

How Scientific Pretenders of Any Stripe May be Caught with their Pants Down

...On the Day They Face the Judgment of Jesus Whom they Naively Denied¹

“...that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” (Philippians 2:11)

At one debate on the existence of God, agnostic philosopher Dr. Kai Nielsen was challenged to account for the evidence of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, to which he replied, *“I don't know much about such things...Suppose there were good evidence...I have no idea if there is or isn't.”*² This incident merits being highlighted here since, in preparation for a public debate on that subject, such a renowned academic should be expected to be familiar with this core biblical doctrine, regardless of whether or not he personally believes it. Yet in fact that occasion is symptomatic of much broader-ranging incidents of intellectual laziness. British Theologian Dr. J.B. Phillips observed in his book, *Ring of Truth*, that *“Over the years I have had hundreds of conversations with people, many...of a higher intellectual calibre than mine, who quite obviously had no idea what Christianity is really about...This I find pathetic and somewhat horrifying. It means that the most important event in history is politely passed by. For it is not as though the evidence had been examined and found unconvincing; it had simply never been examined.”*³

Although people harbor a range of private motives for resisting the claims of Christ, it is common for them to rationally *justify* that posture on what is merely a popular assumption. It asserts that science renders Christian belief so untenable, it doesn't merit even a moment's consideration. That presumption is typically bolstered by such charges as: 1) since the notion of Jesus' resurrection (**JR**) entails *religious* belief, it is categorically the case that it cannot be factual, 2) since science “establishes” that nature operates on the basis of physical laws alone, the notion of miracle is effectively impossible, 3) Consequently, the very notion of an intelligent personal god is conceptually-incoherent, and 4), since scientists have made extraordinary progress in both understanding and harnessing nature, assertions which concern religious claims are thereby deemed to be inconsequential.

This article **does not challenge the authority of science** to make its own pronouncements on the states of affairs in nature. I instead charge that these **objections do not reflect authentic science**. Therefore I challenge them on the basis of demonstrable errors that are unique to each point.

- Point 1: The “facts” which Christians appeal to in support of JR are grounded **not** on religion, but on *factual* data which can be evaluated by means of classical *historical* methodology.
- Point 2: The pervasive belief that reality consists of only *physical* entities and laws (no free-will or soulish beings exist) does NOT rest on science but on the *philosophical view, physicalism*. Yet ironically, these same *physicalists* who declare that we are just machines that have no capacity for free-will, nevertheless teach classes and write books in direct contradiction to that very tenet, thereby proving the fundamental incoherency, and so falsity, of that view.
- Point 3: The scientific fact of the beginning of the cosmos out of nothing at the Big Bang cannot possibly be explained by scientific *causes* since, prior to that beginning, there was neither matter, energy, space, nor time, out of which scientific *causes* could possibly work.
- Point 4: As I am writing this essay, our society is experiencing profound social deterioration because of a loss of confidence in the necessity of our heeding *moral* and *spiritual* truths.

¹ The doctrine of Christ's judgment has its source not in biblical fundamentalism, but in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

² J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen. *Does God Exist? The Great Debate*. (Nelson, 1990), p. 64, boldface mine.

³ J.B. Phillips. (Shaw, 1967), p. 24, boldface mine.

I highlight the word, “*pretenders*” (title, above) for the reason that **I reject the view** that science is anti-theistic. Science, according to its simple classical definition, is the study of physical entities and the occurrence of interactions between them. In line with these parameters, every careful scientist:

- Will acknowledge that scientific knowledge, although vital, is NOT the totality of either factual data or rationality. Indeed scientific research as a discipline can only be rationally justified by means of non-scientific (religious and philosophical) reasons.⁴
- Will acknowledge the boundaries within which science has authority to pronounce judgments.
- Will thereby acknowledge that science cannot disprove or dismiss the possibility of miracle.
- Will assemble and analyze ALL evidence that is relevant to the given investigational program.
- Grants that hypotheses about phenomenal relationships cannot be absolutely proved.
- Will NOT settle for only disproving hypotheses posed by *other* parties; but rather seek to disprove their *own* as well.
- Will further employ the same scientific investigation strategy that was used in Charles Darwin’s research for his seminal work, On the Origin of Species, which is called “*abductive reasoning*.” This **positive** methodology is defined as “*beginning with an observation or set of observations, and then seeking to find the simplest and most likely conclusion from these observations.*” This methodology is most effective when applied in a context where the data is both acknowledged by all, and where a plurality of competing hypotheses are proposed, each of which seek to offer the best explanation of that data. In summary, scientists do not settle for knocking down hypotheses, but attempt to explain them better than does their competition!

