

Chapter 16: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection

Faith does not, however, mean a leap in the dark, an irrational credulity, a believing against evidences and against reason. It means believing in the light of historical facts, consistent with the evidences, on the basis of witnesses. It would be impossible to believe in the resurrection of Jesus apart from the historical facts of His death, His burial, and the witness of his disciples.

—George E. Ladd, theologian¹

One Sunday morning approximately two millennia ago, an angel allegedly appeared to a few women at the tomb where Jesus had been buried. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you” (Matthew 28:5-7). Though they differ in their secondary details, the three other Gospels corroborate this story. According to three of the Gospels and the Book of Acts,² all of which were written within a few decades of Jesus’ death, Jesus *did* meet the disciples in Galilee, eating with them and allowing them to touch him. His body was no longer in the tomb, he could be touched, he could carry on conversations, and he could eat and drink. Jesus had been *physically* raised from the dead, not merely spiritually or symbolically.

Upon hearing this story, many people immediately assume it is the product of the creative imaginations of mortal humans, the byproduct of a deep ache for something beyond this short life of toil, pain, suffering and sorrow. The resurrection story has all the makings of a blockbuster movie, complete with special effects, a heartfelt reunion of loved ones, and a happy ending to counter a series of huge disappointments. But is it really just a feel-good story to help us cope with the difficulties of life? Does our Easter celebration really only amount to a beautiful symbol? Or was the physical resurrection of Jesus an actual historical event?

If Jesus really did rise bodily from the dead, there are enormous implications. First, death is no longer to be feared. Following his own experience of the risen Jesus, the apostle Paul taunts death with confident eloquence: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). If Jesus really did appear in a newly restored body after receiving thirty-nine lashes and suffering the excruciating and disfiguring torments of crucifixion, there is hope that our increasingly frail, debilitated, broken and wrinkled bodies can also be restored.

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975).

² The ending of Mark, which describes Jesus’ appearances to his disciples, was not in the original.

There is hope that beyond this lifetime we will still be able to enjoy the physical pleasures of gourmet food, a loving embrace, a relaxing soak in a hot tub, the physical challenge of our favorite sport, the thrill of riding a rollercoaster, horseback riding, or skiing on fresh powder, the sound of a beautiful symphony, the smell of roses, the sight of a breath-taking sunset or magnificent art, and so on down the list of sensory stimuli that a mere spirit couldn't truly appreciate. If the resurrection is true, not only can we be certain that death has been conquered, but that Jesus really is who he claimed to be, the Son of God who will usher in the kingdom of peace—or perfect *shalom*, in the Hebrew—that God promises throughout the Bible. Peace on earth will be a reality, not a distant pipe dream. If the resurrection really happened, this life is but a single molecule of water compared to the huge ocean of an eternity that is free of suffering, pain and evil.

But if Jesus did not rise again, the entire foundation of the Christian faith crumbles. We may still have a beautiful symbol of new life to celebrate on Easter, and we may still have a set of moral rules to guide our lives, but the hope for eternal life after death is mere wishful thinking. The apostle Paul, who suffered and died for his certainty of Jesus' resurrection, put it this way: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men... If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" (1 Corinthians 15:17a,19,32b). Without the resurrection of Jesus, our hope of eternal life is an insubstantial vapor, and we have nothing to live for but the pleasures we can try to squeeze out of our brief existence in this life.

There is a lot riding on whether or not the resurrection is a true historical event. If there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Jesus is still dead and the resurrection is just a product of wishful thinking, Christians are to be pitied. If, however, there is solid historical evidence that Jesus really did rise from the dead, Christianity offers much more than vacuous promises of eternal life—in fact, it offers much more concrete evidence for eternal life than any other religion ever has. Fortunately, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter doesn't have to be a superstitious celebration of a "feel-good" myth; it can be a celebration based on confident certainty that Jesus really did rise from the dead two millennia ago. Why can we be so certain the resurrection happened? It's the only plausible historical explanation for both the internal evidence from the Gospel resurrection accounts themselves and the external evidence from other historical sources. In this chapter, we'll first examine the internal evidence, as summarized by one expert in ancient history. In the second part of the chapter, we'll take a look at five virtually undisputed historical facts relating to the alleged resurrection of Jesus. In the next chapter, we'll examine the various

explanations historians have advanced to explain these five historical facts. As we'll see, the most plausible explanation—though it may contradict the metaphysical views of the materialists—is that the bodily resurrection of Jesus really did happen.

The Internal Evidence

In his tome, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, prominent first-century historian N. T. Wright makes a detailed presentation of the solid historical evidence that undergirds faith in the resurrection of Jesus. For the first 583 pages (out of a total of almost 800), he provides a meticulous overview of the variety of beliefs in the ancient world with regard to the afterlife, demonstrating that no one at the turn of the first century—whether Jewish, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, or of any other nationality—expected that a man would come back from the grave in a newly restored, immortal, *physical* body. But even though no one expected it, practically overnight, thousands of Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) came to believe just such a thing had happened to a man named Jesus of Nazareth. The only plausible explanation for such a dramatic worldview change and the birth of the Christian church, Wright argues, is that numerous individuals really did see the risen Jesus and told others about their experience. At the end of the next chapter, we will go into further detail about this argument, but suffice it for now to note that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was simply not something anyone would have thought to concoct, much less something anyone would have expected others to believe without substantial proof and eyewitness affirmation that such a thing really did happen.

Before we turn to the external evidence for the resurrection, of which there is a substantial amount, I want to first summarize the internal evidence that Wright provides in the remainder of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, starting on page 587. Because my aim is to keep this book much shorter than Wright's generally are, I will focus only on his summary of the four main "surprise" features that characterize the resurrection narratives, features that indicate these stories were not fabrications, but instead represented early eyewitness testimony of events that actually happened.

The first surprising feature is that there is little biblical commentary embedded within the resurrection narratives. They are, as Wright describes them, "biblically unadorned."³ Throughout the other parts of the Gospel accounts, the authors felt free to interpret the events of Jesus' life and ministry in light of Old Testament prophecy

³ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 602.

and their Jewish worldview. But this biblical interpretation stops with the resurrection stories. As Wright describes it, “the evangelists told their stories up to this point... with a persistent build-up of scriptural quotation, allusion, reference and echo.”⁴ For example, Matthew often inserted phrases such as, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet” (see, for example, Matthew 1:22, 3:15, 4:14, 5:17, 8:17, 12:17, 21:4). But these types of statements are curiously absent in Matthew’s resurrection narratives, as well as in those of the other three Gospels.

