

THE HISTORICAL CASE FOR THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

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Preface

The resurrection of Christ, the fact he was raised from the dead into a new bodily life in which death is no longer possible (Rom. 6:9), is at the heart of the Christian faith. Paul declared bluntly in 1 Cor. 15:14, "And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [indeed] is our preaching, empty also is your faith." He repeated just three verses later (v. 17), "and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is useless; you are still in your sins." Indeed, Jesus' resurrection is tied expressly to our justification in Rom. 4:25, where Paul says (NET), "He was given over because of our transgressions and was raised for the sake of our justification." So it is no surprise that belief in Christ's resurrection is necessary for our salvation. Paul states in Rom. 10:9, "Because if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' *and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead*, you will be saved." In 1 Thess. 4:14 he writes, "For if we believe that Jesus died *and rose again*, in the same way God will also bring with him the ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus."

I first taught this class years ago on the heels of having taught the Letter to the Hebrews. I said repeatedly during the Hebrews class that we need to shore up people's faith in the truth of Christ if we hope to reduce the number who fall away, the number who decide to sell their inheritance for the bowl of stew our culture offers. We need to shore up their confidence in things hoped for, their confidence in the fulfillment of God's promises, and we need to strengthen their conviction of things not seen, their conviction about spiritual realities and the future. I thought, and still think, this class on the *historical* case for Jesus' resurrection can help in that regard.

Tim Keller, a Presbyterian minister in New York, tells of his experience in coming to a deeper appreciation of the reality of Christ's resurrection. He says (from Justin W. Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020], 9-10):

Did I believe the resurrection of Jesus Christ? I mean, of course. I'm a minister. Did I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus? Sure I did. Would you say I really believed it? Sure I really believed it. Does that give you peace? Sure it gives you peace. Then I got thyroid cancer and when I was recovering from thyroid cancer . . . I got a book by a bishop of Durham, N. T. Wright . . . called *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. . . . At the end of four weeks I put it down . . . and I said, "Oh my gosh, it really did happen." . . . I then felt the certainty go down three more floors, floors in my heart that I didn't even know were there. I thought I was at the basement but there were four or five more floors of things. It just sunk down all the way to the bottom. And maybe there is still more to go.

When I say "the *historical* case for Jesus' resurrection," I mean I am going to approach the question without relying on the inspiration or inerrancy of the Bible. Though I certainly believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, I think it is important to see that one need not start from that position to conclude that Jesus was resurrected. Even if one treats the New Testament documents as one would treat any

other ancient documents, there are excellent reasons for believing that Jesus rose from the tomb.

That does not mean the resurrection can be proven through historical inquiry with absolute certainty. Historical inquiry is detective work in which one infers the most likely explanation of various bits of data; absolute certainty is beyond its grasp. The question is whether the historian can ascertain with a reasonable amount of certainty that an event occurred. As Gary Habermas and Michael Licona explain in *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 31:

[V]irtually nothing can be established with 100 percent certainty. Can we know with 100 percent certainty that George Washington was the first President of the United States of America rather than a mythical figure? Perhaps documents were forged and stories invented in a conspiracy to encourage the citizens of a new country. We can know that this was not the case with a high degree of certainty.

If you have never investigated this question, I think you will be surprised by how strong the evidence is that Jesus was resurrected. As Boston College philosophers Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli write, "We believe Christ's resurrection can be proved with at least as much certainty as any universally believed and well-documented event in ancient history." *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 181. Seeing this will not only strengthen and solidify your faith but, in Justin Bass's words (p. 11), will also help you to "go on the offensive, not the defensive, with a skeptical and unbelieving world." It will help you be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Pet. 3:15).

I have been interested in apologetics throughout my Christian life, so I have pondered these things for years, but in preparing these lessons I drew heavily on *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* by Gary Habermas and Michael Licona; *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright; *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* by Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd; and Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

Disposing of Two Groundless Claims

1. Jesus never existed.

There is no serious debate about whether Jesus existed. As you will see from the quotes I provide later in the study, the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus, who wrote the *Annals of Rome* around A.D. 115, and the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote *Jewish Antiquities* around A.D. 95, confirm that Jesus was crucified in Judea when Pontius Pilate was procurator (A.D. 26-36).

The claim that Jesus never existed was first proposed at the end of the 18th century by some disciples of the radical English deist Lord Bolingbroke. New Testament scholars do not take the claim seriously. For example, in his influential history of New Testament interpretation, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), Werner Kümmel addresses the claim only in a footnote (p. 447, n. 367) and says, "the denial of the existence of Jesus . . . [is] arbitrary and ill-founded."

Günther Bornkamm says in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 28, that "to doubt the historical existence of Jesus at all was reserved for an unrestrained, tendentious criticism of modern times into which it is not worth while to enter here." Willi Marxsen states in *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 119, "I am of the opinion (and it is an opinion shared by every serious historian) that the theory [that Jesus never lived] is historically untenable." Dale Allison, a leading scholar on the life of Christ, says "No responsible scholar can find any truth in [the theory Jesus never lived]," and Craig Evans, another scholar with that same focus, says, "No serious historian of any religious or nonreligious stripe doubts that Jesus of Nazareth really lived in the first century and was executed under the authority of Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea and Samaria." Even Rudolf Bultmann, the famous liberal German scholar who doubted the authenticity of much of the Gospels, concluded in *Jesus and the Word*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribners, 1958), 13: "Of course the doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as the founder behind the historical movement whose first distinct stage is represented by the Palestinian community." See, Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 6-8 and Licona, 63 (fn. 125).

Historian Michael Grant termed the hypothesis that Jesus never lived an "extreme view" and says, "if we apply to the New Testament, as we should, the same sort of criteria as we should apply to other ancient writings containing historical material, we can no more reject Jesus' existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned." He notes that arguments for the Christ myth have been "annihilated" by scholars because the critics "have not succeeded in disposing of the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary." *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 199-200. See, Gary R. Habermas, "[A Summary Critique: Questioning the Existence of Jesus](#)," *Christian Research Journal* (vol. 22, no. 3, 2000).

The claim that Jesus never existed has been refuted so definitively that Robert Van Voorst declares in his book *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (p. 14): "The theory of Jesus' nonexistence is now effectively dead as a scholarly question." Larry Hurtado, an internationally respected scholar specializing in Christian origins (died in 2019), states ("[Why the 'Mythical Jesus' Claim Has No Traction with Scholars](#)," December 2, 2017):

The attempts to deny Jesus' historical existence are, for anyone acquainted with the relevant evidence, blatantly silly. So, let those who want to argue for or against Christian faith do so on more serious grounds, and let those of us who do historical investigation of Jesus and Christian Origins practice our craft without having to deal with the stratagems-masquerading-as-history represented by the mythical Jesus advocates.

Even Bart Ehrman, a New Testament scholar who describes himself as an agnostic/atheist, declares in *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 4, "the view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet," a view with which he concurs. He adds (p. 5), "It is striking that virtually everyone who has spent all the years necessary to attain these qualifications [as serious historians of the early Christian movement] is convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is a real historical figure." At a 2014 meeting of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, Ehrman said the following in response to someone who challenged Jesus' existence (from Bass, 5):

Once you get out of your conclave, there's nobody who thinks this. This is not even an issue for scholars of antiquity. . . . There is no scholar of any college or university in the Western world who teaches classics, ancient history, New Testament, early Christianity, any related field who doubts that Jesus existed. . . . I think atheists have done themselves a disservice by jumping on the bandwagon of mythicism [i.e., the denial of Jesus' existence] because frankly it makes you look foolish to the outside world. If that's what you're going to believe, you just look foolish.

2. Jesus did not die by crucifixion.

The fact Jesus died by crucifixion is considered indisputable by almost all scholars writing on the subject (see, Licona, 302-318). It was a common form of execution employed by the Romans in Jesus' day against certain categories of offenders, including those accused of treason, and Jesus' death by crucifixion is attested by numerous ancient sources, Christian and non-Christian alike. It is all over the New Testament, including in letters Paul wrote no more than 25 years after the event, is mentioned repeatedly in early non-canonical Christian literature, and is very probably reported by Josephus. The Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote in the early second century, was certainly aware of the event, as was the second-century Syrian writer Lucian, and the Syrian writer Mara bar Serapion, who wrote some time after A.D. 73. And very significantly, there is zero evidence to the contrary; there is no claim or report of any kind disputing that Jesus died by crucifixion or suggesting some other fate.

Michael Licona (p. 311-312) offers the following quotes as reflecting the state of current scholarship on the question.

John McIntyre comments, "Even those scholars and critics who have been moved to depart from almost everything else within the historical content of Christ's presence on earth have found it impossible to think away the factuality of the death of Christ." McIntyre is quite correct. Atheist Gerd Lüdemann writes, "Jesus' death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable." Crossan, who denies the authority of a large majority of the sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels, comments that there is not the "slightest doubt about the *fact* of Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate" and, "That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be." For the Jewish scholar Geza Vermes, "The passion of Jesus is part of history." The rather skeptical scholar Paula Fredriksen writes, "The single most solid fact about Jesus' life is his death: he was executed by the Roman prefect Pilate, on or around Passover, in the manner Rome reserved particularly for political insurrectionists, namely, crucifixion."

In the quote already given, Craig Evans says, "No serious historian of any religious or nonreligious stripe doubts that Jesus of Nazareth really lived in the first century *and was executed* under the authority of Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea and Samaria." Ehrman declares, "One of the most certain facts of history is that Jesus was crucified on orders of the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate." Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, who is certainly no fundamentalist, says, "The support for the mode of his death, its agents, and perhaps its co-agents, is overwhelming: Jesus faced a trial before his death, was condemned and was executed by crucifixion." (See, Licona, 313, fn. 145.) James D. G. Dunn, an internationally respected New Testament scholar (died in June 2020), stated in *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 339, that Jesus' death by crucifixion "command[s] almost universal assent" and ranks "high on the 'almost impossible to doubt or deny' scale of historical 'facts.'"

Views of Death and Afterlife at the Time of Christ

Some in the ancient pagan world denied there was any kind of life after death, but most pagans believed that a person's spirit or soul continued to exist after death. Those pagans who believed in a continuing spiritual existence did not believe in *resurrection*, in the restoration of bodily life after death. For them, death was a one-way street to a disembodied existence. Paul Williamson concludes the section "Resurrection in Greek and Roman culture" in *Death and the Afterlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 67, with the following:

Therefore, despite widespread belief in an afterlife, there seems to be nothing like the concept of bodily resurrection. Rather, apart from Jews and Christians, the Greco-Roman world appears to have used resurrection language for a concept they philosophically rejected and categorically denied. For some, it was irrational; for others, it was undesirable; but in

both popular opinion and educated thought, it was thought utterly impossible.

