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Dialogue on the Resurrection

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DIALOGUE ON THE RESURRECTION

[Issue #84 featured an article by Lauren A. King, on the “New Testament Account of the Resurrection” with a response by Paul Anderson. These articles elicited a response by British Friend Ronald Blackburn, whose book *Jesus: The Proclaimer Proclaimed* (York: Sessions, 1992) was cited by Anderson as a point of view quite in contrast to King’s interpretation. Blackburn asks, reasonably, that readers be made aware of the reasons supporting his contrastive position. Lauren King offers a response, to complete the dialogue. —aor]

A QUAKER’S SCEPTICISM

RONALD BLACKBURN

LAUREN KING IN HIS ESSAY ON “The New Testament Account of the Resurrection” appears to have marshaled his evidence almost entirely from the accounts recorded in the Gospels. One is surprised that he takes little notice of the evidence recorded by Paul in 1 Corinthians, which, after all, is the earliest written testimony to the fact of the resurrection. According to this account Paul equates his own personal experience of the risen Christ with that of other apostles whom he names along with several other disciples. Whilst he does not go into details, he is content to describe both his own and the experience of these others with the phrase “he was seen.” For a detailed account of his own experience we are dependent upon the biographical accounts in the Acts of his vision on the Damascus Road. This vision is described as a blinding light accompanied by the challenging voice who identifies himself as the “Jesus whom thou persecutest.” (Acts 9: 5) Paul gives no description of the vision beyond describing it as a blinding light.

When we come to examine the evidence which Lauren King so thoroughly collects from the several Gospels, one should bear in mind that these testimonies are all of a later date than Paul’s, for none of them had been written before his letters, if indeed before his death. The point Lauren King makes, in presenting this collection of evidence, seems to be to secure an affirmative answer to his question: “Is it credible?” It is at this point that one’s scepticism becomes apparent.

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With all of his apparently exhaustive marshaling of the evidence from the Gospels, it may be noted that he makes no reference to the two earthquakes recorded by Matthew. The first occurred immediately after the expiring of Jesus on the cross, with the strange report of the opening of the graves and “many bodies of the saints which slept arose and came out of their graves [...] and appeared unto many.” (Matt. 27:50-53) The second took place on the resurrection morning with the appearance of an angel who rolled away the stone from the tomb’s entrance, to the terror of the guards who had been set on duty (Matt. 28:1-6). The omission of these passages by King may be because they do not have any relevance to the resurrection appearances. But they are all part of the whole narrative. And they are so astonishing as to raise the question, not only of their credibility but also whether all the other narratives may embody, at least, some of the legendary features which seem to be so apparent in these two earthquake narratives. In this connection one notes how King stresses not only the visible appearances but of a body which could be touched and which was capable of taking food! May not these particular features in the narratives be regarded as later legendary accretions in an attempt to stress the reality of the resurrection to a second generation of believers who perhaps needed reassuring of that reality in face of a subtle scepticism about the hitherto accepted tradition of a sequence of merely “visionary” appearances?

Refuge for some of the perplexities of these bodily appearances even through closed doors is sometimes sought in the notions of “materialisation” and “de-materialisation,” on the assumption that the risen one existed in a “spirit” body which could manifest itself, as occasion required, in a material form. Furthermore, it may be enquired that if the body of the risen Christ was of this nature, what was the point of the miraculous removal of the stone from the entrance to the sepulchre on the resurrection morning?

It is from this sceptical point of view that I am persuaded to the conclusion expressed in the chapter of my book, *Jesus: The Proclaimer Proclaimed*, referred to by Paul Anderson in his comment on Lauren King’s essay.

RESPONSE TO RONALD BLACKBURN

LAUREN A. KING

RONALD BLACKBURN IN HIS COMMENTS on my paper finds both general and specific difficulties. Of the general the first is that I “marshaled...evidence almost entirely from the accounts recorded in the Gospels.”

Evidently I have not made clear my basic approach—to examine in detail the elements of the New Testament account. But how else can an account be thus examined than by full laying out of that account? After laying out a passage I then inquire whether this can be believed.

Blackburn is also unhappy that I did not include enough from the accounts, particularly that in 1 Corinthians 15. Perhaps my use of that passage on page 12 is not enough to satisfy him. So I will expand a bit. Paul declares that he received the gospel which he preached—surely from the eyewitness disciples early on. This good news he had preached at Corinth: that Jesus was crucified and on the third day arose from the dead and appeared to various disciples. This statement he offers in the midst of his spirited defense of a general bodily resurrection based upon the fact of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. This teaching—which I gather Blackburn denies—Paul regards as the core of the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:17).