The second curious feature of the resurrection stories is their failure to comment on the implications of Jesus’ resurrection for his followers. The Gospel narratives never answer questions such as: Will those who believe in Jesus also be resurrected? Does Jesus’ resurrection mean his followers will have eternal life? This is in stark contrast to the letters of Paul, especially 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 8, in which Paul thumbs his nose at death and expounds on the hope that believers have because they too can look forward to a bodily resurrection. As Wright notes, “The significant thing to notice here is this: neither ‘going to heaven when you die’, ‘life after death’, ‘eternal life’, nor even ‘the resurrection of all Christ’s people’, is so much as mentioned in the four canonical resurrection stories. If Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wanted to tell stories whose import was ‘Jesus is risen, therefore you will be too’, they have done a remarkably bad job of it.”⁵ Since one of the main objections of any invented story about Jesus’ resurrection would have been to promote Christianity and attract believers in a time when they were being put to death for their faith, you would expect these types of “you-too-can-live-forever” statements throughout the resurrection accounts. But they aren’t there.

The third surprising feature of the resurrection narratives is that they portray the risen Jesus in an unusual, completely unexpected way—a way that is inconsistent with the Jewish Scriptures. Rather than depicting him as a radiant heavenly being coming on the clouds, like the visionary “son of man” figure of Daniel 7:13, the resurrection accounts depict the risen Jesus as a human being interacting with his fellow human beings. Rather than shining “like the brightness of the heavens,” as future resurrected individuals are portrayed in Daniel 12:2, Jesus eats broiled fish (Luke 24:42-43) and invites people to touch him to see that he is real (Luke 24:39, John 20:27). What’s more, despite his solidly physical human qualities, the risen Jesus’ body has bizarre properties that no one would have expected, especially after studying what the Jewish Scriptures had to say about resurrection. Jesus could appear and

⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 600.

⁵ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 603.

disappear at will (see John 20:19, 26), and his appearance was somehow different, such that those who witnessed the risen Jesus couldn't quite put their finger on what was different about him. Those who had known Jesus before his crucifixion were able to recognize him, yet they also didn't quite recognize him (for example, see John 20:15 with 16, 21:4 with 12, and Luke 24:15-16 with 31). Wright uses the word "transphysical" to describe the resurrected Jesus: he had a physical body, but it wasn't quite like the typical human body of this world. Because the description of the resurrected Jesus was so strange and unexpected, it is unlikely that the early church would have invented it. Wright makes the point as follows:

If, as the consensus view has tended to say, these stories developed as the church pondered scripture and expressed and re-expressed its faith, we should have expected the resurrection stories to reflect the kind of things that the favourite 'resurrection' passages in the Old Testament had been saying. But they do not... They are not, that is, the sort of thing one would expect if the evangelists or their sources had wanted to say that Jesus had been exalted to a position of either divinity or heavenly glory.⁶

That is, if the earliest Christians were inventing these stories in order to "prove" that Jesus had risen again as a demonstration of his position as Son of God and Messiah, they certainly would have used other descriptions that better fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures. Interestingly, the Gospels' bizarre description of Jesus' resurrected body—a body that is the same as our existing one yet somehow different—fits well with Paul's understanding of our future resurrected bodies. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul declares that when the trumpet sounds at Christ's second coming, "the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:54). Paul didn't get this idea of a transformed embodiment—a "transphysicality"—from the Jewish Scriptures. The question is, then, where did he get it? Did he just invent it out of thin air, or was he describing something that the original eyewitnesses had described to him?

The fourth surprising feature of the resurrection accounts, as we touched on in Chapter 7, is that women were the first witnesses of the empty tomb. Interestingly, while Paul excludes the women from his own list of eyewitnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, all four canonical Gospels, which were written after Paul's letters, claim that women were the first to discover that Jesus' body was missing from the tomb. Why insert the detail about the

⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 604-5.

women if it didn't serve your purpose, unless, of course, the women really were the first to discover the empty tomb? Wright makes the point regarding these women in the following way:

It is, frankly, impossible to imagine that they were inserted into the tradition after Paul's day... 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. We may regret it, but this is how the Jewish world (and most others) worked.⁷

Why would the Gospel resurrection accounts list the women as the first witnesses, especially since the tradition that Paul quoted in his letter to the Corinthians had already felt free to exclude them? The most likely answer, according to Wright, is that the resurrection stories as recounted in the four Gospels go back to a time *before* Paul wrote in the 40s and 50s, "before anyone had time to think, 'It would be good to tell stories about Jesus rising from the dead; what will best serve our apologetic needs?'"⁸

To summarize these four curious features of the canonical resurrection narratives: (1) they don't adorn the stories of Jesus' resurrection with biblical quotations or commentary, (2) they don't expound on the hope that all believers have as a result of Jesus' resurrection, (3) they don't describe the risen Jesus in a way that reflects the resurrection passages in the Jewish Scriptures, but instead give him a strange, completely unexpected, "transphysical" quality, and (4) they don't try to avoid the embarrassing detail that the first witnesses of the empty tomb were a few relatively unimportant women. After presenting these four surprising aspects of the resurrection narratives, Wright then asks which historical explanation best accounts for them. There are only two possible historical explanations: either these stories are fabrications or they are true. Let's take a look at which of these two options best explains the four surprising features of the resurrection narratives.

The first historical explanation is that these resurrection stories were invented by the early church. As Wright explains, this option requires that Matthew, Luke and John⁹ based their accounts of the risen Jesus on Paul's unprecedented description of the resurrected body—"of human bodies being neither abandoned to rot, nor yet

⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 607-8 (emphasis his).

⁸ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 608.

