namely, that “the disciples saw the risen Lord, . . . and interpreted their experience in a theologically novel way . . .” (pp. 184–85).

However, why suppose that the reality of Resurrection is the only explanation of the rise of Christianity? Surely, there is at least one other: early Christians believed deeply but falsely that the Resurrection occurred. They thought that the disciples saw the risen Jesus and they interpreted their beliefs theologically at least partly in terms of the myths and legends of their times. We have no more need to appeal to the reality of the Resurrection to explain the rise of Christianity than to appeal to the reality of the revelation of the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith by the Angel Moroni to explain the

rise of Mormonism.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, there is a plausible naturalistic explanation for why some groups in the early Christian church advocated a physical resurrection. As Elaine Pagels has argued, a physical interpretation of the Resurrection gave “orthodox” Christians political advantages over Gnostic Christians who stressed subjective spiritual experience.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, in the light of my criticisms readers must ask themselves if Davis has really shown that the historical evidence is as low as he supposes relative to alternative theories such as the hallucination theory or the legend theory.

### 3. THE PROBABILITY OF THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE RELATIVE TO THE RESURRECTION

So far I have made a very generous assumption. I have assumed and have let Davis assume that if the Resurrection is true, it would completely account for the historical evidence. More precisely stated I have assumed that  $\text{Prob}(EH/K\&R) = 1$ . Rejection of this assumption would mean that  $\text{Prob}(R/K\&EH) < .5$  could be true with even a higher initial probability than I have previously assumed. For example, suppose that  $\text{Prob}(R/K) = .18$  and  $\text{Prob}(EH/K\&R) = .8$ . Then  $\text{Prob}(R/K\&EH) < .5$ .

Is there any reason to suppose that  $\text{Prob}(EH/K\&R) < 1$ ? Surely there is. In my paper I pointed out that there are numerous contradictions in the scriptural account of the Resurrection. Now according to Davis there are only “a few” inconsistencies that are difficult to harmonize and in any case all of the accounts are in agreement on the “main” points. But consider the following contradictions connected with the empty tomb. They are not a few, and, as far as I know, have not been reconciled; moreover, they are connected to major main points such as who were the first witnesses to the empty tomb and what was seen in and around the empty tomb by these witnesses.

In Matthew, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive toward dawn at the tomb there is a rock in front it, there is a violent earthquake, and an angel descends and rolls back the stone: “And behold there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat upon it” (Matt. 28: 2). In Mark, the women arrive at the tomb at sunrise and the stone has been rolled back: “And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen and they were saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?’ And looking up they saw that the stone was rolled back, for it was very large” (Mark 16:2–4). In Luke, when the women arrive at early dawn they find the stone has already been rolled back. “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb” (Luke 24:1–2).

In Matthew, an angel is sitting on the rock outside the tomb (Matt. 28: 2) and in Mark a youth is inside the tomb: “And entering the tomb, they saw a

young man sitting on the right side dressed in a white robe, and they were amazed" (Mark 16:5). In Luke, two men are inside: "While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel" (Luke 24: 4).

In Matthew, the women present at the tomb are Mary Magdalene and the other Mary: "Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre" (Matt. 28:1). In Mark, the women present at the tomb are the two Marys and Salome: "And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spice, so that they might go and anoint him" (Mark 16:1). In Luke, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and other women are present at the tomb: "Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joana and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles" (Luke 24:12).

In Matthew, the two Marys rush from the tomb in great fear and joy, run to tell the disciples, and meet Jesus on the way: "So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples. And behold Jesus met them and said 'Hail!'" (Matt. 28: 8–9). In Mark, they run out of the tomb in fear and say nothing to anyone: "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come up on them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). In Luke, the women report the story to the disciples who do not believe them and there is no suggestion that they meet Jesus: "And returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest . . . but these words seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:9–11).

Given these various accounts what should one believe? Can *The Gospel According to John* help decide? Unfortunately, John contradicts much of the three other Gospels (John 20:1–18). According to John, only Mary Magdalene came to the tomb when it was still dark, thus contradicting the three other Gospels. She sees that the stone has been moved and rushes to tell Simon Peter, and the other disciples who apparently take her story seriously since they run to the tomb. This directly conflicts with the accounts of Mark and Luke. In John, before she runs to tell Simon Peter and the disciples, she sees neither angels nor a youth, thus contradicting the other three Gospels. Moreover, since there is no report of her entering the tomb before she tells Simon Peter and the disciples, Mark and Luke are contradicted. Only after she returns to the tomb with the disciples, they inspect the tomb and find linen wrapping and a head napkin, and they then leave and she is standing outside weeping, does she see two angels inside the tomb. This, of course, is in conflict with the three other Gospels. At this point, according to John, she also sees Jesus who she does not at first recognize. This also contradicts the other Gospels.

