

The Historical Case for Jesus' Resurrection: Evaluating the New Testament Documents

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Last modified: May 6, 2014

Detective Inspector: We're obviously looking at a suicide.

John Watson: That does seem to be the only explanation of all the facts.

Sherlock Holmes: Wrong. It's *one* possible explanation of *some* of the facts. You've got a solution that you like but you are choosing to ignore anything that you see that doesn't comply with it.

-- *Sherlock* (BBC Version, Season 1, Episode 2)

The Four Gospels as Complementary Witnesses: The Thesis

As Sherlock Holmes, played by Benedict Cumberbatch, investigates what looks like a suicide, he notices other clues that others don't. He deduces, correctly, that the man was murdered. The story demonstrates what we must do to explore a historically unique event that cannot be repeated. We cannot be content with looking at some of the facts. We cannot have a theory that explains only the facts we want to consider. We have to consider all the evidence, from every angle.

Dr. Simon Greenleaf (1783 – 1853), former attorney, one of the principal founders of Harvard Law School, and a Harvard Law professor, is regarded as one of the finest legal minds of all time. He wrote the famous *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, considered by some the greatest legal volume ever written. Dr. Greenleaf initially set out to expose Jesus' resurrection as a myth. However, after he thoroughly examined the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, Dr. Greenleaf came to the opposite conclusion. He became a Christian. He stated emphatically: 'It was impossible that the apostles could have persisted in affirming the truths they had narrated, had not Jesus Christ actually risen from the dead...The character of their narratives is like that of all other true witnesses, containing... substantial truth, under circumstantial variety. There is enough discrepancy to show that there could have been no previous concert among them; and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same great transaction, as the events actually occurred.'¹ How did he reach that conclusion? He started by looking at the New Testament documents.

An Englishman, John Singleton Copley (1772 – 1863), better known as Lord Lyndhurst, is recognized as one of the greatest legal minds in British history. Upon Copley's death, among his personal papers were found his comments concerning the resurrection in the light of legal evidence and why he became a Christian: 'I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet.'

Professor Thomas Arnold (1795 – 1842), former chair of history at Oxford and author of the volumes, *History of Rome*, was a careful scholar of historical facts and claims. Professor Arnold stated, 'I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.' Below are some of the historical and archaeological evaluations that undergirded their conclusions.

Were Our Current Manuscripts Faithful to the Originals? The Question of Transmission

The New Testament manuscript evidence is impressive, with 24,000 known copies, 5,366 which are complete, and some that date as early as the second and third centuries. This manuscript authority greatly surpasses all other writings of antiquity, as illustrated in the following table:²

¹ Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*, 1874, p.29. Professor Thomas Arnold (1795 – 1842), former chair of history at Oxford and author of the volumes, *History of Rome*, stated, 'I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.'

² Fred Williams, <http://www.bibleevidences.com/archeology.htm>, 1995 – 2005

<i>Work</i>	<i>When Written</i>	<i>Earliest Copy</i>	<i>Time Span</i>	<i>No. of copies</i>
Homer, <i>Iliad</i>	800 BC	AD 100	900 yrs	643
Herodotus, <i>History</i>	485 – 425 BC	AD 900	1,300 yrs	8
Thucydides, <i>History</i>	496 – 406 BC	AD 900	1,300 yrs	20
Plato, <i>Tetralogies</i>	496 – 406 BC	AD 900	1,200 yrs	7
Aristotle, <i>Ode to Poetics</i>	384 – 322 BC	AD 1100	1,400 yrs	49
Julius Caesar, <i>Gallic Wars</i>	58 – 50 B.C.	AD 900	1000 yrs	10
Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i>	AD 80	AD 950	870 yrs	Less than 30
Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>	AD 95	AD 1050	1000 yrs	Less than 30
Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>	AD 100	AD 850	750 yrs	20
Pliny the Younger, <i>History</i>	AD 110	AD 850	740 yrs	7
Suetonius, <i>Lives of the Caesars</i>	AD 120	AD 850	730 yrs	8
New Testament	AD 40 – 100	AD 125	50 yrs	5,000+ in Greek

As we can see from the table, Homer's *Iliad*, the most renowned book of ancient Greece, is a very distant second to the New Testament in manuscript support, with only 643 copies. Of these copies, there are 764 disputed lines, compared to only 40 lines in the New Testament.³ The New Testament even fares better than the 37 plays written by William Shakespeare in the 17th century. Every play contains various gaps in the printed text, forcing scholars in many cases to 'fill in the blanks.' With the 5,000+ Greek copies of the New Testament, we can be sure that nothing has been lost. It is also very impressive to note that scholars can recreate all but 11 verses of the New Testament by simply piecing together quotations by the early church fathers of the second and third centuries! The scholar F.F. Bruce, in *The Books and the Parchments* sums it up well: 'There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.'⁴