⁹ As discussed in Chapter 11, the earliest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel end at verse 8, after the women find the empty tomb and before the risen Jesus makes an appearance.

resuscitated into the identical sort of condition they were in before, but somehow transformed, so that they are puzzlingly the same and yet different.”¹⁰ That is, because this belief in a “transphysical resurrection body” did not derive from the expectations of the Messiah as laid out in the Jewish Scriptures, Paul must have invented it, and Matthew, Luke and John subsequently based their resurrection accounts on Paul’s invention. Then, Matthew, Luke and John turn this “theology of transphysicality” into three completely different accounts of the risen Jesus: Matthew’s account of Jesus appearing on a mountain and giving the “Great Commission” to his followers (Matthew 28:16-20), Luke’s account of Jesus appearing to two men on the road to Emmaus and then to the eleven disciples (Luke 24:13-49), and John’s account of Jesus cooking breakfast on the lakeshore and speaking to Peter (John 21). In Wright’s words, the three accounts of the risen Jesus “show no sign of mutual influence, but... all possess this same, strange, like -and-yet-not-quite-like characteristic.”¹¹

Moreover, if the Gospel resurrection accounts were invented and were based on Paul’s resurrection theology, how do they somehow avoid any analysis of the resurrected embodiment, but instead describe the risen Jesus in a way that most hearers would find extremely odd and unintelligible? If you were making up a story to convince people that Jesus had risen again and had been “exalted,” why even mention that some people didn’t recognize him? Why would you have Mary Magdalene at first mistake the risen Jesus for a gardener (John 20:15)? Why emphasize how normal Jesus’ body appeared, such that it could eat and be touched, and then immediately describe it in a way that contradicted normal experience, such that he could somehow walk through walls? What’s more, if these stories were written to convince people that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah, why would they never allude to any Old Testament prophecy or describe the risen Jesus in a way that was consistent with Jewish expectations of what a resurrected body might look like? All of these questions point to the implausibility of the first historical option, which Wright summarizes as follows:

If, as a first-century Bible-reading writer, you started with Paul’s theology, or indeed that of Revelation or Ignatius, and tried to turn that theology of resurrection into an artful, just-as-if-it-happened-yesterday sort of narrative, it would be extremely difficult to avoid reference to scripture. If you try to imagine three such people doing it independently and coming up with three

¹⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 608-9.

¹¹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 609.

different stories which nevertheless all share this remarkable feature, in addition to the others we have noted, I think you will find it incredible. I certainly do.¹²

On top of their failure to allude to Old Testament prophecy or resurrection passages, these three resurrection narratives never expound on the implications of Jesus' resurrection for his followers, such as "Jesus rose from the dead, so his followers will too." The lack of these interpretations of Jesus' resurrection is especially strange considering that the earliest Christians were going willingly to their deaths for their faith in Jesus. As Wright says, "The more Christians were persecuted, and the more they began to die in some numbers... the more this theme of hope beyond the grave, based firmly in Jesus' own resurrection, would have been an inevitable part of any resurrection stories that might be invented."¹³ And on top of all this, if these stories were fabricated by the early church, why make women the first witnesses? The first historical explanation—that these stories were concocted by the early church—fails miserably at accounting for the four surprising features of these resurrection narratives.

But then there is the second historical explanation: these narratives record what actually happened, as reported by the original eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus. Wright asks us to suppose the following historical scenario:

Supposing Paul was providing a theoretical, theological and biblical framework for stories which were already well known—stories which, indeed, he is summarizing when he quotes an already official formula at the start of 1 Corinthians 15. Supposing the stories in Matthew, Luke and John—though almost certainly not written down until after Paul had dictated his last letter—were what they were, not because they were a late writing up, or wholesale invention, of what post-Pauline Christians thought ought to have happened, but precisely because they were not. What if they represented, with only light editing, the stories that had been told very early on, without offering theories about what sort of a thing this new, risen body might be, without attempting (except at the level of minor adjustments) to evoke wider theological themes, without adding the element of hope for one's own resurrection, and in particular without the biblical quotations or allusions that might have done for these stories what was done for so many, so recently in the same books. Supposing the reason nobody evoked Daniel 12 in the Easter stories was that everybody knew that the risen body of Jesus had not shone like a star? Supposing, wider, that the reason nobody evoked the Old Testament in the gospel accounts of the resurrection was that there was no immediately apparent point of connection between Jesus' resurrection and the narratives in Jewish tradition? Supposing, in other words, that these stories have the puzzled air of someone

¹² Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 610.

¹³ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 610.

saying, ‘I didn’t understand it at the time, and I’m not sure I do now, but this is more or less how it was.’¹⁴

In light of the four surprising characteristics of the resurrection narratives, the most plausible historical explanation is that these stories stem from very early oral tradition—accounts from actual eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus. Rather than fabricating the “transphysical” nature of his resurrected body, the Gospels simply record the strange characteristics of the risen Jesus that the eyewitnesses reported.

This historical explanation accounts for all four surprising characteristics of the Gospel resurrection narratives. The eyewitnesses were reporting what they saw and didn’t concern themselves with how it fit in with the Scriptures nor with what it implied for their own future resurrection. Moreover, eyewitness reportage would account for the inclusion of the women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb. They were telling it like it was, without thought to the potential negative ramifications on the credibility of the stories down the road. Certainly, if the early church were inventing Jesus’ resurrection in order to promote their new religion and prove that Jesus was the Messiah, they could have written stories that would fit better with the messianic expectations of the Jewish Scriptures. Certainly they could have played up the eternal benefits for the believer more by emphasizing how the resurrection that Jesus experienced would also happen to those who believe in him. Certainly they would have made the first witnesses of the empty tomb prominent men rather than frantic women. When you take each of the surprising features of these stories into account, the second historical explanation—that what is recorded in the resurrection narratives actually happened—is the much more plausible explanation. One final quote from N. T. Wright serves to drive this point home:

The very strong historical probability is that, when Matthew, Luke and John describe the risen Jesus, they are writing down very early oral tradition, representing three different ways in which the original astonished participants told the stories. These traditions have received only minimal development, and most of that probably at the final editorial stage, for the very good reason that stories as earth-shattering as this, stories as community-forming as this, once told, are not easily modified. Too much depends on them.¹⁵

In conclusion, the four curious characteristics of the resurrection narratives are much more consistent with eyewitness reportage than apologetic fabrication.

¹⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 611.

¹⁵ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 611.

We now turn from the internal evidence supporting the historicity of the resurrection to the external evidence. Once again, as we'll soon see, the most plausible explanation for the evidence is that the Jesus really did rise from the dead.

The Five “Minimal Facts”

While there have been many scholars who have successfully argued the case for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, Gary Habermas and Michael Licona aim to cut to the chase of the debate by using what they call the “minimal facts approach.” In their recent book, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, they boil down all of the historical data relating to early Christianity to five key facts, the truth of which is rarely disputed by experts in the field. That is, with respect to the historical truthfulness of these five “minimal facts,” there is consensus among the majority of New Testament scholars, including the most skeptical and atheistic critics. They then ask what historical scenario is the most plausible explanation for all five facts.¹⁶ As it turns out, the best explanation is that Jesus actually rose from the dead. Of course, those historians who rule out the supernatural from the get-go don't agree with the conclusion that the resurrection must have happened. But no one has successfully provided a plausible alternative explanation of all five facts. Let's take a look at the five minimal facts and analyze them as historiographers would.