Recall how some of the intellectuals at the Areopagus in Athens mocked Paul when he proclaimed that Christ had been raised from the dead (Acts 17:31-32). The claim struck them as nonsense.

Here is how the New Testament scholar N. T. Wright summarized his research on ancient views of death and the afterlife in *Surprised By Hope* (New York: Harper, 2008), 36:

When the ancients spoke of resurrection, whether to deny it (as all pagans did) or to affirm it (as some Jews did), they were referring to a two-step narrative in which resurrection, meaning new bodily life, would be preceded by an interim period of bodily death. *Resurrection* wasn't, then, a dramatic or vivid way of talking about the state people went into immediately after death. It denoted something that might happen (though almost everyone thought it wouldn't) sometime *after* that. This meaning is constant throughout the ancient world until the post-Christian coinages of second-century Gnosticism. Most of the ancients believed in life after death; some of them developed complex and fascinating beliefs about it, which we have just touched on; but outside Judaism and Christianity (and perhaps Zoroastrianism, though the dating of that is controversial), they did not believe in resurrection.

In content, *resurrection* referred specifically to something that happened to the body; . . . Everybody knew about ghosts, spirits, visions, hallucinations, and so on. Most people in the ancient world believed in some such things. They were quite clear that that wasn't what they meant by *resurrection*. . . . Resurrection meant bodies. We cannot emphasize this too strongly, not least because much modern writing continues, most misleadingly, to use the word *resurrection* as a virtual synonym for *life after death* in the popular sense.

Ehrman likewise writes (from Bass, 117):

If an apocalyptic Jew . . . were to come to believe that the resurrection of the dead had begun – for example, with the raising of God's specifically favored one, his messiah – what would that resurrection involve? It would naturally and automatically involve precisely a bodily resurrection. That's what resurrection meant to these people. It did not mean the ongoing life of the spirit without the body. It meant the reanimation and glorification of the body.

Some Jews, like the Sadducees, denied there was any kind of life after death, and others, like Philo (died around A.D. 50), believed that one would continue to exist after death as a disembodied soul or spirit. But most ancient Jews believed that God would

raise his people bodily from the dead at the last day, the day on which he judged and remade the world. Williamson (p. 74) concludes his section "Resurrection in Second Temple Judaism" with:

Thus, with the exception of conservatives like the Sadducees, and those influenced by Platonism (like Philo), a large number of Jews, arguably the majority, believed in the resurrection of the dead. Significantly, this was understood as a future eschatological event, often involving both the righteous and the wicked; the souls/shades of the righteous would be re-embodied in physical flesh that was, or would become, more glorious than the present human body.

That belief in an end-time resurrection is behind Martha's statement in Jn. 11:24 that she knows her dead brother Lazarus "will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." It also is evident in Paul's play to the Pharisees in Acts 23:6 that he was on trial with respect to the hope of the resurrection of the dead and in his statement in Acts 24:15 that his accusers from Jerusalem accept the hope that there will be a resurrection of both the just and unjust.

In several places, Jesus accepts this aspect of the standard Jewish view, the aspect of a general resurrection on the last day. For example, in Mk. 12:18-27 (Mat. 22:23-33; Lk. 20:27-40), when the Sadducees asked him a trick question designed to make the belief in an end-time resurrection look silly, he defended the belief by indicating that in that resurrection state certain things would be different so there would be no problem with people who had been married multiple times during their pre-resurrection lives. In Lk. 14:14 Jesus, in speaking of those who show kindness to those unable to repay them, refers in the normal Jewish way to "the resurrection of the righteous." In Mat. 13:43 he refers to the end-time resurrection through an allusion to Dan. 12:3.

What the Jews did *not* expect was that this end-time resurrection, this rising to immortal life, would happen to someone *in advance of God's remaking of the world*. That was not part of their theological landscape. They expected everyone to be resurrected to immortality together in conjunction with the final judgment and the beginning of the eternal state.

The fact Jesus was raised contrary to that expectation, raised immortal in advance of God's remaking of the world, the firstfruits of the end-time resurrection, is indicated in Mark's account of the transfiguration. When Jesus told Peter, James, and John after the transfiguration not to tell anyone what they had seen "until the Son of Man had risen from the dead," Mark reports that they were puzzled about what this rising from the dead might mean (Mk. 9:9-10). Commenting on this verse, R. T. France says in *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 357: "If the disciples understood Jesus to be talking of his own individual restoration to life after death within the normal course of history, they had good reason to be bewildered, as no clear precedent for such an idea can be found in extant literature of the period."

N. T. Wright says in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 415:

The passage flags up one of the points at which we have seen, in our study of Paul, a significant Christian innovation: the idea that 'the resurrection' has split into two, with Jesus' resurrection coming forwards into the middle of history. Mark, clearly, intends his readers to recognize that they share with hindsight the knowledge that Jesus seemed to have in advance. The reader understands what was, for the disciples at the time, still a puzzle. Mark is thus drawing our attention to the fact that this is precisely an innovation within Jewish thinking.

In Mk. 9:31 Jesus tells the disciples that he was going to be killed and that after three days he would rise. Mk. 9:32 says, "But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him." A similar thing occurs in Lk. 18:31-34. It is not clear in these texts, however, that the lack of understanding relates to the Lord's resurrection; it could relate to the statement about his being killed, which would clash with the view of the Messiah as a triumphant conqueror.

The fact the disciples were not expecting Jesus to be resurrected within history, despite what he had told them, is confirmed by their reaction to his death. None of them said, "Don't worry; he'll be back in a few days." Rather, their hopes were crushed; they went into hiding. You can feel the despair in the disciple Cleopas's statement in Lk. 24:21. He said to the unrecognized Jesus on the road to Emmaus that they "*had hoped* that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel," the implication being "but they crucified him so he could not have been."

Even when the women reported to the apostles and the others that the tomb was empty and that angels had announced Jesus' resurrection, they did not believe them (Lk. 24:1-11). Thomas had everybody telling him that the Lord had risen, and he said he would not believe it unless he could see that the allegedly resurrected Jesus had distinguishing marks of crucifixion and could feel those marks and the solidity of Jesus' body (Jn. 20:24-25).

Historical Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection

1. Disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected

The first point in the historical case for Jesus' resurrection is that the disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected; they were certain of it. (Yes, I know that sincerely believing something is true does not mean it *is* true but follow me and you will see why this is so significant.) We can know they sincerely believed Jesus rose from the grave from several lines of evidence.

a. Disciples claimed Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them

(1) Paul's testimony

In the first place, the disciples *claimed* that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them. We know they claimed this because we have multiple early and independent sources that make that clear. We have Paul's firsthand testimony that he saw the resurrected Jesus. He says so in 1 Cor. 9:1 and 15:8 and, less clearly, in Gal. 1:12 and 1:16, two undisputedly Pauline letters.¹ 1 Corinthians was written just 25 years after Jesus' death, and Galatians probably was written only 18 - 20 years after his death, though some would date it in the mid-to-late 50s.

Christ's appearance to Paul is corroborated by Luke in Acts 9:1-9, 22:1-11, and 26:9-19. We know Luke was a companion of Paul from the "we passages" in Acts (16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-28:16) and from Paul's mention of him in Col. 4:14, 2 Tim. 4:11, and Philem. 1:24, though some deny Pauline authorship of Colossians and 2 Timothy.

Note that Luke's accounts do not suggest something other than an actual appearance of Jesus to Paul. (On this subject, see Wright, *RSG*, 388-393.) On the contrary, when Luke states in Acts 9:7 that Paul's fellow travelers "did not see anyone," there is an implied contrast with Paul; he saw what his companions did not see. In Acts 9:17 Luke reports Ananias's comment to Paul about Jesus having "appeared" to him on the road, in 9:27 he reports that Barnabas explained to the apostles how Paul had "*seen* the Lord, who *spoke* to him," and in 26:16 he reports Paul's reference to Jesus' statement that he had "appeared" to Paul. So the onset of Paul's blindness must not be placed so early as to deny this visual element that is acknowledged in Acts and which Paul in 1 Corinthians makes the centerpiece of the experience.

The description of the Damascus Road experience as a "heavenly vision" in Acts 26:19 does not mean it was a purely subjective "seeing" of a nonmaterial thing. The following question and answer is instructive in that regard. It is from [Ben Witherington's interview of N. T. Wright](#) (March 13, 2009) regarding his book *Surprised By Hope*:

Question 2--- There seem to have been at least two persons who saw the risen Jesus on or after Easter who were not amongst his disciples at the time---- James his brother and Saul on Damascus Road. One of these surely took place during the initial period of appearances, the other after

¹ There are seven undisputed Pauline letters, letters that virtually all scholars believe to have been written by Paul: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

those 40 or so days, which is to say after the Ascension. Yet they both claimed equally to have seen the risen Lord.

In your view was either of these appearances to non-disciples visionary in character, and does it make any difference to your case that resurrection always meant something that happened to a body after death and the initial afterlife?

ANSWER

James, Paul and 'visions'. The difficulty here is that in our culture a 'vision' is thought of as a 'purely subjective' thing, so that when people say 'so-and-so had a vision' they assume there is no correlated phenomena in our own space-time-matter world. The whole NT is predicated on a different view: that heaven and earth are twin parts of God's good creation, and that they overlap and interlock in a variety of surprising ways, so that sometimes people really do see right into God's dimension and sometimes aspects of God's dimension -- in this case, the risen body of Jesus -- are visible from within our dimension.

That is of course what I think was happening when Paul saw Jesus, as I have explained in the relevant chapter of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Such moments are genuine anticipations of the final day when heaven and earth will come together as one glorious reality, when 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea'. Our culture is built on the denial that such a thing is possible, let alone desirable, so things fall apart into either 'ordinary seeing' or 'vision', the first being 'objective' and the latter 'subjective'. To unravel this further would need a few paragraphs on epistemology...

For example, the two "men" in dazzling apparel who stood before the women and spoke to them in Lk. 24:4-7 were an external manifestation; they were angels who were, or at least appeared to the women to be, physically present.² All the women were frightened by what they saw and bowed their faces to the ground. (Even the Roman guards in Mat. 28:2-4 reacted to the angel's presence, trembling and becoming as dead men.) According to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the women described this shared, objective experience as their having "seen a *vision (optasia)* of angels" (Lk. 24:23), using the same word as in Acts 26:19. The same goes for the angel of the Lord whom Zechariah saw and spoke with in Lk. 1:11-20 (described as a "vision" in Lk. 1:22). So clearly a "vision" can be an objective perception of an external phenomenon. For Paul, it involved him seeing the resurrected Christ.