Are the Biblical Narratives Historically Reliable? The Question of Historical Reliability

One of the most compelling testimonies regarding the historical reliability of the New Testament is the opinion of historian and archeologist Sir William Ramsay. Educated at Oxford, Ramsay eventually held several prestigious professorships. At Oxford, he was First Professor of Classical Archaeology and Lincoln and Merton Professorship of Classical Archaeology and Art. At the University of Aberdeen, he was Regius Professor of Humanity. He received gold medals from the University of Pennsylvania, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, and was knighted in 1906. He pioneered the study of antiquity in what is today western Turkey. Initially, Ramsay was very skeptical of the accuracy of the New Testament, and he conducted archaeological study in Asia Minor to refute its historicity. He especially took interest in Luke's accounts in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, which contained numerous geographical and historic references. Dig after dig the evidence without fail supported Luke's accounts. Governors mentioned by Luke that many historians never believed existed were confirmed by the evidence excavated by Ramsay's archeological team. Without a single error, Luke was accurate in naming 32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 islands. Ramsay became so overwhelmed with the evidence he eventually converted to Christianity. Ramsay finally had this to say: 'I began with a mind unfavorable to it...but more recently I found myself brought into contact with the Book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne upon me that in various details the

³ Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 1986, p.367

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 1963, p.178

narrative showed marvelous truth.⁵ Later he concluded, 'Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest historians.'⁶ The classical historian A.N. Sherwin-White corroborates Ramsay's work regarding the Book of Acts: 'Any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.'⁷

Recently, Cambridge scholar Peter Williams gave a stimulating lecture about very important demographic data.⁸ He suggests this experiment: Try to write a novel about a place you do not know that well, taking place a hundred years before you. What would you name all your characters? What were the most popular names of the time? What proportion of those popular names was given to people? What details can you get right about houses, buildings, features of the land, figures of speech, customs, etc. Williams responds to skeptical scholars who argue that the Gospel writers were people who wrote without any real personal knowledge of the land and people of first century Palestine. They know the right details of names, buildings, customs, geography, and cultural interactions. If people were making up stories, you would need a huge attention to detail and vast amount of research to get these details right. And in fact, scholars have studied Jewish personal names in the first century has been done through literature and physical objects like tombs. The most popular names on tombs, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in Josephus, etc. match the most popular names inside the New Testament. That is very significant to placing the Gospels in the time period from which they claim. These statistical analyses have only been done since the late 1990's and early 2000's. It confirms the authenticity of the Gospel narrators.

University of Yale archeologist Millar Burrows said, 'Archeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the scriptural record. More than one archeologist has found respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine'.⁹ The noted Jewish archeologist Nelson Glueck put the matter in stronger terms: 'It may be stated categorically that no archeological discovery has ever controverted a single biblical reference. Scores of archeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible.'¹⁰

Could the Resurrection of Jesus Be a Legend that Developed in a Greco-Roman Context?

The idea that the Christian community gradually invented the idea of Jesus' resurrection over time has been put forward by some scholars. After all, legends do develop over time. Stories are embellished and exaggerated. Why would this not be true about the resurrection of Jesus? Perhaps this explains how this curious idea got started?

The problem is this: The notion that anyone would have invented the idea of Jesus' bodily resurrection and embellished it is very hard to believe. In fact, it requires some other supernatural explanation to make it work. So if you are going to believe in the legendary development theory, you must also believe in a supernatural force that helped people believe in Jesus' resurrection. Why? Because the further out in space and the later in time that we try to imagine belief in Jesus' resurrection happening, the more and more unlikely it becomes. Therefore, we have fairly solid grounds for believing in the resurrection itself. Let me explain.

One theory in vogue is that Paul of Tarsus, apostle to the Gentiles, invented the idea of Jesus' bodily resurrection. This idea has its appeal. Could a renegade Jewish Christian, the apostle Paul, have inherited a 'psychological event' of Jesus being spiritually alive in his disciples' minds but being physically dead elsewhere?