The first minimal fact is that Jesus died by crucifixion. Beyond the four Gospels, the crucifixion of Jesus is attested to by the non-Christian sources that we covered in Chapter 8. The Jewish historian Josephus records that Jesus was crucified under Pilate.¹⁷ The Roman historian Tacitus writes that “Christus... suffered the extreme penalty [crucifixion] during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.”¹⁸ Lucian of Samosata writes that Christians “worship a man to this day— the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.”¹⁹ The earliest portion of the Jewish Talmud also mentions that “on the Eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged.”²⁰ (“Yeshu” is the Jewish equivalent of “Jesus,” and the term “hanged” was used to describe crucifixion in ancient times.) Even the most skeptical New Testament scholars agree that Jesus

¹⁶ Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2004), 43-131.

¹⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.64 *Josephus in Ten Volumes*, vol. 9, *Jewish Antiquities*, Loeb Classical Library, Louis H. Feldman, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, available in Latin at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/tacitus/tac.ann15.shtml#44>.

¹⁹ Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, transl. by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), vol. 4.

²⁰ *The Babylonian Talmud*, transl. by I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), vol. III, *Sanhedrin* 43a, 281.

died by crucifixion. John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar wrote, “That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”²¹ James Tabor, another scholar who is skeptical of the resurrection, admits: “I think we need have no doubt that given Jesus’ execution by Roman crucifixion he was truly *dead*.”²²

The second minimal fact is that the disciples truly believed that Jesus appeared to them after his crucifixion. This doesn’t prove that Jesus really did appear to them, of course, since many skeptical scholars claim that the disciples may have merely experienced a vision of Jesus. There are two main reasons for the broad consensus among New Testament scholars that the disciples truly believed they saw Jesus after he was crucified. First, multiple early sources demonstrate that the disciples *claimed they saw Jesus* after he was crucified. Second, multiple early sources confirm that the disciples were *transformed* overnight from dejected cowards to bold martyrs following their alleged experiences with the risen Jesus. They went from denying that they knew Jesus to steadfastly proclaiming that he had risen from the dead, even though they knew such proclamations would only bring imprisonment, torture, and death. While some scholars still maintain that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection were fabrications, they admit that the disciples must have seen something to account for this transformation. There are at least nine early, independent sources that demonstrate the disciples themselves—not later Christian leaders—claimed that Jesus had risen from the dead.²³ There are at least seven early, independent sources that demonstrate that the disciples were willing to suffer and die for their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.²⁴ There are four

²¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 145.

²² James Tabor, *Jesus Dynasty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 230 (emphasis in original).

²³ The nine early sources that demonstrate the disciples proclaimed Jesus’ resurrection are: First, the apostle Paul provided written testimony that the disciples claimed Jesus rose from the dead. Paul knew at least a few of the disciples, including Peter, James and John, so he would have known what they proclaimed. In 1 Corinthians 15:11, Paul even states that the disciples—not just Paul himself—also preached the resurrection of Jesus. Second, early creeds, such as that in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, provide testimony that the disciples proclaimed they had seen Jesus after his crucifixion. Third, sermon summaries from Acts (such as Acts 2) provide further early oral tradition demonstrating that the disciples proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. Fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh, the four Gospels each mention that the disciples saw Jesus after his death. Even if a scholar denies their divine inspiration, and even though they may contain bias, historians still consider these four documents early historical sources about Jesus. Eighth, the early church father, Clement of Rome (c. 30-100), who had been ordained as the bishop of Rome by the original disciple Peter, wrote that the disciples had “received complete certainty caused by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*First Clement* 42:3). Ninth, the early church father, Polycarp (c. 69-c. 155), who had been ordained by the original disciple John as bishop of Smyrna, wrote “For they did not love the present age, but him who died for our benefit and for our sake was raised by God.” (*To the Philippians* 9:2) For further explanation of these sources, refer to Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49-62, along with the extensive accompanying endnotes.

²⁴ The seven early sources that demonstrate that the disciples were willing to suffer and die for their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead are: First, the Book of Acts, written by Luke, attests to their willingness to suffer and die. Second, Clement of Rome (c. 30-100) writes, “The greatest and most righteous pillars have been persecuted and contended unto death.” (*First Clement* 5:2) Third, Polycarp (c. 69-c. 155) writes to the church in Philippi that

additional early sources that confirm that the apostles Paul and James, the brother of Jesus, also suffered and died for their belief in Jesus.²⁵

As a result of these numerous historical sources, in the opinion of the vast majority of New Testament scholars, it is a historical fact that the disciples believed they had seen Jesus after he died. They may have been hallucinating, but they definitely saw something that made them truly believe Jesus had risen from the dead, and their beliefs were so strong that they were willing to die for them. Skeptical New Testament scholar Paula Fredriksen put it this way:

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 afterwards attest 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.²⁶

Although atheistic New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann believes the disciples saw a vision of the risen Jesus, he concurs that they definitely saw something, claiming: "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."²⁷ Gary Habermas did a study of more than 1,400 recent scholarly publications concerning the resurrection of Jesus, and one of the

Paul and the rest of the apostles suffered together for their belief in Jesus' resurrection. Fourth, Ignatius, who was the bishop of Antioch in Syria at the end of the first century and beginning of the second, and who had known Polycarp and was therefore familiar with the apostles' teaching, confirmed that the disciples had touched Jesus when he appeared to them after rising from the dead, and that they were willing to die for him because they no longer feared death (*To the Smyrnaeans* 3:2). Fifth, Tertullian, an early church father at the end of the second century, recorded that Peter was crucified for his faith in Jesus and Paul was beheaded for his faith in Jesus, both during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero (AD 54-68). Sixth, the first church historian, Eusebius, records that Dionysius of Corinth wrote in approximately AD 170 that Paul and Peter had both been martyred for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. Seventh, Origen (c. 185-c. 254) was an early church father who wrote, "Jesus, who has both risen Himself, and led His disciples to believe in His resurrection, and so thoroughly persuaded them of its truth, that they show to all men by their sufferings how they are able to laugh at all the troubles of this life, beholding the life eternal and the resurrection clearly demonstrated to them in word and deed." (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2.77 in Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, eds. and trans., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*). For further explanation of these sources, refer to Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49-62, along with the extensive accompanying endnotes.