These inconsistencies are part of the historical evidence EH. Unless we can reconcile them then surely  $\text{Prob}(\text{HE}/\text{R \& K}) < 1$ . Indeed, unless we can  $\text{Prob}(\text{R}/\text{K \& EH}) = 0$ .<sup>28</sup>

In my paper I said that given all these uncertainties we need independent

confirmation, yet that is lacking both from Jewish and pagan sources.<sup>29</sup> I could have added that independent confirmation is lacking from the New Testament sources. The genuine Paulian epistles and the earlier non-Paulian letters provide no details about the burial, and what is said is compatible with Jesus not being buried in a tomb. This lack of independent evidence needs to be accounted for. Interestingly enough, although in his book Davis does try to make Paul's views compatible with the Gospel's empty tomb stories, he does not attempt to explain the lack of independent confirmation from earlier non-Paulian letters let alone from Jewish and pagan sources. This failure to explain the lack of independent confirmation also lowers Prob (HE/R &K).

## **THE RELIABILITY OF TESTIMONY**

Davis says that only at one point do I misunderstand his argument. I interpreted his saying that an account of the Resurrection "was written years after the event by unsophisticated, myth prone people who were more interested in formulating statements of faith and in furthering Christian ends than writing accurate history" as being skeptical about the reliability of witnesses. Now Davis says that in this quotation he was not speaking in his "own voice" and that in fact he believes that early Christians were very reliable witnesses, reporters, and scribes.

Davis's evidence for the claim that early Christians were very reliable witnesses is not strong, however. His basic reason for this claim seems to be: alternative hypotheses are far less probable than the hypothesis that the witnesses were reliable. Since I have evaluated this argument earlier I will say no more about it. However, more can be said concerning the reliability of eyewitness testimony. It is well known from psychological experiments that eyewitness testimony is very often unreliable. Eyewitness testimony is influenced by what psychologists call "post-event" and "pre-event" information. In the case of Christianity, for post-event information we can read "early Christian beliefs" and for pre-event information we can read "prior messianic expectations."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, we know from other religious movements such as Sabbatai Sevi that eyewitnesses in such movements tend to be unreliable. Why should we expect the situation to be different in the case of Christianity?

If I misunderstood Davis, he certainly has misunderstood me. He says, that "Martin thinks that one assesses [an extraordinary event] in terms of (a) the probability of the event in question and (b) the probability that the witnesses are telling the truth. But that can't be the whole story; otherwise we get into situations where we would have to disbelieve a witness whom we know to tell the truth 99% of the time who reports that the number 893420 was the winning number in yesterday's lottery. That is, the probability must also be determined in the light of (c) the probability of the witness reporting as she did had the event not taken place."

I do not claim that the probability of a witness's testimony is based simply

on the probability of a witness telling the truth and the initial probability of the event in question. It is also based on many background factors including whether it is confirmed by other independent witnesses and sources. This independent confirmation is lacking in the case of the Resurrection. Moreover, I do not deny that probability must also be determined in the light of the probability of the witnesses reporting as they did had the event not taken place. This latter determination would involve assessing alternative accounts. My point is that in the case of the Resurrection these alternative accounts can have a fairly low probability and yet rational belief in the Resurrection would still be impossible.

## CONCLUSION

Davis's reply to my critique of his account of the Resurrection fails. His arguments against my claim that the initial probability of the Resurrection is very low are based on confusions and mistakes and are in *prima facie* conflict with his earlier thesis that for Christians the Resurrection is shockingly absurd. Moreover, his thesis that Jesus was resurrected in the strong sense is not supported by most of the evidence cited in his book or paper. In addition, even supposing that his thesis is merely that Jesus was resurrected in the weak sense he does not show that the probability of alternative explanations of the historical evidence are lower than the initial probability of the Resurrection. In addition, unreconciled inconsistencies in the biblical account of the Resurrection, the failure to independently confirm the Gospel account, and background evidence indicating the unreliability of eyewitness reports further weakens Davis's case.