⁵ William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*, 1892, p.8

⁶ William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 1915, p.222

⁷ A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, 1963, p.189

⁸ Peter J. Williams, "Eyewitnesses to Jesus? A Cambridge scholar investigates new evidence for the authenticity of the Gospels", Veritas Forum; <http://www.veritas.org/Talks.aspx#!/v/1204> (23 minutes). He references Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006)

⁹ Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones*, 1941, p.1

¹⁰ Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, 1960, p.31. Concerning the Old Testament, Fred Williams, <http://www.bibleevidences.com/archeology.htm>, 1995 – 2005, summarizing Scott Jones, *The Veracity of the Old Testament: A Scientific Validation*, 1997 writes: 'When compared against secular accounts of history, the Bible always demonstrates amazing superiority. The noted biblical scholar R.D. Wilson, who was fluent in 45 ancient languages and dialects, meticulously analyzed 29 kings from 10 different nations, each of which had corroborating archeological artifacts. Each king was mentioned in the Bible as well as documented by secular historians, thus offering a means of comparison. Wilson showed that the names as recorded in the Bible matched the artifacts perfectly. The Bible was also completely accurate in its chronological order of the kings. On the other hand, Wilson showed that the secular accounts were often inaccurate and unreliable. Famous historians such as the Librarian of Alexandria, Ptolemy, and Herodotus failed to document the names correctly, almost always misspelling their names. In many cases the names were barely recognizable when compared to its respective artifact or monument, and sometimes required other evidence to extrapolate the reference.'

Could he have shifted this ‘psychological event’ into a ‘physical event’ where Jesus was also bodily raised from the tomb? Could he have accomplished this because he went outside the Jewish community in Judea into the Greco-Roman eastern Mediterranean world? Perhaps if Paul himself was not the originator, maybe another Christian leader, or a group of Greek Christians, did so?

Let us examine how likely that idea is. In the first century, this is what most Jews believed about resurrection, contrasted with Greco-Roman beliefs.

DIFFICULTY:	<u>EASY</u>	<u>HARD</u>
BELIEF SYSTEM:	CLASSICAL GREEK BELIEFS	CLASSICAL JEWISH BELIEFS
US: What are we?	SOUL We are good, immortal souls trapped in a bad, mortal body	BODY & SOUL We are both; both were created good
DEATH is...?	LIBERATION of the soul from the body	THE ENEMY God will overthrow it in a fresh new creation
HOPE: What is there to hope for?	DISEMBODIMENT the separation of soul from body	RESURRECTION God’s renewal of Israel and the physical world
GIVE WEALTH up for the poor, the weak...?	NO since other people’s bodies are not important	YES Because the body and soul were important, Jewish biblical ethics had a strong concern for the poor
SEX & MARRIAGE are...?	From NEUTRAL (Epicureans said have sex with anyone), to BAD (Stoics, Gandhi, etc. said don’t have sex)	UNITED & GOOD Marriage and sex are inseparable because God designed it that way.
POLITICAL POWER	CASTE SYSTEMS tend to emerge; Athens was the first civilization to use mass slavery.	WAIT FOR MESSIAH; NO KING BUT GOD Rome had killed many Jews <i>until legally exempting Jews from bowing down</i> before representations of Caesar.

Although the sell-out Sadducee minority within Judaism renounced the idea of resurrection because they were collaborators with Rome and profited from Roman occupation, the rest of the Jews hoped for the bodily resurrection of Israelites. In fact, it was a fighting doctrine, since resurrection was a future reward for standing up against the Gentiles for God, Israel, and Torah. Where did this belief come from?

Do you think Paul (or someone like him) invented the idea of bodily resurrection *in Greco-Roman culture*? If you had to pick a belief system, which would you pick?

DIFFICULTY:	<u>EASIEST</u>	<u>EASY</u>	<u>HARD</u>	<u>HARDEST</u>
BELIEF SYSTEM:	CLASSICAL GREEK BELIEFS	JESUS RAISED ‘IN SPIRIT’	CLASSICAL JUDAISM	JESUS RAISED BODILY
US: What are we?	SOUL We are good, immortal souls trapped in a bad, mortal body	SOUL	BODY & SOUL	BODY & SOUL We are both; both were created good
DEATH is...?	LIBERATION of the soul from the body	?	THE ENEMY	THE ENEMY God will overthrow it in a fresh new creation
HOPE: What is there to hope for?	DISEMBODIMENT the separation of soul from body	?	RESURRECTION	RESURRECTION God’s renewal of the world, and us, affirmed by Jesus’ bodily resurrection

GIVE WEALTH up for the poor, the weak...?	NO since other people's bodies are not important	?	YES	ABSOLUTELY YES 'We share all things but our spouses.'
SEX & MARRIAGE are...?	From NEUTRAL (Epicureans said have sex with anyone), to BAD (Stoics, Gandhi, etc. said don't have sex)	?	UNITED & GOOD	UNITED & GOOD Marriage and sex are inseparable because God designed it that way.
POLITICAL POWER	CASTE SYSTEMS tend to emerge; Athens was the first civilization to use mass slavery.	?	WAIT FOR MESSIAH Jews were legally protected by Rome	JESUS IS LORD, CAESAR IS NOT Die before you worship the Emperor; hence Rome killed many Christians.