²⁵ The four additional sources that claim that Paul and James suffered and died for their belief in Jesus' resurrection are: First, the apostle Paul himself claims that he suffered for proclaiming the resurrection throughout his Epistles (see 1 Corinthians 15:30-32 and 2 Corinthians 11:22-29 for two examples). Second, the Jewish historian Josephus records that James, the brother of Jesus, was stoned for his faith in Jesus (*Antiquities* 20:9). Third, Hegeippus, writing around AD 165-175, records the martyrdom of James, as quoted by the church historian Eusebius. Fourth, Clement of Alexandria, writing around AD 200, also records the martyrdom of James, as quoted by Eusebius. For further explanation of these sources, refer to Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49-62, along with the extensive accompanying endnotes.

²⁶ In an interview by Peter Jennings in *The Search for Jesus* (American Broadcasting Corp. [ABC], July 2000).

²⁷ Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus? A Historical Approach to the Resurrection*, John Bowden, trans. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 80.

study's main conclusions was that "no fact is more widely recognized than that early Christian believers had real experiences that they thought were appearances of the risen Jesus."²⁸ If even the scholars who deny the resurrection agree that this is a historical fact, we can be confident that the disciples really did believe and proclaim that they saw the risen Jesus.

The third minimal fact that virtually all New Testament scholars grant is that the former enemy of Christianity, Saul of Tarsus, had an experience in which he claims that the risen Jesus appeared to him and after which he immediately switched from persecuting Christians to proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. After his conversion, Saul's name was changed to Paul, and he became one of the most influential and outspoken messengers of the Christian faith, even though he suffered greatly and was eventually killed for his beliefs. Paul himself provides written testimony of his own conversion in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, Galatians 1:12-16, 22-23, and Philippians 3:6-7. Paul also describes the extent of the suffering he was willing to endure as a result of his dedicated faith in the risen Jesus:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

In the Acts of the Apostles, the detail-oriented historian Luke confirms Paul's story. Acts describes how Paul originally persecuted Christians, was converted when he saw the risen Jesus, and subsequently proclaimed the resurrection even in the face of numerous death threats, imprisonment, and tremendous suffering.²⁹ Even though

²⁸ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 60. The study was published in Gary R. Habermas, "Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3.2 (2005), pp. 135-153. Available online at http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/J_Study_Historical_Jesus_3-2_2005/J_Study_Historical_Jesus_3-2_2005.htm.

²⁹ In Acts 7:58 through 8:1, Luke records that Paul (called Saul at the time) was present at the stoning of Stephen and gave his consent for his execution, the first Christian to die for his faith. In Acts 8:2-3, Saul began to persecute the church, dragging believers in Jesus from their homes and putting them in prison. In Acts 9, Luke records the story of Saul's conversion, which happened after he saw the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul's suffering for his beliefs in the risen Jesus are recounted throughout Acts: Acts 14:19 records how he is stoned. In

Acts ends when Paul is under house arrest in Rome, we know from other early Christian historians that he was beheaded under the emperor Nero.³⁰ The question is: Why would a man who was formerly a powerful and highly respected Jewish Pharisee convert to a religion he once persecuted and then be willing to endure suffering and death to proclaim his new faith in Jesus? His story—that he personally saw the risen Jesus—provides the best answer. He may have merely had a vision, but no historian doubts that he must have experienced something to cause this dramatic change.

The fourth minimal fact that virtually all historians in the field agree upon is the conversion of James, the brother of Jesus, as a result of his experience of the risen Jesus. All four Gospels, along with Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians corroborate the fact that Jesus had four brothers (James, Judas, Joseph, and Simon), as well as sisters who are unnamed.³¹ The Gospels mention that Jesus' brothers did not believe that he was the Messiah, and even believed he was "out of his mind" (see Mark 3:21, 31; 6:3-4; John 7:5). The principle of embarrassment gives us confidence that Jesus' brothers really didn't believe he was who he claimed to be. Why would the authors of the Gospels mention this if it wasn't really true, since it could only hurt their cause? We also know from an early source that James had been a very strict and pious Jew, the least likely candidate for conversion to Christianity.³²

Then suddenly a huge change occurs. After Jesus' death, James converts to Christianity and willingly faces persecution from his former Jewish brethren, not to mention the Roman occupiers. His belief in Jesus was so strong that he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and was willing to go to his death proclaiming that Jesus was both God and Messiah, statements that created an outrage among the pious Jews whose company he used to keep. Writing at the end of the first century, the Jewish historian Josephus confirms that the Jewish Sanhedrin sentenced James, the brother of Jesus, to death by stoning because of his heretical belief in Jesus.³³ That James died as a martyr

Acts 16:19-24, Paul and Silas are flogged. In Acts 17:5, they are pursued by a mob. In Acts 21:27-36, a crowd tries to kill Paul, and a group of more than forty men vow not to eat or drink until they kill Paul in Acts 23:12-35.

³⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, Lactantius, John Chrysostom, and Sulpicius Severus all record that Paul was beheaded during the reign of Nero.

³¹ The four brothers are listed by name in Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3. Jesus' siblings are also mentioned in Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21; John 2:12, 7:3,5,10; Acts 1:13-14; 1 Corinthians 9:5; and Galatians 1:19.

³² This comes from statements about James from the Christian chronicler, Hegesippus, writing in the second century. Even though the works of Hegesippus have been lost, Eusebius quotes Book 5 of Hegesippus' *Memoirs*, in which he describes James as a devout, law-abiding Jew (Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23).

³³ Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:9.

is confirmed by two other early historical sources.³⁴ Why would a devout Jew like James suddenly convert to Christianity after Jesus' death? This is especially confounding because Jews believed that anyone who was crucified was cursed by God; consequently, a crucified man could never be the Messiah.³⁵ After Jesus died on the cross, a devout Jew like James would only be further convinced that Jesus was *not* the Messiah, but James instead goes from skeptic to devoted follower after Jesus' death.