We have Paul's firsthand testimony in numerous undisputed letters that he believed and preached that Jesus had been raised from the dead. See Rom. 1:4, 4:24, 6:4,

² God sometimes dispatches faithful angels in human form. The physicality of the angels in Genesis 18-19 is indicated by their repeated description as "men" and the fact they ate food (18:8, 19:3).

6:9, 7:4, 8:11, 8:34, 10:9, 14:9; 1 Cor. 15:1-15, 15:20; 2 Cor. 4:14, 5:15, Gal. 1:1; Phil. 3:10, 20-21; 1 Thess. 1:9-10, 4:14. This firsthand testimony is corroborated by Luke in Acts 13:29-37, 16:18, 16:30-32, 17:2-3, 25:19, and 26:8.

Paul clearly knew the other apostles personally, and we have his firsthand report in 1 Cor. 15:1-11, a letter intended to be read publicly while the apostles were living, that those apostles preach the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (see esp. v. 11). We also have his firsthand report in Gal. 2:1-9, another letter intended to be read publicly while the apostles were living, that those apostles agreed with the gospel Paul preached, which gospel we know included the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-5).

I say Paul clearly knew the other apostles personally because we have his firsthand statements Gal. 1:18-19 and 2:1-10 that he knew them and the gospel they preached. Luke, a companion of Paul, confirms in Acts 9:26-30 and 15:1-35 that Paul was well acquainted with the apostles and the gospel they preached. Paul declares in 1 Cor. 15:5, in a public letter to a congregation that was personally acquainted with Peter (1 Cor. 1:12, 3:22, 9:5), that the resurrected Christ appeared to Peter and to the Twelve.³

For several reasons, Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 15:3-5 is generally recognized to be an early creedal formula. (A creed is a set way of expressing certain important truths that usually facilitates memorization.) Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:3 that he previously had "passed on" or "delivered" to the Corinthians the elements of this creed, which is a reference to his visit some four years earlier, and he also says that he had "received" this creedal formula even earlier than that.⁴ So we know that within twenty years of Christ's death, and most likely within six or seven years (when Paul first met with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem – Acts 9:26-29), a set statement was circulating that included not only belief in Christ's resurrection but the assertion that he had been seen by Peter and the Twelve. As one scholar noted, "This is the sort of data that historians of antiquity drool over" (quoted in Habermas and Licona, 53).

(2) The four Gospels

³ "The Twelve" is a title that early on was given to the special group of twelve whom Jesus called to "be with him" (Mk. 3:14). It is a corporate designation that is applied despite Judas's absence, as we might say that the President met with the Boston Celtics even though a member of that group was absent.

⁴ Paul having received this tradition from men is not inconsistent with his statement in Gal. 1:11-12 that he did not receive his gospel from human beings but through a revelation of Jesus Christ. In Galatians he is referring to the gospel itself, the truth of Christ's atoning sacrifice and resurrection and its meaning for Gentiles, not to a creedal formula, a specific shorthand way of expressing of those truths. The tradition, the creedal formula, he received from men was consistent with the gospel he already had received from the Lord. As Joseph Fitzmyer notes, "in Galatians he is referring not to the formulation, but to the content of the gospel as a whole. In using *tíni logō* ['what word' in 1 Cor. 15:2], he insists on the very formulation, which he has inherited from tradition . . ." *First Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008) 545-546.

The authors of each of the four Gospels report that Jesus rose from the dead and with the possible exception of Mark (if one rejects 16:9-20 as original) report appearances to the disciples. There are good reasons to believe that these accounts go back to the early disciples, that they are faithful expressions of stories they told, so at the very least they are good evidence of what the early Christians *claimed* regarding Jesus' resurrection.

(a) Their reliability generally

The first thing to note in accessing the reliability of the Gospels is that, contrary to the popular assertion that the Gospels originally were anonymous and were only much later attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there are very good reasons to believe the Gospels were in fact *written by* Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That is significant because Matthew and John were apostles and Mark and Luke were companions of apostles, so they all were in an excellent position to know what they were writing about.⁵

I say there are very good reasons for believing Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the Gospels because not a single anonymous copy of any of the Gospels has ever been found. All the manuscripts that have been discovered, not only the earliest and best manuscripts but *all* of the ancient manuscripts, in every language and without exception, attribute the four Gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The earliest Greek manuscripts for Matthew and John go back to the second century, for Luke go back to the second or third centuries, and for Mark go back to the fourth century. If the Gospels originally were anonymous and copies circulated throughout the Roman Empire for decades before titles supposedly were added to them in the second century, certainly one would expect some manuscript evidence, a copy trail, of the original form, but there is none for any of the four Gospels!

In addition, if the Gospels originally were anonymous and titles were not added to them until the second century, one would expect some disagreement regarding the titles. In other words, there is no reason to think a scribe in Palestine or Egypt who added a title to an anonymous Gospel would attribute it to the same person as a scribe in Rome who added a title to that same anonymous Gospel. Disagreements would be inevitable, and those disagreements would be reflected in ancient manuscripts. And who, by the way, would attribute an anonymous Gospel to such low-profile early Christians as Mark and Luke? If authorship was being fabricated, then certainly Peter, James, or other more prominent Christian figures would be chosen.

Moreover, we know from Luke's Gospel that many accounts of the life of Jesus were circulating at the time he wrote, so there was a need to distinguish one account from another. In that environment, it is highly doubtful the four Gospels would have been written without an indication of their authorship.

⁵ See Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (New York: Image, 2016), 12-54, to which this discussion is indebted.

And finally, the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament are unambiguous and unanimous regarding the authorship of the Gospels. Brant Pitre states (p. 53):

To sum up what we've learned so far: when the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament are taken into account, there is not the slightest trace of external evidence to support the now popular claim that the four Gospels were originally anonymous. As far as we know, for almost four hundred years after the lifetime of Jesus, no one – orthodox or heretic, pagan or Christian – seems to have raised any serious doubts about who wrote the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As we have seen previously, there was some debate among the church fathers about the exact order and dating of the Gospels, but there was no debate about their authorship. In other words, the theory of anonymous Gospels not only fails to do justice to the internal evidence from the most ancient manuscripts; it also fails to do justice to the *external* evidence from the earliest Christian writing outside the New Testament.

But even if one rejects this evidence for the authorship of the Gospels, all the Gospels were written, according to most *liberal* dating estimates, within forty to seventy years after the events they record, with Mark generally accepted as the earliest. So the authors of these works certainly were in a position to transmit reliable history. Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd write in *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 395:

From what we know about the reliability patterns of orally transmitted traditions, this actually is a rather insignificant span of time – one that, technically speaking, puts us in touch with "oral history" rather than "oral tradition" per se. A broad range of studies – from ancient Greece to nineteenth-century Serbo-Croatia to contemporary Africa – have all confirmed that orally oriented historical traditions (both oral and written in medium) of relatively recent events – within roughly 80 to 150 years of the event recorded – tend to be quite reliable.

After all, these stories were circulating during the lifetimes of the apostles and other eyewitnesses, who certainly would have exercised some control on their content. In fact, there has been something of a quiet revolution in New Testament studies over the past twenty years or so, led most notably by Samuel Byrskog and Richard Bauckham, in which the assumptions of critical scholars over the last century plus about how the Gospel stories were circulated and preserved prior to being written down is being overthrown in favor of a greater role for eyewitnesses.

Here is how Richard Bauckham, an internationally respected New Testament scholar, outlines the objective of his book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 6:

In general, I shall be arguing in this book that the Gospel texts are much closer to the form in which the eyewitnesses told their stories or passed on their traditions than is commonly envisaged in current scholarship. This is what gives the Gospels their character as testimony. They embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses, not of course without editing and interpretation, but in a way that is substantially faithful to how the eyewitnesses themselves told it, since the Evangelists were in more or less direct contact with eyewitnesses, not removed from them by a long process of anonymous transmission of the traditions.

Eddy and Boyd conclude their survey of the recent work in this field this way (p. 291):

In conclusion, given that the first-century Jewish world of pre-Gospel oral Jesus tradition highly valued eyewitness testimony, we find it far more plausible that *the early church valued and preserved the essence of the personal remembrances of Jesus's original disciples* than that they neglected the actual eyewitnesses, only to manufacture fabricated testimonies at a later date. At the very least, we can now conclude that the standard form-critical arguments against the presence of a significant amount of eyewitness testimony within the oral Jesus tradition are deeply flawed.

In addition, the evidence is mounting that prior to the writing of the Gospels the stories about Jesus were transmitted not only orally but also in written form in notebooks. These writings would supplement and support oral forms of remembering and teaching. See Bauckham, 287-289; Eddy and Boyd, 241-252. Such notebooks were used widely in the ancient world, and given that Jesus' disciples were drawn from all classes of people, no doubt including professional scribes and copyists, "[i]t seems more probable than not that early Christians used them" (Bauckham, 288). Bauckham writes (p. 289):

In such a context it does seem unlikely that no one would have even noted down Jesus traditions in notebooks for the private use of Christian teachers. Such notebooks would not be a wholly new factor in the process of transmission through memorization that we described in the last section. They would simply have reinforced the capacity of oral transmission itself to preserve the traditions faithfully.

New Testament scholar Michael Bird was originally skeptical about the prospect of notebooks being used to preserve Jesus' teachings, but his consideration of the evidence and arguments changed his mind. He concluded in *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 47-48, "Thus, it is highly probable that notebooks were used by Jesus' own disciples and by later adherents in the early church to assist in memory retention by functioning as an aide-mémoire."

**(b) Their reliability supported by standard criteria employed
by historians**

So it should not be surprising that the Gospels fare well when one applies to them the six broad diagnostic questions historians routinely ask of ancient documents in order to assess their historical reliability, at least when those questions are properly qualified.

1. The authors include details that risk damaging their own cause, which they would not do unless they were interested in remaining faithful to history.

Eddy and Boyd write (p. 410), "[T]he Synoptics are brimming with 'embarrassing' material, which we not only cannot imagine early Christians inventing, but which we might have expected the earliest traditions to drop – were they not so invested in retaining historically rooted information about Jesus." For example, Jesus' baptism by John is an "inconvenient" fact that required explanation. Why is the one you claim to be the Son of God submitting to baptism by a sinner? The supremely inconvenient truth, however, was Jesus' crucifixion by the Romans. It was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23).

Likewise, the authors omit material one might have expected them to include if they were not constrained by the truth. For example, why not put on Jesus' lips answers to the questions that arose in the church after Jesus' death, such as how "Jewish" a Gentile must become when he becomes a Christian or the attitude disciples must have toward feasting in idol temples.