To the question then, “*Was Jesus raised from the dead?*” any reply which limits itself to merely denying that claim must, in light of especially the last point (just above), be judged amateurish and **sub-scientific**. Authentic scientists will instead firstly face the following body of **historically-sound facts**:⁵

1) Jesus died due to the rigors of crucifixion, 2) Was buried, 3) His death caused the disciples to despair, 4) the tomb was found to be empty a few days later, 5) The disciples had experiences which they believed were literal appearances of the risen Jesus, 6) They were transformed from fearful doubters into bold proclaimers who willingly died for their message, 7) This message was at the center of their preaching, 8) which was first proclaimed in Jerusalem, the very “scene of the crime,” 9) As a result of their preaching, the church was born and grew. 10) Sunday became the new primary day of worship, 11) James, Jesus’ own brother who had been a skeptic became converted and transformed by his experience of seeing the risen Jesus, and 12) Sometime later Paul, the great persecutor of the early Jesus movement, was converted and transformed by seeing the risen Jesus.

New Testament scholar Dr. Craig Hazen frames this data into the *abductive reasoning* (above) investigational program by proposing 12 common hypotheses which people have employed to seek to reconcile all of the data to the potential end that they might undermine it. Each entry into the following list of competing hypotheses (identified by simple titles) will be followed by numbers from the above list of 12, which Hazen deems refute each hypothesis as false. His material here is not copyrighted.

⁴ Empirical scientific research began NOT in ancient Greece or Asia, but by Christians who assumed by their *belief in God*, that since He created nature, the latter too must have rational order at all levels. Secondly, the validity of logical inference is grounded by *philosophical arguments*.

⁵Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? (Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 19-20. In his debate against former atheist, the late Antony Flew, New Testament scholar Dr. Gary Habermas laid out twelve historical facts which are deemed to be historically sound by the vast majority of historians, many of whom don’t necessarily believe that they prove Jesus rose from the dead. Hence, they offer alternative hypotheses.

- The Unknown Tomb, 4-12
- The Wrong Tomb, 5-12
- The Story is Legend, 1-12
- Jesus Had a Twin Brother, 4, 11
- Hallucination, 5, 11, 12
- Existential Resurrection, 4, 5, 11, 12
- Spiritual Resurrection, 4, 5, 11, 12 (both of these mean Jesus rose without his body)
- Disciples Stole Body, 5, 6, 11, 12
- Authorities Hid Body, 5-12
- Swoon Theory Conspiracy, 1,6
- Passover Plot Conspiracy, 5, 6, 11, 12
- Jesus Rose Bodily, all of the data harmonizes with Jesus' resurrection.

Dr. Craig completes his chart with the following challenge: If one deems that there is not enough data to make a rational judgment, then the skeptic should turn his skepticism on almost all of what we know from ancient antiquity for the reason that the matter of credibility with respect to the New Testament in particular, is vastly stronger than it is for any other historical documents from antiquity.⁶

Consequently, should Jesus Christ indeed be who the New Testament (**NT**) claims him to be, then no escape will be found in pleading “*ignorant*” on the day of judgment. Neither Scripture (Romans 1:18-20) nor rationality as expressed by Aristotle, encourages such a ploy. The latter indeed states,

*“We punish [people] for the very fact of being in ignorance if a man seems **responsible** for his own ignorance. Hence, the fine for offenses committed by drunks is double; after all, he can decide not to get drunk, and it is **this** that causes his ignorance. There is punishment too, when people are in ignorance of a point of law that should be known and is not difficult to know...people themselves are responsible for [their carelessness] through living disorderly lives; they are responsible for being unjust or profligate, the former through evildoing, the latter through drinking and so on ... Not knowing that dispositions are attained by actually doing things is a sign of a complete **ignoramus**.”⁷*

We have solid reasons to know that Jesus lived, and did, and said substantially everything recorded about him in the four Gospels of the NT. Yet, judged by the standards that are employed in historical research in general, we have **even greater grounds** to embrace with full conviction that Jesus, who died, was seen alive on the third day following his death. St. Paul stated about him before the intellectual leaders at Athens that God “*has fixed a day on which he will judge the world [by Jesus Christ] and of this he has **given assurance to all by raising him from the dead***” (Acts 17:31).

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⁶ Lee Strobel, ed. The Case for Christ. (Zondervan, 2016). The work contains an array of interviews from top-flight scholars in the fields they address and thereby substantiates the validity of every one of the “historical facts cited. Copies are available on the internet for under 7.00 \$.

⁷ H.H. Joachim, tr. Renford Bambrough, ed. Philosophy of Aristotle. “Ethics” Book III. (Mentor, 1963), pp. 323-4, boldface mine.