The early Christian creed that Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 provides the most plausible reason for James' sudden conversion. This creed lists James among the people to whom Jesus appeared after his crucifixion. Even if the creed didn't mention Jesus' appearance to James, it would be the only explanation for the dramatic conversion of a former skeptic and devout Jew. Critical scholar Reginald Fuller even claims that without the creed, "we should have to invent" the appearance of Jesus to James in order to explain why a pious, skeptical Jew would, subsequent to Jesus' death, convert to Christianity and become the head of the Christian church in Jerusalem.³⁶

The fifth minimal fact is the empty tomb. While the previous four facts are universally accepted by New Testament scholars—both liberal and critical, atheistic and theistic—this fifth fact is accepted as historical by about 75% of scholars in the field. While the empty tomb doesn't enjoy the same universal acceptance by historians, there is very strong evidence for its historicity. There are three main reasons to believe that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb where he was buried. First, Jesus died in Jerusalem, and the Christian church began in Jerusalem. If the body was still in the tomb, all Jesus' enemies would have to do to squash the Jesus movement was produce the body, which never happened. Prominent German theologian Paul Althaus emphasizes that the resurrection "could have not 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."³⁷ Second, rather than producing the body, Jesus' enemies allegedly asserted that the disciples had stolen the body.³⁸ By asserting that the body had been stolen, they were implying that the body

³⁴ These two sources are Clement of Alexandria, who wrote about it in AD 200, and Hegesippus, who mentioned James' martyrdom in circa AD 165-175. Both sources are quoted by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

³⁵ This comes from Deuteronomy 21:23b: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."

³⁶ Reginald H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 37.

³⁷ Paul Althaus, as cited in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*. Trans. by L.L. Wilkins and D.A. Priche (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 100.

³⁸ The claim that Jesus' disciples had stolen his body is recorded in Matthew 28:12-13. In *Trypho* 108, Justin Martyr wrote that this explanation for the empty tomb was still in circulation in the first half of the second century (available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.iv.cviii.html>). Tertullian also mentions that skeptics were using this explanation for the empty tomb in *De Spectaculis* 30, written in the late second century (available online at http://www.tertullian.org/lfc/LFC10-13_de_spectaculis.htm).

was not in the tomb. Also, if Jesus' body had been buried in a mass grave or had been left to be devoured by wild animals, as some skeptical scholars claim, the enemies of the Jesus movement would have been all too happy to circulate this fact. But there is no evidence that they did. Third, as mentioned earlier, the Gospels each record that women were the first to discover the empty tomb, an embarrassing admission in a society where the testimony of women wasn't even accepted in court.³⁹ If the empty tomb story were concocted, why not bolster the credibility of your story by making the male disciples the first to discover it? The fact that all four Gospels record that women were the first to see the empty tomb ironically gives the stories much more credibility two thousand years later, something that the original authors never would have foreseen.

The evidence in favor of the empty tomb is so strong that the former church historian of Oxford University, William Wand, wrote:

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.⁴⁰

The empty tomb is an important piece of historical evidence demonstrating that the appearances of the risen Jesus were more than mere visions or hallucinations. In fact, there is only one plausible explanation for all five minimal facts: Jesus rose from the dead. None of the alternative explanations proposed by skeptics fully explains all five facts. In the next chapter, we take a look at each of the alternative explanations.

³⁹ In *Antiquities* 4.8.15, the Jewish historian Josephus writes, "But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex, nor let servants be admitted to give testimony on account of the ignobility of their soul; since it is probable that they may not speak the truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment." Also, in Rosh Hashannah 1.8, the Jewish Talmud records, "Any evidence which a woman [gives] is not valid (to offer), also they are not valid to offer. This is equivalent to saying that one who is Rabbinically accounted a robber is qualified to give the same evidence for a woman." In Sotah 19a, the Talmud states, "Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to a woman." And in Kiddushin 82b, the Talmud states, "The world cannot exist without males and without females—happy is he whose children are males, and woe to him whose children are females."

⁴⁰ William Wand, *Christianity: A Historical Religion?* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson, 1972), 93-94.

Chapter 17: The Failure of the Alternative Explanations

Enormous forces in our culture are determined to deny Jesus was raised from the dead. And, over and over again, they use arguments which can be shown to be invalid, and they propose alternative scenarios about the rise of Christianity which can be shown to be impossible.

—N. T. Wright, Early Christian historian¹

As we have just seen, there are five historical facts that stand up to historiographical scrutiny: (1) Jesus was killed by crucifixion, (2) his disciples claimed to have seen him physically alive afterwards and they were willing to die for their conviction that he truly had risen from the dead, (3) Paul converted from Christianity's chief persecutor to its chief missionary after claiming to have seen the risen Jesus, (4) Jesus' brother James went from a devoted Jew to a leader in the early Christian church following his brother's crucifixion, and (5) Jesus' tomb was empty. In *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Gary Habermas and Michael Licona summarize the various theories that skeptics have proposed to account for the five minimal facts without appealing to a supernatural resurrection. As we shall see, while each of the five facts can easily be accounted for if Jesus really did rise from the dead, none of the alternative naturalistic explanations adequately explains all five facts. Interestingly, it is often the resurrection skeptics themselves who find fault with these alternative theories.²

In this chapter, we'll take a look at the eight main alternative theories, some of which we have already addressed in part earlier in this book: (1) The resurrection story is the result of legendary development, (2) The resurrection was just a metaphorical story that was never intended to be understood as a historical reality, (3) The resurrection is based on myths of other religions, (4) The disciples lied or stole the body, (5) Someone besides the disciples stole the body, (6) Witnesses went to the wrong tomb, (7) Jesus didn't really die, and (8) The appearances of the risen Jesus can be explained by psychological phenomena, such as hallucinations, delusions, visions,

¹ From N. T. Wright's opening statement in his dialog with John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation? A Dialogue," recorded in Robert B. Stewart, ed., *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006), 18.

² As mentioned in *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Gary R. Habermas and J.P. Moreland write in *Beyond Death* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998), 125: "David Strauss delivered the historical deathblow to the swoon theory held by Karl Venturini, Heinrich Paulus, and others. On the other hand, while Strauss popularized the hallucination theory, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paulus pointed out errors in it. The major decimation of the hallucination theory came later in the century at the hands of Theodor Keim. Liberal scholars had long before dismissed fraud theories, while legend theories, popular later in the century, were disproved by later critical research. So these scholars demolished each other's theories, thereby burying the major naturalistic attempts to account for Jesus' resurrection by the late 1800s."

conversion disorder, and so forth. Although we will go into more detail soon, the explanatory power of each of these theories is summarized in Figure 1 on page --.