2. The authors include incidental details and casual information, which suggests they are presenting factual data, material derived from an eyewitness perspective.

There is much of this in the Gospels. Indeed, Wolfgang Schadewaldt, a respected scholar of ancient Greek literature, has written (quoted in Eddy and Boyd, 415):

As a philologist, someone who has acquired some knowledge of "literature," I am particularly concerned here to note that when we read the Synoptic Gospels, we cannot be other than captivated by the experiential vividness with which we are confronted. . . . I know of no other area of history-writing, biography or poetry where I encounter so great a wealth of material in such a small space.

As an example, Mk. 4:36 includes the fact that when the disciples took Jesus with them in the boat "other boats were with him." As R. T. France says (p. 223), "It is hard . . . to see any other reason for their inclusion beyond the circumstantial reminiscence on the part of whoever told the story (Peter?) that as a matter of fact their boat was not alone on the lake that evening." Likewise, Mk. 6:39 reports that at the feeding of the five thousand Jesus commanded them to sit down "on the green grass." France says of the account generally (p. 266), "The vivid description suggests the

eyewitness account of someone who was present at this extraordinary picnic." There are many things like this.

The naming of specific people who can be questioned about the veracity of the report also signals eyewitness accounts. For example, Mark writes in Mk. 15:21 that "they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross." The women at the crucifixion and tomb are specifically identified (Mk. 15:40), as are various beneficiaries of Jesus' healings (Jairus [his daughter healed] – Mk. 5:22-24a, 35-43; Bartimaeus – Mk. 10:46-52; Lazarus – Jn. 11:1-44; Mary Magdalene – Lk. 8:2) and one of the disciples to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus (Cleopas – Lk. 24:18). Bauckham concludes that "the named characters were eyewitnesses who not only originated the tradition to which their names are attached but also continued to tell these stories as authoritative guarantors of the traditions" (quoted in Eddy and Boyd, 294).

3. There is sufficient consistency within and between the Gospels to preserve their general reliability.

In other words, assuming for purpose of the argument that the Gospels are not inerrant and contain genuine inconsistencies, those inconsistencies are "at least on a par with what one finds in other works whose general reliability historians are willing to grant" (Eddy and Boyd, 421). As Eddy and Boyd conclude (p. 438), "the Gospels can be seen as exhibiting the sort of broad internal consistency that suggests that the authors both intended to faithfully record the essential aspects of Jesus's life and teaching, and that – as far as we can tell – they were quite successful at doing so."

I think the case is stronger than that because not only can the apparent inconsistencies be harmonized in plausible (albeit speculative) ways,⁶ their presence demonstrates that the accounts are not latter-day concoctions. If they were, those surface conflicts would have been ironed out. As N. T. Wright puts it (*RSG*, 612):

The surface inconsistencies between Mark 16:1-8 and its parallels, of which so much is made by those eager to see the accounts as careless fiction, is in fact a strong point in favour of their early character. The later we imagine them being written up, let alone edited, the more likely it would be that inconsistencies would be ironed out. The stories exhibit, as has been said repeatedly over the last hundred years or more, exactly that surface tension we associate, not with tales artfully told by people eager to sustain a fiction and therefore anxious to make everything look right, but with the hurried, puzzled accounts of those who have seen with their own eyes something which took them horribly by surprise and with which they have not yet fully come to terms.

⁶ See, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007) 152-240; John Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

4. *The Gospels do not report events or make claims that seem inherently improbable, **provided** one is willing to entertain the possibility of God's existence and his working miracles.*

If the historian deems miracles impossible before he begins his investigation, that metaphysical assumption will force him to judge as historically unreliable any report that a miracle occurred, regardless of its strength when measured by conventional standards of historiography. In other contexts, we call that having a closed mind. It is like the old story about the psychiatric patient who was certain he was dead. In an attempt to persuade him otherwise, his doctor asked him if dead men bleed. The patient answered, "Of course not." The doctor then nicked the man's forearm with a razor and stared triumphantly as the blood oozed out. He asked the patient, "So what do you think now?" The patient responded, "What do you know, dead men do bleed."

Now some people try to justify this close-minded approach to the historical evidence by appeal to the argument of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume that, given the evidence of countless confirmations of the laws of nature in everyday experience, it is always more reasonable to believe that a miracle did not occur than to believe that it did. In other words, miracles are so improbable in light of the uniform experience of humanity that no amount of historical evidence can outweigh that improbability in any given case.

But if God exists, miracles can occur, and the only way to determine whether a miracle has happened in any given case is to weigh the evidence regarding that specific event. One cannot turn the rarity of miracles into a basis for refusing to believe the evidence of a miracle.

Think about it. Under Hume's argument, if a miracle really did occur, he could never know it. He would be forced to deny it, however compelling the evidence, because that evidence would be swamped by the countless times that miracles did not occur. That is having eyes but being unable to see and having ears but being unable to hear. Michael Licona writes (p. 151):

If we assume that God does not exist, then of course it is more probable that men would lie than that nature would alter its course. However, if we are open to God's existence, we will need to ask at least three additional questions: (1) Is there good evidence that the event in question occurred? (2) Does a context exist in which we might expect a god to act? (3) Is there good evidence that those making the claim lied? If good evidence exists that the event occurred, a context exists where we might expect a god to act, and there is an absence of evidence for a lie, then there is no reason to believe that a lie is more probable than a miracle in a specific instance. If one were then to continue believing that deceit was involved, he would not have weighed the evidence but weighed in with his bias.

For detailed discussions of the weaknesses in Hume's argument, see R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); John Earman's book *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Licona, 135-153. As J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig write in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 571, "it would be fair to say that the fallaciousness of Hume's reasoning has been recognized by the majority of philosophers writing on the subject today . . ."

5. The Gospel accounts are corroborated by as much external literary evidence as reasonably can be expected.

Remember that the vast majority of all that was written in the ancient world has perished and that a new religion arising in a remote region of the Roman Empire would not be likely to attract the attention of Roman historians. That said, we do have a number of pieces of "outside" literature that support aspects of the early Jesus tradition. Here are some of the more important ones:

Thallus was a Roman historian who apparently wrote a three-volume chronicle of world history in the mid-50s. That work is lost, but we know of Thallus's work from the early fourth-century church historian Eusebius and from a reference to it by a third-century Christian historian named Julius Africanus. In the course of discussing the darkness that fell on the land during Jesus' crucifixion, Africanus writes: "In the third book of his history Thallus calls this darkness an eclipse of the sun – wrongly in my opinion." So Thallus here seems to acknowledge the odd, prolonged darkness during Jesus' crucifixion through his attempt to explain it away.

Josephus (born A.D. 37 and captured by Romans in the Jewish Revolt) wrote the *Jewish Antiquities* around A.D. 95. This work has two sections of particular interest to this study. What is called "the James passage" (*Antiquities* 20.9.1) reads:

When, therefore, Ananus [the high priest] was of this [angry] disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise this authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road. So he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or some of his companions]; and, when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.

So Josephus confirms the New Testament claims that Jesus was called Christ and that James was his brother. The text known as the *Testimonium Flavianum* (*Antiquities* 18.3.3) is widely believed to contain Christian interpolations. That is, it is generally accepted that the surviving copies of Josephus are based on copies made by Christians who put some words in Josephus's mouth when they copied his remarks about Jesus. Based on an Arabic translation of this section that was published in 1971, we can now reconstruct what Josephus

originally wrote with a high degree of confidence. In the words of James Charlesworth, "We can now be as certain as historical research will presently allow that Josephus did refer to Jesus in *Antiquities* [18.3.3]" (quoted in Eddy and Boyd, 194). The most common reconstruction of the *Testimonium* reads:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

Here Josephus confirms that Jesus was a teacher, that he performed what appeared to be supernatural feats, that he was crucified under Pilate, and that his followers continued to have affection for him after his death.

In about A.D. 112, Pliny the Younger, while governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan asking for advice on how to deal with Christians in his territory. He recounts information he had gathered about Christians from those who had defected from the faith under threat of death. His letter tells us that the Christians of this time worshiped Jesus as God, a point that confirms the view of Jesus given in the New Testament. It also tells us that some Christians were willing to die for this belief.

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus wrote his *Annals of Rome* around A.D. 115. In describing how Emperor Nero attempted to divert the blame for starting the fire in Rome in A.D. 64 which destroyed three quarters of the city, he writes:

Consequently, to get rid of the report [that he ordered the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but also in the City [Rome], where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular.

Paul Barnett comments in *Is the New Testament Reliable? A Look at the Historical Evidence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 21:

In one sentence of the above passage Tacitus confirms five details mentioned in the New Testament:

1. The public career of Christ occurred in the time of the Emperor Tiberius (Luke 3:1).
2. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor when Christ died.

(Matthew 27:2; parallels in the other gospels; Acts 3:13 and 13:28).

3. Christ was executed as a criminal (Luke 23:2).
4. This occurred in Judea (Mark 11:16).
5. The movement spread from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 1:4 and 28:14).

Around A.D. 166, the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata warned his readers about the dangers of Christianity in a work titled *The Death of Peregrinus*. In it he refers to Jesus as "the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world." He says "[The Christians'] first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshiping the crucified sophist himself and living according to his laws." So this opponent of Christianity did not question that Jesus was crucified and was the origin of a new religion in which he was worshiped.

Around A.D. 175, the Roman philosopher Celsus wrote a full-scale attack on Christianity titled *True Doctrine*. That work is lost, but we know of it because the Christian philosopher and theologian Origen quoted it extensively when he rebutted it around A.D. 250 in a work titled *Against Celsus*. Celsus argues, among other things, that Jesus amazed his small following by displays of sorcery and magic that he learned in Egypt. What is important is that even so fierce a critic of Christianity as Celsus did not challenge the belief that Jesus performed miracles; rather, he attributed them to Jesus being a sorcerer or magician.

6. *The Gospel accounts also are corroborated by archaeological evidence.*

I will just note briefly some of the more interesting finds. Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the Pool of Bethesda that is mentioned in John 5 was discovered in Jerusalem. Many fragments of column bases, capitals, and drums were found "which probably belonged to the five porches (i.e. porticoes or colonnaded walkways) of the pool John mentions." John McRay, *Archaeology & the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 187.