Why would Paul (or anyone) make Christianity the **hardest option** in a Greco-Roman context? Why would anyone believe it? Classical Judaism was similar but less difficult: It was politically protected within the Roman Empire. The idea that Jesus was only raised 'in spirit' already fit nicely with Classical Greek Beliefs. A better historical explanation is that Paul inherited belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection and was able to rationally argue for it.

Hence, the theory that Jesus' bodily resurrection was an embellishment or exaggeration, growing from a 'psychological event' in the minds of the first disciples into a 'physical event' in space-time and history, itself requires a supernatural influence to explain why this idea would mutate, take hold, and exercise incredible influence in cultures that find it to be anathema. If we are prepared to admit a supernatural influence into the growth of early Christianity, or at least admit that very strange things take place in history, then out of fairness we should look into the claim that Jesus rose bodily from the grave. We must take seriously the possibility that this was the original Christian claim from before Paul's missionary activity in the Greco-Roman world.

Could the Resurrection of Jesus Be a Legend that Developed in a Jewish Context?

Did the Jewish disciples develop the legend in the traditional land of the Jews, in Palestine occupied by the Roman Empire? It's also exceedingly unlikely. Among Jews, belief in Jesus' resurrection was accompanied by this shift in worldview:

	FROM	TO
<i>The Messiah is</i>	A Jewish military leader, descended from King David	Jesus, descended from King David
<i>The Romans are</i>	The oppressive enemy	Loved by God, welcomed into God's people
<i>We want freedom from</i>	Bondage to Rome	Bondage to our own evil & self-centeredness
<i>Do we want the land?</i>	Yes	No
<i>Jewish law and custom are</i>	Required for everyone	Relativized for the sake of non-Jews
<i>The Temple is</i>	The physical building in Jerusalem	Jesus himself, and then his followers
<i>The Temple is cleansed by</i>	Recapturing & purifying Jerusalem	Jesus purifying his own human nature
<i>The Scriptures point to</i>	Israel's liberation from others	Israel's liberation from evil
<i>The Messiah's death means</i>	Humiliating defeat; you look for another Messiah, hopefully in the same family	Jesus' victory over the corruption in his own human nature
<i>The signs of the Messiah's victory are</i>	Triumph over Rome & his renewal of national freedom	Jesus' triumph over death, & his renewal of humanity
<i>Bodily resurrection?</i>	We expect it for Israel as a whole	Jesus first, those who believe in him later

The Jewish homeland of Jesus' day bore some similarities to the Syria of 2013, fractured by partisan groups vying against a dictator and against each other. The four Gospels portray the disciples prior to Jesus' death and resurrection as hoping that he would lead a military revolution wielding supernatural power, being utterly downcast after his death, and completely shocked and surprised by his resurrection. Given the social and political conditions of first century Judaism being occupied by Rome, this portrayal of the Jewish disciples fits perfectly and

plausibly as real history. Most importantly, Jewish ideas about resurrection were more like present day radical Muslim views: They expected a general resurrection where those who were faithful to God and Torah and even died in the cause would be rewarded (as described in 2 Macc.7), and betrayers and enemies would be tormented. No one expected a singular resurrection of one person, least of all the Messiah. Thus, none of the disciples had a preconceived idea that Jesus would be resurrected, nor did they have a personal, emotional investment in such an idea, which would have given an impetus to a hallucination. Nor did they or anyone have a moral, emotional inclination to do all the things which they did and said which, as they argued, flowed theologically from the resurrection of Jesus. The fact that Christian theology and ethics emerged fully matured from the very beginning of the Christian movement is quite significant, and very impressive.

For the early Jewish Christian disciples, belief in Jesus' resurrection flowed out into a complete worldview with story, ethics, and definition of community. Jesus' new humanity was for all humanity, so Jesus' followers understood that Jesus wanted them to love their Roman oppressors and Jewish betrayers alike and win them into Jesus' new community. Jesus' victory was achieved through personal moral resolve against an internal foe, so the proper way to deal with ethnic conflict was to renounce military resistance even as Jewish ethnocentric zealotry continued for the next one hundred years, resist the internal foes of hatred and jealousy, and be reconciled with one's enemies. Jesus personally renounced the sacred Promised Land to verbally spread his message, calling his disciples to do the same. He dramatically shared whatever personal wealth he had, setting a very clear example for his followers. Jesus did not require all his followers to observe Jewish cultural distinctives like observing kosher laws and Sabbath practice, so he relativized Jewish culture at a time when the Jews felt like an unprotected minority fighting to retain their cultural distinctiveness. He courageously embraced persecution by his own national leadership, calling his followers to accept the same. The Christian community then took shape from these declarations. And so on. All that is very remarkable. But the context of the emergence of the Christian movement makes it even more significant. Why would this particular kind of reconciliation movement emerge, fully formed, in the midst of an occupied country which was oppressed by foreign enemies, bubbling over with foment, and fragmented into many political parties, at odds with all of them yet publicly and openly claiming a superior intellectual heritage based on ancient texts?