Figure 1: Summary of Theories and Their Ability to Explain the Five Minimal Facts

Minimal Facts Theories	1. Jesus died by crucifixion	2. Jesus' disciples truly believed they had seen the risen Jesus	3. After Jesus' death, Paul converted from chief persecutor to chief missionary	4. After Jesus' death, James converted from pious Jew to devoted follower of Jesus	5. Jesus' tomb was empty
Jesus rose from the dead	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The resurrection is the result of legendary development	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
The resurrection was intended to be nonhistorical genre	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
The resurrection was copied from other religions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
The disciples lied or stole the body	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Someone else stole the body	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The disciples went to the wrong tomb	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Jesus didn't die on the cross					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The disciples had visions of the risen Jesus	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
Paul had a vision of the risen Jesus	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
James had a vision of the risen Jesus	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Legendary Development

First, let's take a look at the claim that the resurrection accounts are the result of legendary development by the early Christian church. As we saw in Chapter 11, textual criticism of the thousands of extant manuscripts demonstrates that the accounts of Jesus' life that we read today are essentially identical to the originals, and any minor differences have no effect on the core doctrines of Christianity, including the resurrection. Therefore, if any legendary development occurred, it was before the Gospels were written. There are many problems with this theory, many of which we covered in Chapter 10, but for our purposes now, we will focus on the failure of this theory to explain the minimal facts. First, as we discussed above, there are numerous early sources that record that the disciples *themselves*—not later church leaders—claimed that they saw the risen Jesus and that the disciples *themselves* were willing to proclaim that Jesus had risen from the dead, even in the face of persecution and martyrdom. The original disciples had nothing to gain and everything to lose by proclaiming their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Moreover, there is no record that anyone who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus ever recanted, even when threatened with torture or death. Any news of recantation would have been widely publicized by Christianity's many critics, including Celsus, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Suetonius, Lucian of Samosata, and Josephus, to name a few. But historical sources only demonstrate that the very people who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus went willingly to their deaths. While it is one thing for someone to die for something he believes in, it is quite a different thing for someone to willingly die for something he knows is a lie. If they were making it up, they would not be willing to die for it. As Habermas and Licona clarify, "Liars make poor martyrs."³

The legendary development theory also doesn't explain why a persecutor of the Christian church claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. Why would an active enemy of Christianity choose to go along with a concocted story about the resurrection? This theory also doesn't explain why a formerly devout Jew like James would convert to Christianity, much less willingly die as a martyr for his faith. A pious Jew wouldn't have willingly converted without strong reason to do so, and he would have easily seen right through any legendary fabrications. Furthermore, this theory does not account for the empty tomb. The only minimal fact that the legendary development theory accounts for is that Jesus died by crucifixion.

³ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 59.

Resurrection Was Intended To Be Symbolic

The second main alternative theory is the claim that the authors never intended for the resurrection story to be taken as a literal historical event. Proponents of this theory claim that the disciples invented the resurrection as a way to honor Jesus and communicate a theological message. The resurrection of Jesus is therefore a fable much like Aesop's fables of talking animals, which were written to communicate a message but not intended to be taken literally. They point to Jesus' own use of parables as an example of this "nonhistorical genre" of literature. There are many problems with this theory, not the least of which is that it can account neither for the empty tomb nor for the conversions of Paul and James. If the resurrection wasn't intended to be taken literally, why was there discussion of the tomb being empty or the claim that the disciples had stolen the body? Why would former devout Jews, Paul and James, risk jeopardizing their souls to follow a man who only symbolically rose from the dead? They most likely were familiar with Jewish fables (later known as the Midrash) and would have understood the distinction between a metaphorical fable and something that really happened. This is especially true in Paul's case, since he himself claimed to have seen the risen Jesus.

Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 6, the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, as well as the sermons from the Acts of the Apostles, all make it clear that the disciples saw, heard and touched the risen Jesus. They were proclaiming Jesus' literal bodily resurrection, not a metaphorical symbol. For example, Peter made it quite clear in his sermon of Acts 2 that King David died and was buried, and his "grave is here to this day," but Jesus was "not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay." He even claims, "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact." In Acts 10:40-41, Peter emphasizes that he and others "ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead." This is not the language of symbolism and metaphor. Peter is clearly talking about a literal, physical resurrection. Moreover, early critics of Christianity, such as the second-century Greek philosopher Celsus, were clearly attacking the assertion that Jesus had risen physically from the dead. Celsus proposed theories to explain Jesus' appearances, such as he probably didn't die, but he clearly understood that the Christians weren't just claiming Jesus had risen symbolically.

Resurrection Copied from Other Religions

The third theory that skeptics have proposed to explain the early Christians' belief that Jesus had risen from the dead is the claim that they were merely copying other myths about dying and rising gods in ancient times. We

already addressed this theory in Chapter 8, but let me just review the main reasons why pagan religions wouldn't have influenced early Christians to the extent that they would proclaim Jesus' resurrection and willingly die for this belief. First, the inclusion of incidental details throughout the Gospel stories, the inclusion of embarrassing and counterproductive information, and the commonplace, unembellished nature of the resurrection accounts are atypical of ancient mythology. Second, the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and the accounts of the first believers in Acts are written like accurate historical accounts, with specific mention of political figures of the day, geographical features, architectural details, and other historical information that is not included in mythology. These historical details demonstrate that the authors were familiar with the geography and political climate of the first-century Mediterranean world, lending further credibility that their accounts were based on eyewitness testimony and weren't intended to be mythological.

Third, most of the parallels between pagan religions and Jesus' death and resurrection appear after the first century, suggesting that Christianity influenced the pagan religions, not the other way around. For example, the accounts of the god Adonis rising from the dead appear after AD 150, and the accounts of the god Attis being reborn as an evergreen tree first appear during the third century.⁴ Moreover, the mythological accounts of dying and rising gods that pre-date Christianity are clearly not the same as the resurrection of Jesus. For example, the Egyptian god Osiris died after being cut into fourteen pieces. He was reassembled (or at least thirteen of his parts were reassembled) and became the god of the underworld. There is no mention that he appeared to others on earth again. His son, Horus, was born soon after his death, becoming a symbol of the new harvest. This mythological account most likely arose as a way to understand the annual change of seasons as a cycle of death and rebirth similar to Osiris and Horus. According to the Greek historian Plutarch, who wrote in the first century, Osiris' worshipers believed his body was still buried in the ground, and they sought to be buried in the same place.⁵ Even if he did reign over the underworld, Osiris hadn't *physically* risen from the dead, a huge distinction and precisely the reason ancient people didn't easily believe in Jesus' physical resurrection any more than modern, scientific people do. The account of Jesus' bodily resurrection, after which he ate and drank with others and encouraged them to touch him to see that

⁴ Günter Wagner, *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1967), 197-201, 213, 219, 221, 223-224, 229, 251, 265.