Blackburn’s specific difficulties I now take up in order. Continuing his call for more of Paul, he points out that Paul regarded his Damascus road experience as much a “seeing” as the appearances to the other apostles. This is true; but as Blackburn himself points out, Paul speaks only of a light and a voice. I am not sure of Blackburn’s intent in citing the Damascus road event, but I surmise he regards it as a “spiritual” appearance which Paul equates with the appearances to the other apostles. To make Paul thus in the one passage (1 Cor. 15) forcefully defend the bodily resurrection and thus the bodily appearances and then make a “spiritual” appearance equivalent is to make him self-contradictory and forgetful of what he had just written.

And yet Paul does write that Jesus was “seen” by him. Could he mean that the Damascus road event was so convincing as to count as a seeing? Or (let me speculate) did he in that bright light see the bodily resurrected Jesus? (Remember the transfiguration and John’s report of an appearance in Revelation 1.) And with the reticence he shows in 2 Corinthians 12 when telling of another vision did he now refrain from telling all that he saw on the Damascus road? At any rate it seems

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precarious reasoning to suggest that Paul is supporting the idea of a “spiritual” appearance and resurrection.

Blackburn’s next difficulty is my failure to mention the two earthquakes. He should have added the darkness at the time of the crucifixion. Very simply, these elements of the story did not seem to me relevant to the question of the credibility of the central narrative.

But here he raises indirectly what is likely the source of our differing views. Let me quote: “And they [the earthquakes] are so astonishing [my italics] as to raise the question, not only of their [my italics] credibility but also whether all the other narratives may embody, at least, some of the legendary [my italics] features which seem to be so apparent [my italics] in these two earthquake narratives.”

Note the italicized expressions: The earthquakes are so astonishing as to be classed as legendary—and hence false—and to suggest that much else in the resurrection narrative must also be legendary and false. Working from a certain basic viewpoint, as I point out on pages 6 and 7, one can indeed find earthquakes like these and bodily resurrections so impossible as to be astonishing and certainly legendary. This world view holds that God perhaps cannot, surely will not, interpose his supernatural power into the operations of the material world. Hence there can be no such thing as miracles, and any claim of one must be false. There can be no earthquakes, no local darkening of the sun, indeed no bodily resurrection. All this is logical, given the basic world view.

But there is another world view, a faith—also logical—which holds to a God who is both able and willing to interpose his supernatural power into the material universe of which he is creator, sustainer, and Lord. For this world view it is entirely and logically believable that there could be and were the earthquakes, the darkness, and the bodily resurrection. I hold this second world view, as do all those who believe in a bodily resurrection. To us phenomena of miraculous sort are not necessarily legendary, though perhaps difficult to interpret.

Blackburn is further troubled by my “stressing” the bodily nature of the resurrection. He regards the gospels’ matter-of-fact account of extraordinary qualities of Jesus’ resurrected body as later legendary additions to the Church’s “accepted tradition of a series of merely ‘spiritual’ experiences.” To me, holding as I do to the world view of a God active in the material world, these qualities are not astonishing nor unexpected. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 emphasizes the changed

nature of Jesus' body. It is these differences which distinguish Lazarus' resuscitation from Jesus' resurrection.

As for the "hitherto accepted tradition" of merely visionary appearances, I know of no references to any such tradition in the writings of the early church fathers. There may possibly be some such idea in gnostic writings of the early years. But to hold to such a tradition requires one to relegate almost all of Acts as well as 1 Corinthians 15 to legend and falsehood.

Finally, Blackburn inquires why if Jesus' body could pass through locked doors there was any necessity for the opened and empty tomb. As I argue in my paper, the empty tomb was necessary but not sufficient evidence of the bodily resurrection. Both the tomb and the appearances were necessary to make a convincing case for a bodily resurrection. Especially in view of the disciples' obvious unpreparedness for such an event. Without the empty tomb they might have been convinced by several powerful demonstrations of the bodily nature of the resurrection. If so, they would, as Acts clearly indicates, then have gone out to preach the bodily resurrection. But this would have brought instant response by the establishment's opening the tomb to demonstrate the falsity of their preaching. The tomb could not have remained closed. So why not open it at once, provide the evidence of a bodily resurrection, and get on to the emergence of the Church?

In summary, Blackburn from his world view can interpret and select evidence to make a logical case for "merely visionary appearances," the abandonment of much of the last chapters of the gospels, of most of Acts, as well as 1 Corinthians 15. I, operating from my world view, can accept as credible the account of the gospels and Acts, and the claims of Paul.