Do the Gospel Narratives Tell One Story? The Question of Content

So what do these Gospel accounts say? Within well understood Hebrew literary conventions,¹¹ the four Gospels contain some literary differences, but not historical discrepancies. For example, here are the questions asked of the resurrection narratives in the four Gospels.

Were there men (Mark, Luke) or angels (Matthew, John) at the tomb? Angels. The Old Testament literary precedent was to describe the appearances of angels and even God as 'men' (e.g. Gen.18:2; 19:1; Judg.13:16; Dan.10:5; Zech.1:8, 11). Jewish scholar of the Hebrew Bible Jon D. Levenson says, 'The notion that "man" (ish) can denote an angel in biblical Hebrew is beyond dispute.'¹² And as an example, one suspects that Luke's description, 'two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing,' should probably not be taken to mean two ordinary human beings.

Was there one angel (Matthew, Mark) or were there two angels (Luke, John) at the tomb? Two. Hebrew biblical narrative and common sense allow a narrator to leave out information, but not to make up anything.¹³ On the number of angels, each Gospel writer desires a literary symmetry between beginning and end.

Matthew relates the same elements in the beginning of his Gospel as at the end: one angel's announcement (to Joseph in 1:20 – 23 and then to the women at the tomb in 28:2 – 7), the fulfillment of a prediction (Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah's birth in 1:23 and Jesus' own prediction of his resurrection 'just as he said' in 28:6), Gentile inclusion through Jesus by conversion (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba in Jesus' lineage in 1:1 – 17 and the Gentiles called through Jesus' great commission in 28:16 – 20), Jesus' kingly authority by virtue of being a

¹¹ The four Gospels employ literary techniques found in Old Testament biblical narrative. Jewish scholars of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament include: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative, The World of Biblical Literature*; Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was*; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Christian scholars include: J.P. Folkelmann, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*; Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was*; John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative, Old Testament Theology*. Scholars of the Gospels as literature include: Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*; Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant's Eyes*; Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God, The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

¹² Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p.108

¹³ Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*

descendant of King David and recipient of the promises God made to the final heir of David (Jesus' legitimacy in claiming David's royal title is stressed in 1:1 – 17 and his claim to authority over the nations is raised in 28:17), and the theme of Immanuel – 'God with us' (Jesus' is named 'Immanuel' in 1:23 and then he says to his disciples, 'I am with you always' in 28:20). Hence, Matthew's literary intentionality is fairly evident. He narrates one angel at the tomb in Matthew 28:2 – 7 to match the appearance of one angel to Joseph in Matthew 1:20 – 23.

Luke works with pairings of people, songs, and stories throughout his narrative. He starts his narrative with two people, Zacharias and Elizabeth (1:5 – 25), beginning the announcement to Israel the news of the kingdom of God. But also in his literary introduction are two angel visits, one to Zachariah (1:11 – 20) and one to Mary (1:26 – 37); two women who supernaturally bear sons, Elizabeth bearing John the Baptist (1:36 – 57) and Mary bearing Jesus of Nazareth (1:31 – 41; 2:1 – 7); two songs, Mary's Magnificat (1:46 – 55) and Zacharias' Benedictus (1:67 – 79); two elderly representatives of Israel who greet the infant Jesus in the Temple, Simeon (2:25 – 35) and Anna (2:36 – 38); two narrated appearances of Jesus in the Temple, one at his birth (2:21 – 40) and one at age twelve (2:41 – 52). Not surprisingly, as an adult starting his public ministry, Jesus appears in two synagogues, Nazareth (4:14 – 30) and Capernaum (4:31 – 44); and so on. Luke ends his narrative with two 'men' (24:4) announcing to a renewed Israel the news of Jesus rising with a renewed human nature; two disciples (Cleopas and perhaps his wife Mary) on the Emmaus Road interacting with Jesus (24:13 – 34); and two narrated appearances of the resurrected Jesus, one on the Emmaus Road (24:13 – 34) and the other in Jerusalem (24:35 – 53). Luke's literary pattern of pairings remains constant. He also uses the same literary technique as Matthew in pairing the beginning and the ending: in the beginning, two people (Elizabeth and Zacharias) publicly announce the dawning of the kingdom (1:5 – 25 and 1:67 – 79). In the end, two 'men' announce to the disciples the resurrection of Jesus and the empty tomb. To further parallel the birth and resurrection of Jesus, Luke uses the same language of wrapping and laying Jesus' body. When Jesus was born, Mary 'wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger' (2:7) so that from there Jesus might proceed into his human life. When Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea, who curiously bears the same name as Joseph of Nazareth, 'wrapped [Jesus' body] in a linen cloth, and laid him in a tomb' (23:53), so that from there Jesus might proceed into his resurrected human life. These literary markers invite us to place the beginning and ending of Luke's Gospel in parallel. It suffices to explain why Luke uses the term 'two men' even though those men were angels.