An inscription discovered at Caesarea Maritima in 1962 refers to "Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea," confirming that he reigned in the position attributed to him by the Gospels. Excavations begun in Capernaum in the late 1960s uncovered a simple first-century house beneath a fourth-century house church, which was itself beneath a fifth-century octagonal church. On the walls of one of the rooms of the first-century house are inscribed a variety of Christian prayers that date from the second century. So from the early centuries the Christians viewed this site as significant. A number of leading scholars across a broad theological spectrum are convinced that this is the home of the Apostle Peter. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor writes in *The Holy Land*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), 227:

Certitude as to the original ownership of the room is, of course, impossible, but the evidence of consistent veneration in the pre-Constantinian period demands an explanation. The most reasonable assumption is the one attested by the Byzantine pilgrims, namely, that it was the house of Peter in which Jesus may have lodged (Matt. 5:20). Certainly, nothing in the excavations contradicts this identification.

In 1990 an ornate ossuary (burial bone box) was discovered south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem by workers who were building a water park. It is inscribed in Aramaic with the name "Caiaphas," and many leading scholars have concluded that it is indeed the actual ossuary of the high priest who handed Jesus over to Pilate.

In 2002 *Biblical Archaeology Review* published an ossuary with an inscription in Aramaic reading, "James [really Jacob/Yaakob], son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." Before he published the find, Hershel Shanks, the Jewish editor of the magazine, had the inscription authenticated by two leading epigraphers and the ossuary authenticated by the Geological Survey of Israel. Nevertheless, the Israel Antiquities Authority, which had been left out of the loop regarding the find, prosecuted the ossuary's owner, Oded Golan, for forgery. After a trial that went on for seven plus years, Golan was declared "not guilty" on March 14, 2012. Shanks has laid out the evidence that, in his view, leaves "no doubt" the inscription is authentic, and he has blistered the IAA for its unsubstantiated claims and groundless and political prosecution of Golan.⁷ Indeed, it is significant when Israel's leading epigrapher, Ada Yardeni, declares, "If this is a forgery, I quit."

In 2004 the Pool of Siloam that is mentioned in John 9 was discovered in Jerusalem, supplanting an earlier site that many had accepted as the pool. See "[The Pool of Siloam](#)." Many other references in the N.T. to buildings, cities, rulers, people, events, customs, geographical details, and political situations have been verified by secular sources. For a thorough presentation of archaeological discoveries (prior to 1991) that relate to the N.T, see John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

(c) Their reliability regarding resurrection accounts specifically

Regarding the resurrection accounts specifically, there are four features that indicate they are very early accounts rather than later inventions (Wright, *RSG*, 599-608; *SBH*, 53-57). First, they are almost devoid of biblical quotations, allusions, and echoes, which suggests they reflect an oral tradition "which was formed and set firmly in the memory of different storytellers before there was any time for biblical reflection" (*SBH*, 54).

⁷ See Hershel Shanks, "Brother of Jesus' Inscription Is Authentic!" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38.4 (Jul/Aug 2012), 26-33, 62, 64 and Hershel Shanks, "First Person: 'Brother of Jesus' Inscription—Authentic or a Forgery?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42:04 (Jul/Aug 2016): see also, Amnon Rosenfeld, "[The Antiquities Game - Behind the Trial of the Century](#)."

Second, women are the principal witnesses in the resurrection accounts. As Darrell Bock explains in his chapter in W. David Beck and Michael R. Licona, eds., *Raised on the Third Day* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 260-261:

The point emerges that although it is false to claim that women were never allowed to be witnesses, it was rarely the case, taking place only in very limited situations. . . . A fabricated event would be unlikely to create a story using a set of second-tier witnesses to make a point about a controversial idea. . . .

In the Gospel accounts, women are the lone witnesses to the initial awareness of an empty tomb. They alone hear an angelic announcement that God had raised Jesus from the dead. There is no reason to expect a fabricated story to go there unless it took place this way.

Third, the resurrected Jesus is not said to shine like a star, which is what one would expect based on Dan. 12:3 if the account was the result of theological reflection years after the fact. And fourth, they never mention the future hope that those who belong to Jesus will likewise be resurrected. If the stories were later inventions, they certainly would have included a mention of the final resurrection of God's people.

(3) Report of sermons/speeches in Acts

Luke recounts in Acts a number of sermons or speeches (Acts 1–5, 10, 13, 17), and most scholars agree, for various reasons, that the summaries he gives of those sermons are based on the earliest teachings of the church, even if they think the particular speeches Luke reports never happened. In other words, even when they think Luke has invented the speeches, they still believe he conveyed through those speeches the essence of early Christian teaching. Those speeches express the conviction that Jesus rose from the dead.

(4) Other New Testament writings

The writer of Hebrews was familiar with the early leaders of the congregation(s) to which he wrote (Heb. 13:7) and was a companion of Timothy (13:23), who most likely was the Timothy who traveled with Paul. He declares in Heb. 13:20 that God raised Jesus from the dead. Other New Testament writings that were read publicly in the churches of the first century (though some critical scholars would put 1 Peter and 2 Timothy in the early second century) express a shared belief in the resurrection of Christ. See 1 Pet. 1:3, 1:21, Eph. 1:20, Col. 1:18, 2:12, and 2 Tim. 2:8.

(5) Clement of Rome and Polycarp

Clement was a leader of the church in Rome at the end of the first century. We have a letter he wrote to the church in Corinth that is dated around A.D. 95 (1 Clement). According to a writing of Irenaeus dated to around A.D. 185 and a writing of Tertullian dated to around A.D. 200, this Clement was personally acquainted with the apostles. In his letter, Clement mentions the apostles' belief in and preaching of the resurrection of Christ.

Polycarp was a leader of the church in Smyrna. We have a letter he wrote to the church in Philippi that is dated around A.D. 110-117. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp sat at the feet of the apostle John and was appointed to his office in Smyrna by the apostles themselves. In his letter, Polycarp refers a number of times to Jesus' resurrection.

b. Facts and circumstances confirm the sincerity of this belief

So we can know that the disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected, that they were fully convinced of it, because multiple early and independent sources make it clear that they believed and proclaimed it. But there is more. Numerous facts and circumstances confirm or corroborate what these multiple early and independent sources tell us about the early disciples' belief. In other words, not only do we have direct evidence that the early disciples were convinced Jesus rose from the grave, we also have evidence of the effects this belief would be expected to produce. It is like having testimony from multiple moviegoers that they believed there was a fire in the theater *and* having evidence that they broke through doors and fled the theater in a panic. The testimony about what they believed is confirmed by other facts consistent with that belief.

(1) Paul's reversal

Paul went from being a persecutor of Christians to one who zealously promoted the Christian faith, which is exactly the kind of about face one would expect if Paul was convinced he had seen the resurrected Christ.

We know Paul initially was a persecutor of Christians because we have his firsthand admission of that fact in letters intended to be read publicly that were written within about twenty years of his persecuting activity (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6). He also reports in Gal. 1:22-23 that he was known as a persecutor of the faith among the churches in Judea. Paul was not proud of having once persecuted the servants of his Lord, so his statements in that regard are supremely credible. On top of this, they are corroborated by Luke in several places in Acts (9:1-5, 22:4-5, 26:9-12).

We also know that Paul became a tireless preacher of the gospel of Christ. All of his letters and the Book of Acts make that undeniable. In 2 Cor. 11:23-28 we have his firsthand summary of some of the suffering he had endured for his faith up to that time, much of which is corroborated by Acts (see also, 2 Cor. 4:7-11). His suffering for the faith also is reported in 1 Clement, which was written around A.D. 95. And Paul does not

leave us to infer that he did an about face because of seeing the resurrected Christ; he tells us flat out that that was what did it (1 Cor. 15:8-10; Gal. 1:13-16), which again is corroborated by Acts.

(2) James's reversal

James, the Lord's brother, likewise went from being a skeptic about Jesus to being a fully devoted disciple. That Jesus' brothers were skeptical about him being the Messiah is reported expressly in Jn. 7:5, but it is also evident in the earlier works of Mark and Matthew. Mark reports in Mk. 3:21 that Jesus' family was saying he was out of his mind. In Mk. 6:4 and Mat. 13:57 Jesus included the prophet's "own *household*" among the places in which he was not honored, which may imply there were unbelievers in his. The report that Jesus entrusted his mother to John when dying on the cross (Jn. 19:26) suggests James was not a believer at that point. And the fact none of the Gospels ever mention James being a believer is strong evidence he was not because, given that he later became a leader in the church, being an early believer would have been to his credit and thus would have been reported.

We know from Gal. 1:19, 2:9, Acts 12:17, 15:12-21, and the second-century writings of the Christian Greek author Hegesippus (via Eusebius) that James became a leader of the church in Jerusalem. There is good reason to believe that James authored the letter in the New Testament that bears his name, and that letter opens with his declaration that he is a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hegesippus and Clement of Alexandria, who wrote around A.D. 200, tell us that James was martyred for his faith. The first-century Jewish writer Josephus indicates the same thing when he says James was stoned for "breaking the law." This almost certainly had to do with alleged blasphemy as a result of his faith in Jesus, which would parallel the situation with Stephen in Acts 7:51-60.

Paul, who we know from his letters and Acts knows James personally, reports in a letter to be read publicly during James's lifetime that after Jesus was raised from the dead he appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7). Since Jesus' brothers were among those praying with the disciples a few days before Pentecost (Acts 1:14), James had become a believer by then. That points to Jesus appearing to James sometime during the forty days after he rose (Acts 1:3).

(3) Disciples continued to believe in Jesus as Messiah after his crucifixion

The early disciples believed in Jesus as Messiah *despite the fact he had been crucified*. There were numerous messianic and prophetic movements before and after Jesus' ministry whose central figure was put to death (see, e.g., Bass, See, e.g., 122-125). These included Judas the Galilean (AD 6; Acts 5:37; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4-10, 23-25); the Samaritan (AD 36; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.85-87); Theudas (AD 45; Acts 5:36); the Egyptian

(AD 56; Acts 21:38; Josephus says escaped after many of his disciples were killed, never to be heard from again); Jesus, son of Ananus (AD 60s; Josephus, *J.W.* 5.510); Menachem, son of Judas the Galilean (AD 66; Josephus, *J.W.* 5.510); Simon bar of Giora (AD 70; Josephus, *J.W.* 7.25-36, 153-154); Lukuas-Andreas (AD 117); Simon bar of Kochba (AD 132-135; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 69.12-14; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 31). When that happened, the followers either gave up the struggle or found a new Messiah. No one continued to claim that their dead leader was the Messiah; on the contrary, his being killed was taken as proof that he was *not* the Messiah. The fact the early Christians proclaimed Jesus as Messiah despite his having been killed and had no impulse to seek another Messiah only makes sense in light of their belief that Jesus had in fact been resurrected. See Wright, *SBH*, 48-50.