## REFERENCES

1. In my paper I suggested we might suppose that  $\text{Prob}(R/K)$  is .1. But it can be a little higher than this and still have  $\text{Prob}(R/K\&EH) < .5$ . I think Davis would still object to this slightly higher figure.
2. Toward the end of his paper Davis raises objections to Bayes's Theorem. But he fails to show that any of these problems affect my use of it or if they do that they are really problems. He says that I try to "read probabilities from frequencies" and that it is a mistake to infer that miracles are improbable because they are rare. Frankly, I don't see any mistake. Unless we have independent evidence to suppose otherwise it is perfectly rational to argue that since events of type X are infrequent, an instance of X is improbable. To be sure, sometimes we have independent reason. Suppose the frequency of discovered extraterrestrial intelligent life in the universe is zero relative to the number of attempts to detect it. Given our background knowledge it would be unwarranted to suppose the probability of extraterrestrial life is zero. What this case and the more esoteric case cited by Davis have to do with my argument remains obscure. Davis also says that we don't have enough reliable data of the frequency of miracles to make probability judgments. But how reliable does the data have to be?

Consider the number of miracles at Lourdes—less than 70—accepted by the Catholic Church. Even if this figure is off by a factor of 10 the frequency of miracle cures at Lourdes would be low relative to the number of sick people who go there. I said that even if ten thousand miracles occurred each day in the world the frequency would be low relative to the total number of events occurring each day. Do any Christians really suppose that this many miracles have occurred?

3. *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), appendix 2.

4. Ibid.

5. See Davis, *Risen Indeed* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), p. 19, note 21. Subsequent references to this book will be placed in the body of the text.

6. For more details on this argument see, Robert Greg Cavin, “Is There Sufficient Evidence to Establish the Resurrection of Jesus?” *Faith and Philosophy*, 12 (1995): 361–79.

7. J. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), chapter 6.

8. G. Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 22–24.

9. Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*, p. 24.

10. For example, over 70% of the members of the Jesus Seminar, a group of non-fundamentalist New Testament scholars devoted to the historical study of Jesus, have maintained that the gravesite of Jesus was unknown and that the empty tomb stories are a creation of Mark. See “The Jesus Seminar Voting Record,” *Forum*, New Series 1, 1 (Spring 1998): 231–32.

11. J. Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are The Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 150–51. I owe this point to Jeff Lowder. Moreover, Davis’s argument assumes that, if later Christians invented a story, they would only have used epistemic criteria. But this is not necessarily so. Crossan suggests an entirely different explanation. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, pp. 181–88. See Kathleen E. Corley, “Women and the Crucifixion and Burial of Jesus,” *Forum*, New Series 1, 1 (Spring 1998): 163–80 G.A. Wells, *The Jesus Legend* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1996), pp. 60–61.

12. I owe this point to Keith Parsons.

13. R. Price, “By This Time He Stinketh.”

[http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert\\_price/stinketh.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/stinketh.html).

14. See Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystic Messiah* (Princeton: University Press, 1973), pp. 252, 265 cited by Robert Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 5. [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert\\_price/beyond\\_born\\_again/](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/beyond_born_again/).

15. Davis argues that there was not enough time for a legend to grow but in the Sevi case as well as in many other historical cases it is clear that legends can develop in a short period of time. For example, see the examples surveyed by Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 5.

16. Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 5.

17. Ibid.

18. For example, the Sumerian goddess, Innana and the Thracian god, Zalmoxis. See also resurrection stories from ancient mythology, for example, Demeter, Dionysos, Persephone, Castor and Pollux, Isis and Osiris, and Cybele and Attis. (I owe these references to Richard Carrier, personal correspondence.) There are also Old Testament stories of Enoch and Elijah who were taken up to be with God and who left no traces. (See Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 6.)

19. Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 6.
20. Ibid.
21. Martin, *The Case Against Christianity*, pp. 93–95.
22. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, pp. 417, 446 cited by Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 6.
23. George Barton Cutten, *The Psychological Phenomena of Christianity* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1908), pp. 65–66 cited by Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 5.
24. Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 6.
25. Ibid.
26. This example was used by Jeff Lowder in personal correspondence.
27. I owe this point to Jeff Lowder. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospel* (New York: Random House, 1979).
28. This point should not be confused with another. It may be that a certain type of inconsistent historical record is quite common and that it is probable on the basis of background evidence that it is likely that the empty tomb story would be inconsistent. But this does not affect the point that the probable truth of an inconsistent EH would be 0 relative to R and K.
29. "Why the Resurrection Is Initially Improbable," *Philo*, 1 (1998): 71.
30. Robert M. Price, *Beyond Born Again*, chapter 5. See E. F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).