Mark also seems to desire literary symmetry between beginning and end. At the beginning of Mark's narrative, one man, John the Baptist, began a movement and directed people to Jesus in Galilee (1:4 – 8). At the end of the narrative, one 'man' directed people to the resurrected Jesus, once more in Galilee (16:5 – 8). The motif of passing from death to life also serves as a conceptual parallel between the beginning and the ending of Mark's narrative. At the beginning, we see John the Baptist practicing the ceremony of baptism, signifying a dying and rising (1:4 – 11). Then at the end, we are told of Jesus actually dying and rising (15:37 – 16:8). At the beginning, John the Baptist promises that Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit (1:8). At the end, the implied encounter with the resurrected Jesus also implies that Jesus will bestow the Holy Spirit (16:8). Although Mark declines to narrate Jesus' birth and instead parallels the start of Jesus' ministry to the start of Jesus' resurrection life, the same literary principles are at work. Mark, like Matthew and Luke, intentionally structures the end of his narrative to correspond with the beginning. Hence, Mark narrates the angelic accompaniment to Jesus' resurrection as one 'young man' whose clothing is described (16:5) to parallel the one man John the Baptist whose clothing is also described (1:6).

John starts his narrative with an image of Jesus as a new Temple: 'the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us' (1:14). John ends his narrative with the two angels (20:12) probably because they were another image from the old Temple: the two angels over the ark of the covenant between whom the presence of God was manifested. Once again, there is a clear literary reason why John would call the angels 'angels' instead of men, and why John would note that there were two of them.

This principle of economy in storytelling also explains why the lists of women vary. Each Gospel writer is probably pointing out women familiar to the Gospel writer's original audience, and not claiming to be exhaustive. Notice that John's account highlights Mary Magdalene. Yet Mary, though her own voice, refers to the other women; Mary says 'we' in John 20:2.

Did Jesus first appear to the disciples in Galilee (Matthew, Mark) or Jerusalem (Luke, John)? Jerusalem. Jesus also wanted to meet them later in Galilee for symbolic reasons: Galilee was where Jesus enacted ministry to Jews and Gentiles; Matthew and Mark make use of this fact to signal the start of the global mission. Matthew and Mark knew about the Jerusalem appearances, but were simply using the principle of economy in storytelling.

So, we must evaluate the central claim of these writers. Did Jesus rise from the dead bodily? In an age filled with Jewish ethnocentric, nationalistic fervor and military revolution, what best explains this Jewish claim about Jesus' resurrection?

1. The 'Swoon Theory': Jesus somehow survived crucifixion and escaped the tomb, failed to deliver on any national hopes, but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.
2. The 'Stolen Body' Theory: The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus stole Jesus' dead body, failed to deliver on any national hopes, but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.
3. The 'Mass Hallucination' Theory: The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus all had the same delusion, failed to deliver on any national hopes, but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.
4. The 'Growth of Legend' Theory: The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus developed the idea of resurrection over time, failed to deliver on any national hopes, but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.
5. The Christian Theory: Jesus' resurrection forced his earliest Jewish followers and others, against their own prejudices and preconceptions, to shift their entire worldview and see the Scriptures truly.

I will explore these ideas below.

*Was the Empty Tomb of Jesus a Historical Fact?*¹⁴

What is the evidence that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered empty by a group of female disciples of Jesus on the Sunday following the crucifixion, and then shortly afterwards by the male disciples?

First, Jesus' resurrection was announced in the very same city where Jesus had been killed and buried shortly before. Jesus' disciples did not go to some obscure or distant place where no one had heard of Jesus to begin preaching about the resurrection. Instead, they began preaching in Jerusalem, the very city where everyone had seen Jesus tried, crucified, and buried. They could not have announced this if Jesus' body was still in his tomb. People – then as now – would not be so foolish as to believe that a man had been raised from the dead when his body lay dead in a tomb for all to see. As Paul Althaus writes, the resurrection proclamation 'could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned.'