(4) Early Christians' modifications of Jewish belief in the resurrection

Early Christians modified the traditional Jewish belief in the resurrection in ways one would expect given their belief that Jesus had been resurrected. Specifically, the following seven major modifications of Jewish resurrection belief became central within the Christianity of the first two centuries, all of which flow naturally from a conviction that Jesus had been raised.

1. Despite coming from all strands of Judaism and from differing backgrounds within paganism, the early Christians were virtually unanimous in believing in a resurrection after death. In other words, there was not a diversity of views on the matter as there was in paganism and Judaism. Something caused virtually all Christians to embrace one view about the afterlife from the smorgasbord of views in the pagan and Jewish world; they embraced the view of resurrection.

2. In second-Temple Judaism, resurrection was important but it was not a central matter of the faith. Whereas, "in early Christianity resurrection moved from the circumference to the center" (Wright, *SBH*, 42). As Wright says (*SBH*, 43), "Take away the stories of Jesus's birth, and you lose only two chapters of Matthew and two of Luke. Take away the resurrection and you lose the entire New Testament and most of the second-century fathers as well."

3. Early Christian belief about resurrection sharpened the rather vague Jewish view regarding the nature of the resurrection body. From the start, Christians believed that the resurrection body would be a body that had been *transformed* to have new properties. Though physical, it in some sense would be supernatural, having properties of power, imperishability, and incorruptibility. Paul sets this out clearly in 1 Corinthians 15, a mere twenty-five years after the Lord's resurrection (see also, Phil. 3:20-21).

4. The fourth Christian mutation of Jewish belief about the afterlife is that the end-time resurrection, as an event, has split into two. Wright states (*SBH*, 45):

No first-century Jew prior to Easter expected the resurrection to be anything other than a large-scale event happening to all God's people, or perhaps to the entire human race, as part of the sudden event in which God's kingdom would finally come on earth as in heaven. There is no suggestion that one person would rise from the dead in advance of all the rest. The exceptions sometimes quoted (Enoch and Elijah) do not count precisely because (a) they were held not to have died and so resurrection (new life after bodily death) would not be relevant and (b) they were in heaven, not in a new body on earth.⁸

Some other first-century Jewish movements believed that the end had already in some sense begun, but as Wright notes (*SBH*, 45):

[W]e never find outside Christianity what becomes a central feature within it: the belief that the mode of this inauguration consisted in the resurrection itself happening to one person in the middle of history in advance of its great, final occurrence, anticipating and guaranteeing the final resurrection of God's people at the end of history.

5. The fifth Christian mutation of Jewish belief springs from the early Christians' conviction that the great final resurrection of the last day had already begun or been inaugurated in the resurrection of Christ. Because God's future had in some sense already arrived in the present, they believed it was their responsibility to work in the power of the Spirit toward transforming the present, as far as they were able, in the direction of the eternal state. In other words, they believed they were to anticipate the consummation, the final resurrection and remaking of the world, by working through God's power to transform the present consistently with the eternal vision.

6. The early Christians changed the Jewish *metaphorical* use of "resurrection." Rather than functioning as a metaphor for the Jewish return from exile, the renewal of ethnic Israel, "resurrection" in Christianity functioned as a metaphor for baptism and the new life of strenuous ethical obedience.

⁸ When Herod and some of the people said Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mat. 14:2; Mk. 6:14-16; Lk. 9:7) they most likely meant that the spirit of John was in some sense at work in Jesus. After all, Jesus and John were contemporaries, so it was well known that Jesus was alive long before John died. Moreover, Herod showed no interest in locating John's body, which would have been a natural step if he were thinking of a literal resurrection. The view of some reported in Lk. 9:8 that in Jesus "one of the prophets of old had risen" probably "is related to the popular viewpoint expressed in [Lk.] 7:16: God has raised up (ἡγήθη) a prophet (like Moses). See Deut 18:15 [and] Acts 3:22." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 362 (n. 25). Note Mk. 6:15 where this is understood as a claim that Jesus is "like one of the prophets of long ago." The miraculous raisings of the dead performed by Jesus and some Old Testament prophets were not resurrections in the end-time sense, what the Hebrew writer calls a "better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35), in that those raised still were subject to death. As the firstfruits of the end-time resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-23), Jesus was no longer subject to death (Rom. 6:9). Somehow the disciples understood that Jesus had not merely returned to life but had been resurrected in a transformed sense, resurrected to immortality. Perhaps his rising apart from any earthly prophet or miracle worker was part of that realization.

7. The seventh Christian mutation of Jewish resurrection belief was the association of the concept of resurrection with the Messiah. Despite hints in the O.T. (which became clearer in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection), nobody in Judaism expected the Messiah to die, and thus nobody had imagined the Messiah rising from the dead. Wright states (*SBH*, 47-48):

Where Messianic speculations existed . . . , the Messiah was supposed to fight God's victorious battle against the wicked pagans; to rebuild or cleanse the Temple; and to bring God's justice to the world. . . . No Jew with any idea of how the language of messiahship worked could have possibly imagined, after his crucifixion, that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Lord's anointed. But from very early on, as witnessed by what may be pre-Pauline fragments of early creedal belief, the Christians affirmed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, precisely because of his resurrection.

(5) Jesus' tomb not venerated

Jewish tombs, especially those of martyrs, were venerated and often became shrines, and yet there is absolutely no indication of such a thing occurring with regard to Jesus' grave. That is precisely what one would expect if the disciples believed Jesus had been resurrected. The interest that was taken in Christ's tomb centuries later, when Constantine built a church on the spot, was as the site of his resurrection not his burial.

(6) Early church emphasized first day of the week as special

The early church emphasized the first day of the week as their special day. That is very hard to explain unless something striking happened on that particular day. If the disciples believed Jesus rose from the dead on that day, one would expect it to have some distinction in the community of faith.

(7) Disciples willing to suffer and die for belief Jesus had been resurrected

The disciples were willing to suffer and die for their belief that Jesus had been resurrected. They would not have done that unless they sincerely believed he had been raised. Paul tells us firsthand about some of the persecution he endured (1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Cor. 4:7-9, 11:23-27, 12:10; Gal. 5:11; 1 Thess. 3:4, 3:7), which treatment is corroborated by Luke in Acts (9:22-25, 9:29-30, 13:50, 14:4-5, 14:19, 16:20-24, 17:5, 17:13, 18:12-14, 19:26-31, 20:3, 21:27-32, 22:22-24, 23:10-13, 24:27, 25:15, 28:16). Luke reports that Peter and John were imprisoned (Acts 4); the apostles were arrested, imprisoned, and flogged (Acts 5); James, the brother of John, was killed (Acts 12); and Peter was

imprisoned (Acts 12). And Luke makes clear that the resurrection of Christ was their central message (Acts 4:2, 4:33).

I have already mentioned the martyrdom of James the Lord's brother, which is mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus in A.D. 95, the Christian Greek writer Hegesippus around A.D. 170, and the Clement of Alexandria around A.D. 200. Clement in his letter to the church in Corinth in A.D. 95 (1 Clem. 5:2-7) reported the suffering of Peter and Paul and probably also referred to their executions, though that point is disputed. Polycarp in his letter to the church in Philippi that is dated around A.D. 110-117 refers to the suffering of Paul and the other apostles. Tertullian, who wrote shortly before A.D. 200, reports the martyrdoms of both Peter and Paul by Emperor Nero and says the information was available in the Roman public records in "the lives of the Caesars." Origen, who wrote in the first half of the third century, tells how the disciples suffered because they had been convinced so thoroughly of the Lord's resurrection and reports that Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome under Nero.

c. Virtually all scholars acknowledge the sincerity of this belief

This evidence that the disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been raised from the dead – the multiple early and independent sources that tell us they believed and proclaimed it and the numerous facts and circumstances that confirm that belief – is so powerful that virtually all scholars accept as a fact that the earliest Christians at least believed that they had encountered the resurrected Jesus.

Gary Habermas, a professor at Liberty University who specializes in Christian apologetics generally and in the resurrection specifically, wrote in an article published in the in 2001 ("[The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus' Resurrection](#)," *Trinity Journal* [2001] 179-196):

Perhaps more firmly than ever, the vast majority of contemporary scholars are agreed that the earliest followers of Jesus at least believed that they had experienced their risen Lord. Even radical scholars rarely question this fact. It may well be one of the two or three most widely established particulars about Jesus' life.

In "[Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?](#)" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3.2 (2005), 135-153, Habermas writes: "As we have mentioned throughout, there are certainly disagreements about the nature of the experiences. But it is still crucial that the nearly unanimous consent of critical scholars is that, in some sense, the early followers of Jesus thought that they had seen the risen Jesus." In support of that assertion, he cites his book *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) where he provides a list (p. 50-51, endnote 165) of more than fifty recent critical scholars who affirm these resurrection experiences as historical events.

In 1965 Reginald H. Fuller remarked in his book *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 142 that the disciples' belief that Jesus was raised from the dead "is one of the indisputable facts of history." That they had experiences they thought were appearances of the risen Lord is, in Fuller's words, "a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree." See Habermas (2001).

In 1985 James D. G. Dunn, asserted in *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1985), 75: "It is almost impossible to dispute that at the historical roots of Christianity lie some visionary experiences of the first Christians, who understood them as appearances of Jesus, raised by God from the dead." He adds, "By 'resurrection' they clearly meant that something had happened to Jesus himself. God had raised him, not merely reassured them. He was alive again. . . ." See Habermas (2005).

In his 1993 book *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), E. P. Sanders included (p. 11) among a list of "secure facts" that "are almost beyond dispute" that, after Jesus' death, "his disciples . . . saw him." In an epilogue (p. 280), he wrote, "That Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know." See Habermas (2005).

In 1995 Gerd Lüdemann, an atheistic New Testament scholar, concluded, "It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ" (quoted in Habermas and Licona, 60). In 1999, New Testament scholar A. J. M. Wedderburn declared in his book *Beyond Resurrection*, "It is an indubitable historical datum that sometime, somehow the disciples came to believe they had seen the risen Jesus" (see Licona, 373).

In 2000 Paula Fredriksen, a Boston University historian, remarked (quoted in Habermas and Licona, 60):

I know in their own terms what they saw was the raised Jesus. That's what they say and then all the historic evidence we have afterward attests to their conviction that that's what they saw. I'm not saying that they really did see the raised Jesus. I wasn't there. I don't know what they saw. But I do know that as a historian that they must have seen something.

In 2014 Bart Ehrman, an atheist/agnostic New Testament scholar, wrote in *How Jesus Became God* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 174:

There can be no doubt, historically, that some of Jesus's followers came to believe he was raised from the dead — no doubt whatsoever. This is how Christianity started. If no one had thought Jesus had been raised, he would have been lost in the mists of Jewish antiquity and would be known today only as another failed Jewish prophet. But Jesus's followers — or at least some of them — came to believe that God had done a great miracle and restored Jesus to life. This was not a mere resuscitation, a kind of near-

death experience. For Jesus's disciples, Jesus was raised into an immortal body and exalted to heaven where he currently lives and reigns with God Almighty.

2. Therefore disciples believed the tomb was empty and that Jesus had appeared to them bodily

So the crucial question is *how* the early Christians came to be so certain that Jesus was raised from the dead. What could have produced that deep conviction? In assessing that question, it is helpful to recognize that many people in the ancient world accepted that the spirits of recently deceased people might manifest themselves in some way to the living. But they did not confuse that with resurrection, the return to bodily life. No one accepted or expected resurrection, at least not prior to the great last day when God judged and remade the world.

And before you smirk at the ancients for believing that spirits of the recently departed might appear in some manner or form, know that people have experienced such things in all cultures throughout the ages. In the mid-1950s, the editor of a Swiss magazine invited its readers to report such experiences, and he received an astonishing 1200 letters containing about 1500 accounts of paranormal phenomena related to the dead and dying. These letters were the subject of psychologist Aniela Jaffe's classic study, *An Archetypal Approach to Death, Dreams, and Ghosts* (Irving, TX: Spring, 1979). As she states in the book (p. 18-19 of the 1999 Daimon reprint):

What the letters have to tell can be found in the oldest traditions. Experiences in which a dying person announces his presence by knocking, footsteps, the breaking of crockery, or a ticking in the wall, the motif of premonition or precognition, prophetic dreams, haunting or actual apparitions, etc., have been handed down from time immemorial in every part of the world and have survived in primitive as well as in highly civilized cultures, regardless of rational objections and criticisms.

Whatever psychological explanation one gives for these phenomena, there is no question that throughout recorded history such things have been believed to occur (Wright, *RSG*, 690). The point is that the more it is accepted, as in the ancient world, that the spirits of recently deceased people might appear in some way to the living, the less likely people would be to interpret a post-death encounter as a *resurrection*. They would have a ready, alternative category for the experience. Wright puts it this way (*RSG*, 690-691):

However, precisely because such encounters were reasonably well known . . . they *could not possibly*, by themselves, have given rise to the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They are a thoroughly *insufficient* condition for the early Christian belief. The more 'normal' these 'visions' were, the less chance there is that anyone, no matter how

cognitively dissonant they may have been feeling, would have said what nobody had ever said about such a dead person before, that they had been *raised from the dead*. Indeed, such visions meant precisely, as people in the ancient and modern worlds have discovered, that the person was dead, not that they were alive.

In that light, in order for the apostles to believe Jesus was resurrected they would have to be convinced they had seen him *in person*, that he had been present with them *bodily*. Anything less would be attributed to the kind of non-resurrection, ghostly visitations or hallucinations that were understood to occur. Indeed, the resistance to resurrection was so strong that Thomas is reported to have demanded proof that the body before him was the same body that had been crucified: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (Jn. 20:25b).

But even if the apostles were convinced they had seen Jesus in person, had encountered him bodily, they would not conclude he had been resurrected if his corpse was still in the tomb. His corpse would be proof positive that he was still dead no matter what they had experienced. As Wright points out, "Even if several such experiences had occurred, if the tomb was still occupied by the dead body they would have said to themselves, after the experiences had ceased, 'We have seen exceedingly strange visions, but he is still dead and buried. . . .'"⁹

So being convinced they had encountered Jesus bodily would not be sufficient to convince them Jesus was raised from the dead; it would lead to that conclusion only if the tomb was empty. And likewise, being convinced the tomb was empty would not be sufficient to convince them Jesus was raised from the dead; it would lead to that conclusion only if they had encountered him bodily. Otherwise, with Mary Magdalene in Jn. 20:2, they would have assumed his body had been taken, whether by grave robbers or enemies. They would *not* have said Jesus was raised from the dead.

Given that the Jews did not expect the resurrection to begin with an individual while the world continued on as it was and given that prior alleged messiahs who were executed had stayed dead, the disciples were not expecting Jesus to return to life. That is confirmed by the Gospel accounts (see pp. 6-7 above). To quote Wright again (*RSG*, 689):

Had the tomb been empty, with no other unusual occurrences, no one would have said that Jesus was the Messiah or the lord of the world. No one would have imagined that the kingdom had been inaugurated. No one, in particular, would have developed so quickly and consistently a radical and reshaped version of the Jewish hope for the resurrection of the body.

⁹ Paul is not a valid counterexample to the claim that encountering the risen Jesus would not by itself be sufficient to create belief in the resurrection because when Jesus appeared to him he no doubt was aware, living in Jerusalem, that the Christians he was persecuting claimed the tomb was empty and that their claim had not been falsified.

The empty tomb is by itself insufficient to account for the subsequent evidence.¹⁰

To illustrate the point in a modern context, when the grieving widow in a mystery story is convinced she has caught sight of her dead husband, they dig up the coffin to see if his corpse is still in there. If it is, then there is another explanation for the evidence that he is alive. On the other hand, if it is learned that a coffin is empty, no one concludes from that fact alone that the person who died has returned to life. Without good evidence of his being alive, one assumes the body was sold on the black market by an unscrupulous funeral home, cremated by mistake, or stolen by someone.

3. Evidence of how disciples came to believe those two things

So we can infer from the fact the early disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected that they were convinced his tomb was empty *and* that he had appeared to them bodily. Thus, the question of how the early Christians came to be certain that Jesus was raised from the dead separates into how they became convinced his tomb was empty and how they became convinced he had appeared to them bodily. We are not left to guess about how that happened but have good historical evidence that explains it.

a. Evidence of Jesus' bodily presence

All the available historical evidence indicates that the disciples became convinced Jesus appeared to them bodily because he gave every indication of being present in body. The evidence of the resurrection encounters was given above in establishing the fact that the disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected. Understand that the disciples were well aware of the difference between a ghostly visitation, an apparition, and a resurrection, which involves a physical body. Mark (6:47-50) and Matthew (14:25-27) report that when Jesus approached the disciples' boat at night walking on the water, they were afraid because they thought the figure they could not recognize was a spirit being of some kind. They thought that because they knew that material beings, persons with mass, sink in the water.

For the disciples to believe Jesus had been *resurrected*, as opposed to having appeared as a spirit, something had to convince them that he was standing before them in

¹⁰ John (in Jn. 20:8) is not a valid counterexample to the claim that the empty tomb would not by itself be sufficient to create belief in the resurrection because, as Wright notes (*RSG*, 689):

The grave-clothes seem to be understood as a sign of what happened to Jesus, a sign which would be the functional equivalent of the actual appearances of Jesus (John 20.19-23). The beloved disciple came to his new belief, the text wants us to understand, not simply on the basis of the emptiness of the tomb (which had been explained by Mary in verse 2 in terms of the removal of the body to an unknown location), but on the basis of what he deduced both from the fact the grave-clothes had been left behind and from the position in which they were lying. He, like Thomas at the end of the chapter, saw something which elicited faith.

body. And the Gospels and Acts report that the disciples received precisely that kind of evidence, experiences that confirmed Jesus' materiality.

Matthew reports that the women took hold of Jesus' feet (Mat. 28:9). Luke says in Lk. 24:36-43 that Jesus dispelled the disciples' thinking that he was a spirit by having them feel that he was "flesh and bone" and by eating something with them. Luke, who asserts in Lk. 1:3 that he "followed all things closely for some time past," reports in Acts 1:3 that Jesus "presented himself alive to them *by many proofs*, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." The report he gives of Peter's sermon in Acts 10 includes the statement in v. 40-41 that "God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, *who ate and drank with him after he rose*." John reports in Jn. 20:25 that Thomas would not believe Jesus had been resurrected, as opposed to having appeared as a spirit, until he could both feel the solidity of his body and the marks of his crucifixion. And he was given just that evidence by the Lord (Jn. 20:26-29), which turned him around. John also reports that Jesus breathed on the disciples (Jn. 20:22) and implies that he ate with them (Jn. 21:9-13).

Any attempt to write off this evidence by claiming the reported experiences of Jesus' materiality derived from a later belief that was projected back into the Gospel accounts stumbles over several facts (in addition to the reliability of the Gospels generally). As I noted above (pp. 22-23), the resurrection accounts in the Gospels have four features that indicate they are very early accounts rather than later inventions.

And we know the early disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected, which means they believed they had encountered him in bodily form. Since the belief they encountered him in bodily form was present from the beginning, as early as their belief in his resurrection, it cannot have arisen later as proposed by this theory.

Moreover, if the Gospel writers were willing to fabricate evidence to bolster the notion that the disciples had encountered Jesus in bodily form, they would not have included information that was inconvenient for that purpose. Specifically, Luke would not have reported that Cleopas and his companion were initially kept from recognizing Jesus (Lk. 24:16, 31), that Jesus disappeared from their sight (Lk. 24:31), or that they were startled by Jesus, thinking he was a spirit (Lk. 24:37). Neither would John have reported that Mary initially did not recognize Jesus (Jn. 20:14) and that Jesus came among them when the doors were locked (Jn. 20:19, 26).¹¹ The fact they included that

¹¹ The inference a few have drawn from Lk. 24:31b, 36 and Jn. 20:19, 26 that the Lord's resurrection body was essentially or customarily nonmaterial but capable of temporary materialization is unfounded. In the first place, the reports that the resurrected Christ came and stood among the disciples in a room that had closed or locked doors (the word can be understood either way) say nothing about how he entered the room. Though many assume he passed through the door or walls, no text says that. The jail doors in Acts 5:19-23 were opened for the apostles to exit and then closed and locked without any of that being perceived by the guards. All they knew was that the apostles were in the locked cell and then were not in the locked cell. Here they knew only that Jesus was not in the closed room and then was in the closed room. Of course, if God chose to bring the physical Jesus through the door miraculously, he could do it. But that would be a special miracle not a statement about the general nature of Christ's resurrection body. More

potentially adverse material demonstrates their commitment to reporting the tradition accurately, which strengthens the credibility of their testimony about the experiences of Jesus' materiality.

b. Evidence of the empty tomb

As for the evidence of the empty tomb, the Gospels report that the disciples became convinced Jesus' tomb was empty because they saw with their own eyes that it was empty (Mat. 28:5-6; Mk. 16:5-6; Lk. 24:2-3, 12, 22-24; Jn. 20:4-9, 11-13).¹² The credibility of these reports is especially strong because they list women as the primary witnesses to the empty tomb.