Second, the earliest Jewish arguments against Christianity admit the empty tomb. This is significant because it shows that the Jews did not deny that Jesus' tomb was empty. Instead, their 'stolen body' theory admitted the significant truth that Jesus' body was unaccounted for. (1) Matthew's Gospel refers to the Jewish leaders' attempt say that the disciples stole the body (Mt.28:11 – 15). (2) The *Toledoth Jesu*, a compilation of early Jewish writings, is another source acknowledging this. It acknowledges that the tomb was empty, and attempts to explain it away. Further, (3) the recorded debate in the second century between a Christian named Justin Martyr and a Jew named Trypho refers to the fact that the Jews claim the body was stolen (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, ch.58). So it is reasonably well established that the early Jewish leaders admitted the empty tomb. Why is this important? Because the Jewish leaders were personally opposed to belief in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, and politically opposed to other people believing it as well. They were hostile witnesses. In acknowledging the tomb being empty, they were admitting a fact that was certainly not in their favor or to their liking. So why would they admit that the tomb was empty unless the evidence was too strong to be denied? Dr. Paul Maier calls this 'positive evidence from a hostile source. In essence, if a source admits a fact that is decidedly not in its favor, the fact is genuine.' Neither the Jews nor Romans had a motive to steal the body – they wanted to suppress Christianity, not encourage it by providing it with an empty tomb.

Third, the historical reliability of the empty tomb is supported by the historical reliability of the burial story. New Testament scholars agree that the burial story is one of the best established facts about Jesus. One reason for this is because of the inclusion of Joseph of Arimathea as the one who buried Jesus of Nazareth. Joseph was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish people. People in this ruling council were simply too well known for fictitious and false stories about them to be circulated about them. This would have exposed the Christians as frauds immediately. So the earliest Jesus followers could not have circulated a story about Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus *unless it was true*. Even skeptical historian Bart Ehrman, who is not a Christian, concedes, 'The earliest accounts we have are unanimous in saying that Jesus was in fact buried by this fellow,

¹⁴ My thanks to Matt Perman, *Historical Evidence for the Resurrection*, September 12, 2007

Joseph of Arimathea, so it's relatively reliable that that's what happened.¹⁵ Also, if the burial account was legendary and grew over time, one would expect to find conflicting traditions – which we do not have.

But how does the reliability of Jesus' burial argue that the tomb was empty? Because the burial account and empty tomb account have grammatical and linguistic ties, indicating that they are one continuous account. The two stories share details of Jesus' linen burial cloths (Mt.27:59; Jn.19:40; 20:5 – 7), the massive stone sealing the entrance to the tomb (Mt.27:60, 66; 28:2), and the new, freshly cut tomb being located in a garden (Jn.19:41; 20:15). If the burial account is accurate then everyone knew where Jesus was buried. This would have been decisive evidence to refute the earliest Christians who were preaching the resurrection. For if the tomb had not been empty, it would have been evident to all and the disciples would have been exposed as frauds at worst, or insane at best.

Fourth, Jesus' tomb was never venerated as a shrine. This is significant because Jesus was surely regarded as a holy man, a miracle-worker, if not a type of prophet, and the first century Jewish custom was to set up a shrine at the site of a holy man's bones. At least fifty such sites existed in Jesus' day. Since there was no such shrine made for Jesus, this suggests that his bones were not there.

Fifth, the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb are quite simple, which is a significant article when they are accused of legendary development. This is very apparent when we compare them with the so-called Gospel of Peter, a forgery from about 125 AD that was rejected by the church. *That* story has all of the Jewish leaders, Roman guards, and many people from the countryside gathered to watch the resurrection. Then three men come out of the tomb, with their heads reaching up to the clouds. Then out of the tomb comes a talking cross! This is what legendary development looks like, and we see none of that in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John's accounts of the empty tomb. By contrast, the so-called Gospel of Peter was never quoted from approvingly by any church father, and explicitly rejected by Origen of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesaria.