The women are the first witnesses mentioned regarding the empty tomb, and they are mentioned in all four Gospels. This is significant because the testimony of women was regarded as less trustworthy in both Jewish and Roman cultures. You see this in Celsus's second-century attack on Christianity when he dismisses the report of the resurrection as having come from "a hysterical female" (Van Voorst, 66). This is powerful evidence that the Gospel writers did not make up the story of the empty tomb because if they had they would not have had women be the ones to find it. They would have written the story to be more culturally credible so as to be of greater use in advancing the Christian faith. N. T. Wright comments (*RSG*, 607-608):

Even if we suppose that Mark made up most of his material, and did so some time in the late 60s at the earliest, it will not do to have him, or anyone else at that stage, making up a would-be apologetic legend about an empty tomb *and having women be the ones who find it*. The point has been repeated over and over in scholarship, but its full impact has not always been felt; women were simply not acceptable as legal witnesses.

generally, Francis Beckwith explains in "Identity and Resurrection: A Review Article," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (1990) 372:

The fundamental problem with [this view] is that [it] confuses ontology with epistemology—that is, [it] confuses Biblical statements about the being of Jesus' resurrected body with Biblical statements about the knowledge of the observers of Jesus' resurrected body. All the "materialistic" passages concern the being of his body (e.g. "Touch me and understand, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" [Luke 24:39b]), while the "nonmaterialistic" passages concern the inability of the observers to see the risen Lord (e.g. "He disappeared from their sight" [Luke 24:31]). . . . Some of the materialistic passages [one proponent of the nonmaterial view] cites (and one that is not cited [John 2:19–21]) have Jesus saying he is a body of flesh and bones. Yet it is interesting to note that [the proponent] does not cite one nonmaterialistic passage in which Jesus says his body is immaterial; he merely cites passages in which Jesus cannot be seen. Granted that the nonmaterialistic passages tell us that Jesus' resurrected body is far different from an ordinary physical body (i.e. it is an immortal "spiritual" body), it is a logical *non sequitur* to say from this fact that it follows that Jesus' body is not physical.

¹² As for how the resurrection accounts may fit together, see John Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

We may regret it, but that is how the Jewish world (and most others) worked. The debate between Origen and Celsus shows that critics of Christianity could seize on the story of the women in order to scoff at the whole tale; were the legend-writers really so ignorant of the likely reaction? If they could have invented stories of fine, upstanding, reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact the first on the scene, or that the early church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both. Would the other evangelists have been so slavishly foolish as to copy the story unless they were convinced that, despite being an apologetic liability, it was historically trustworthy?

The reports that the disciples found the tomb empty are reinforced by independent evidence that the tomb was indeed empty. The message of Christ's resurrection was first preached publicly in the place where Jesus was crucified, and yet his enemies did not produce his corpse.

We know from multiple New Testament authors, from the Jewish historian Josephus, and from the Roman historian Tacitus that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem (Josephus and Tacitus both noting he was crucified by Pilate, who was the governor of Judea). We also know from Acts that the message of Jesus' resurrection was first proclaimed publicly in Jerusalem, which claim is corroborated by Tacitus who reports that the church started in Judea. Jesus' enemies in the Jewish leadership and Roman government had every reason to drag his corpse out of the tomb (or take people to it) if it had been there. That would have put a humiliating end to the disciples' tales of resurrection, and Christianity would have been still born. Moreover, if a body had been produced and its impact somehow rationalized away by the disciples, Christians would never have heard the end of it. That criticism would have left a bright trail in the historical record, and yet there is never a mention of it.

The fact Jesus' tomb was empty is implicit in the claim of Christianity's opponents that the disciples stole the body. That claim is reported by Matthew in the first century (Mat. 28:12-13), by Justin Martyr in the mid-second century, and by Tertullian at the beginning of the third century. In fact, in terms of the historical record, it is the only alternative theory to the resurrection that Christianity's early opponents offered. If it were not accepted that the tomb was empty, there would be no reason to claim the body had been stolen. The empty tomb is the condition the claim of theft is designed to explain.

In light of this kind of evidence, former Oxford University church historian William Wand writes, "All the strictly historical evidence we have is in favor of [the empty tomb], and those scholars who reject it ought to recognize that they do so on some other ground than that of scientific history" (quoted in Habermas and Licona, 73). Indeed, it is so powerful that "it is accepted as a fact of history by an impressive majority of critical scholars" (Habermas and Licona, 70). As recently as 2010, Licona declared (p.

462) that the empty tomb is considered a fact "by a significant majority of scholars writing on the subject."

4. No theory other than resurrection explains disciples' beliefs

No theory other than Jesus' resurrection can plausibly explain how from the earliest days the disciples were convinced Jesus' tomb was empty and that they had encountered him in bodily form after his death. Many alternative theories have been proposed, but for anyone whose mind is open to the possibility of God's existence (and thus to the possibility of Jesus' resurrection), they must be judged abject failures. Here are some alternative theories that have been proposed with a brief explanation of why they do not warrant serious consideration.

Some claim that Jesus' resurrection was an embellishment of circulating stories that originally did not include a resurrection, a later legend that was projected back to the beginning by the Gospel writers. This theory ignores the evidence given above that the Gospels generally and the resurrection accounts specifically are rooted in very early traditions. It also is contradicted by the fact the disciples believed in Jesus' resurrection from the earliest days. The *apostles* believed and preached his resurrection. Paul, for example, was converted in the mid-30s and we have letters expressing his belief in the resurrection that were written within twenty years or so of Jesus' death. So it simply will not do to argue that resurrection faith was a creation of the later church.

Some claim the disciples stole the body and lied about the resurrection appearances because they did not want to appear foolish for having followed Jesus. This theory is contradicted by the fact the disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been raised from the dead. Perpetrating a hoax about the resurrection is the opposite of sincerely believing it. It also is contradicted by the conversion of Paul, who as an enemy of the church would not have believed the fraudulent testimony of the disciples and thus would not have converted because of it.

Some claim that someone other than the disciples stole Jesus' body. This theory has no explanation for how the disciples came to believe they had encountered the resurrected Jesus. One does not jump from an empty tomb to a conviction that the dead person had been resurrected, especially when that was not something expected to happen. That is why the early enemies of Christianity never made this accusation. Rather, they accused the *disciples* of taking Jesus' body. That meant the disciples were conspiring to deceive people about Jesus' resurrection and thus provided an explanation for the alleged appearances of Jesus: the claims were part of the conspirators' deception.

This theory also requires one to discount the evidence that the grave clothes were in the tomb when it was found empty. No thief would run the risk of robbing a grave and then leave the valuable items behind. He would be more likely to take the clothes and leave the body behind. (Roman or Jewish opponents of Jesus are not serious candidates

for taking the body because they would have no motive to do so and would have produced it to squelch the talk of his resurrection.)

Some claim that the disciples went to the wrong tomb. This theory has no explanation for how the disciples came to believe they had encountered the resurrected Jesus. All the evidence indicates that the disciples were well aware of the location of the tomb, but even if they were not, they would not have thought the wrong tomb was the correct one. It is one thing not to know where the tomb is; it is another thing to be so confident the wrong tomb is the correct one that one is willing to proclaim the body missing! Certainly some Jews in Jerusalem who opposed the Christians knew the correct location and would have gone to it in an attempt to put an end to the talk of Jesus' resurrection.

Some claim that Jesus did not really die. He revived in the tomb and then appeared to his disciples. As I pointed out in the introduction to the class, this claim is groundless. Not only did the Romans know how to kill people and how to tell when they were dead, the testimony is clear (including that of Tacitus and Josephus) that Jesus did in fact die. Moreover, Jesus could not have recovered by Sunday from the brutality of a scourging and crucifixion on Friday and could not have rolled away the massive stone from the entrance to the tomb.

And even if he had, his weak and battered appearance would give no indication that he had defeated death, that he had been raised to immortality as the firstfruits of the end-time resurrection, and thus would have no power to revolutionize the disciples' lives. There also are the questions of why no more would be mentioned about Jesus if he remained among the disciples and why the opponents of Christianity never mentioned this possibility.

Some claim that the disciples were hallucinating (or having some other psychological experience) when they thought they saw the resurrected Jesus. There is no reason to believe the disciples would hallucinate, but even if they did, there is no reason to believe that so many different people would share the same hallucination in a variety of different settings. Indeed, Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:6, without fear of contradiction, that Jesus was seen by over five hundred brothers at the same time, and he points out that most of them were still alive (and thus could be consulted for verification). Hallucinations occur in the mind of individuals, like dreams, so different people do not see the same things.

Certainly Paul, an enemy of the Christian faith, would not be expected to share with Jesus' disciples a hallucination of him being alive after death. Moreover, hallucinations would not yield convincing evidence of Jesus' materiality and provide no explanation for the empty tomb.

Conclusion

This lengthy quote from N. T. Wright (*SBH*, 63-64) provides a fitting conclusion to this study:

All this brings us face-to-face with the ultimate question. The empty tomb and the meetings with Jesus are as well established, by the arguments I have advanced, as any historical data could expect to be. They are, in combination, the only possible explanation for the stories and beliefs that grew up so quickly among Jesus's followers. How, in turn, do we explain *them*?

In any other historical inquiry, the answer would be so obvious that it would hardly need saying. Here, of course, this obvious answer ("well, it actually happened") is so shocking, so earth-shattering, that we rightly pause before leaping into the unknown. And here indeed, as some skeptical friends have cheerfully pointed out to me, it is always possible for anyone to follow the argument so far and to say simply, "I don't have a good explanation for what happened to cause the empty tomb and the appearances, but I choose to maintain my belief that dead people don't rise and therefore conclude that something else must have happened, even though we can't tell what it was." That is fine; I respect that position; but I simply note that it is indeed then a matter of choice, not a matter of saying that something called scientific historiography forces us to take that route.

But at this moment in the argument all the signposts are pointing in one direction. I and others have studied quite extensively all the alternative explanations, ancient and modern, for the rise of the early church and the shape of its belief. Far and away the best historical explanation is that Jesus of Nazareth, having been thoroughly dead and buried, really was raised to life on the third day with a renewed body (not a mere "resuscitated corpse," as people sometimes dismissively say), a new *kind* of physical body, which left an empty tomb behind it because it had used up the material of Jesus's original body and which possessed new properties that nobody expected or imagined but that generated significant mutations in the thinking of those who encountered it. If something like this happened, it would perfectly explain why Christianity began and why it took the shape it did.