In fact, sixth, the tomb was said to be discovered empty by the female disciples of Jesus. Why is this important? It is important because the testimony of women in first century Judaism was not considered valid for legal purposes. Judaism did not originally countenance a negative appraisal of women, but the denigrating view of women in ancient Greek culture had negatively influenced Jewish rabbinic thought since the time Alexander the Great imposed Greek power and culture upon the Middle East. As William Lane Craig says, 'If the empty tomb story were a legend, then it is most likely that the male disciples would have been made the first to discover the empty tomb. The fact that ordinary women, whose testimony was deemed worthless, were the chief witnesses to the fact of the empty tomb can only be plausibly explained if, like it or not, they actually were the discoverers of the empty tomb.' It is perhaps significant that when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians between 53 – 57 AD, he quoted another Christian stock summary of the resurrection that seems to have been designed to be repeated in Greco-Roman areas. In it, he did not mention the women. He recounted Jesus' resurrection appearances to Cephas, then the twelve, to more than five hundred people at one time, then James, then all the apostles, and finally himself (1 Cor.15:5 – 8). This omission of the women in a shorthand formula suggests that the early Christians moved into Greek culture aware that the expanded and fuller account of Jesus' resurrection would raise a scandal simply on the basis of the women as witnesses. The resurrection of Jesus alone would have been a scandal enough, and they apparently wanted to draw attention to that claim.

Because of the strong evidence for the empty tomb, most recent scholars do not deny it. D.H. Van Daalen has said, 'It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions.' Jacob Kremer, who has specialized in the study of the resurrection and is a New Testament critic, has said 'By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb' and he lists twenty-eight scholars to back up his fantastic claim.

Did the disciples have a pre-existing motivation to see an 'appearance' of a resurrected Jesus? Or to fabricate the idea of the empty tomb? I will now turn to that question.

Were the Appearances of the Resurrected Jesus Historical or Hallucinations?

The hallucination theory is problematic because psychologists tell us that the various types of hallucinations we experience deal with an individual's fears, memories, or chemical imbalances. But the experience of the disciples was a shared one, complete with a coherent system of shared belief and practice that resulted from it; from a historical standpoint, this is simply astonishing. Moreover, the idea that the Jewish Messiah would be raised from the dead in the middle of history was simply not on any first century Jew's theological roadmap. Their assumption was that everyone would be raised by God together at the end of time. This hope was nourished by passages like Ezekiel 36 – 37, which expressed the renewal of the covenant in a vision of God raising the dry bones

¹⁵ Bart Ehrman, *From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity* (The Teaching Company, 2004), Audiobook Lecture 4: The Oral and Written Traditions About Jesus

of many, many Israelites from a graveyard. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus by himself in the middle of history cannot be said to have been a latent wish, desire, suppressed fantasy, or other expectation on the part of the disciples. They did not have a pre-existing motivation for wanting Jesus alone to be resurrected and seen.

Significantly, the hallucination theory also does not explain the lack of response by the hostile witnesses. The Jews and especially the Romans could have discredited the upstart Christians by simply pointing to the tomb and producing Jesus' body. The fact that they did not is telling, given what was at stake. Their silence as hostile witnesses on this matter is rather deafening. Similarly, the hallucination theory does not explain the radical conversion of Paul three years later.

N.T. Wright suggests, 'We can test [the hallucination theory] out with a little thought experiment. In A.D. 70 the Romans conquered Jerusalem, and they led back to Rome thousands of captive Jews, including the man they regarded as the leader of the Jewish revolt, 'the king of the Jews,' a man named Simon bar Giora. He was led into Rome at the back of a triumphal procession, and the end of the spectacle was Simon being flogged and then killed.

Now, suppose we imagine a few Jewish revolutionaries, three days or three weeks later. The first one says, 'You know, I think Simon really was the Messiah – and he still is!'

The others would be puzzled. Of course he isn't; the Romans got him, as they always do. If you want a Messiah, you'd better find another one.

'Ah,' says the first, 'but I believe he's been raised from the dead.'

'What d'you mean?' his friends ask. 'He's dead and buried.'

'Oh, no,' replies the first, 'I believe he's been exalted to heaven.'

The others look puzzled. All the righteous martyrs are with God, everybody knows that; their souls are in God's hand; that doesn't mean they've *already* been raised from the dead. Anyway, the resurrection will happen to us all at the end of time, not to one person in the middle of continuing history.

'No,' replies the first, 'you don't understand. I've had a strong sense of God's love surrounding me. I have felt God forgiving me – forgiving us all. I've had my heart strangely warmed. What's more, last night I saw Simon; he was there with me...'

The others interrupt, now angry. We can all have visions. Plenty of people dream about recently dead friends. Sometimes it's very vivid. That doesn't mean they've been raised from the dead. It certainly doesn't mean that one of them is the Messiah. And if your heart has been warmed, then sing a psalm, don't make wild claims about Simon.

That is what they would have said to anyone offering the kind of statement that, according to the revisionists, someone must have come up with as the beginning of the idea of Jesus' resurrection. But this solution isn't just incredible, it's impossible. Had anyone said what the revisionists suggest, some such conversation as the above would have ensued. A little bit of disciplined historical imagination is all it takes to blow away enormous piles of so-called historical criticism.¹⁶

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), p.49 – 50