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, "Methodology in the Study of Mystery Religions and Early Christianity," in Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies*, 21.

he was real, is nothing like the myth of Osiris and Horus, nor is Jesus' bodily resurrection like any other ancient myths, for that matter.

Fourth, accounts of miracles and rising gods in other religions aren't backed by the kind of evidence that supports the resurrection of Jesus. There is no evidence that any of the dying and rising gods were historical individuals. And if an account attributes miracles to a historical person, they are written a long time after that person's death. For example, the first miracle accounts of Mohammed, the founder of Islam, were written down 75 to 125 years after his death and are in sources that even Islamic scholars consider dubious.⁶ Another example is Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, who lived between 563 and 483 BC and left only oral traditions of his teachings. The first written accounts of his life appear in the Pali manuscripts of the first century BC, more than 400 years after he lived. And almost all of the accounts of Gautama's miracles appear in the later Sanskrit manuscripts, which were written in the first century AD. Therefore, it is much more likely that legend crept in over hundreds of years. Other examples are stories claiming that the Roman emperor Augustus had a divine birth. These accounts come from a single source, a book by Asclepiades of Mendes called *Theologumena*, which no longer exists. The Roman historian Suetonius, writing 183 years after Augustus' death, mentions this book as the sole source of Augustus' divine birth.⁷ On the other hand, the resurrection stories in the four Gospels were written within several decades of Jesus' life, and there is convincing evidence that they are based on eyewitness testimony, as covered in Chapter 10. And, because we have thousands of early manuscripts to compare to one another, we can be confident that the resurrection stories we read in the New Testament today are virtually identical to the originals. This is a far-fetched theory for many reasons, not the least of which is that it explains none of the facts, other than the fact that Jesus died by crucifixion.

The Disciples Stole the Body

The fourth theory is that the disciples stole Jesus' body. This was the original theory that had been circulating soon after Jesus' death, as reported in Matthew 28:11-15. In *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr also reports that skeptics in the mid-second century were still proposing this theory as the explanation for Jesus' empty tomb. Proponents of this theory maintain that Jesus' disciples, who up until Jesus' death had been teaching that the religious leaders were wrong, came to the embarrassing realization that their crucified leader wasn't who he had

⁶ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 91.

⁷ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 170.

claimed to be. In order to cover their mistake and maintain their position at the head of a new religious movement, they stole his body and invented the story of his resurrection. While it sounds credible at first glance, this theory has many weaknesses. First of all, as mentioned earlier, why would the disciples be willing to go to their deaths for something they knew was a lie? There is absolutely no evidence that any of them recanted even in the face of torture and death. Charles Colson, who served prison time for his role in the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s, comments on how unlikely it would be for someone to willingly die for a lie:

Watergate involved a conspiracy to cover up, perpetuated by the closest aides to the President of the United States—the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state’s evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it, “to save his own skin”—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on—two weeks! The real cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all that those around the President were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody’s life was at stake. But what about the disciples? Twelve powerless men, peasants really, were facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, but beatings, stonings, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don’t you think that one of those apostles would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did.⁸

There is a huge difference between the first disciples of Jesus and every other martyr after that. Every other Christian martyr died because they believed the disciples were telling the truth about their experience of a physically raised Jesus. The first disciples died *claiming to have seen* Jesus physically raised from the dead. In other words, they wouldn’t be making it up. They must have seen *something* if they were all willing to go to their deaths without recanting their belief in the risen Jesus. Moreover, this theory doesn’t explain the conversions of the skeptics Paul and James, who would have expected such a fraud. Upon hearing that Jesus’ body was missing from the tomb, their first thought would have been that someone had stolen the body, not, “Sign me up for Christianity!” The theory that Jesus’ disciples stole his body just doesn’t stand up as a plausible explanation of the historical data. It is therefore not surprising that very few serious scholars have maintained this opinion in the last two hundred years.⁹

Someone Else Stole the Body

⁸ Charles Colson, “An Unholy Hoax? The Authenticity of Christ,” *BreakPoint* syndicated column, March 29, 2002.

⁹ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 95.

The fifth theory we will examine proposes that someone besides the disciples stole Jesus' body, and the disciples, upon finding the empty tomb, believed Jesus had risen from the dead. First off, as mentioned already, the empty tomb on its own isn't sufficient to account for Paul's conversion from chief persecutor to chief missionary, nor can it explain why James changed his mind about his brother's claims to divinity. Neither of these men was looking to follow Jesus, and upon hearing a claim like, "The tomb is empty, so Jesus must have risen!", they would have immediately suspected someone had stolen his body. Moreover, the empty tomb wouldn't have been enough to convince Jesus' own followers, even though they were surely hoping he would still be alive. John's Gospel even reports that Mary Magdalene assumed Jesus' body had been stolen when she first finds the tomb empty. She tells Peter and John, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" (John 20:2). Only John believed Jesus had risen from the dead based solely on the empty tomb. John most likely believed Jesus had risen because he recalled Jesus telling him to expect it and because he saw Jesus' vacant grave clothes. He probably asked himself why someone would unwrap the body before stealing it!

The biggest problem with this theory is that it doesn't explain the sightings of Jesus, which the disciples went to their death claiming to have had. It must be combined with multiple additional theories, such as the psychological theories below, in order to fully explain the appearances to the disciples and to skeptics like Paul and James. The only two minimal facts that this theory explains are Jesus' death by crucifixion and the empty tomb.

They Went to the Wrong Tomb

The sixth theory is that the disciples went to the wrong tomb, and finding it empty, believed Jesus had risen from the dead. This theory is even weaker than the previous one at explaining the five minimal facts. It has all the weaknesses of the claim that someone other than the disciples stole the body, plus one more. If the disciples had gone to the wrong tomb and started to proclaim that Jesus had risen from the dead, all their opponents would have to do to silence them is go to the *right* tomb and produce Jesus' body. There were many enemies of Christianity in the first few centuries after Jesus who would have been all too happy to report that the disciples had made this type of error, but there is no record that any critic of Christianity ever even thought of this possibility. Although this theory does admit that Jesus died on the cross, it only partially explains the empty tomb, and it leaves the other three minimal facts with no explanation at all.

Jesus Didn't Really Die

This theory, often referred to as the “apparent death theory” or the “swoon theory,” proposes that Jesus was still alive when they took him down from the cross and that he recuperated enough to valiantly appear to his disciples a few days later. Perhaps one of Jesus’ wealthiest followers paid off a Roman official to have him taken down from the cross before he died and ensure that he received top-notch medical care. Another possible variation of this theory is proposed by Michael Baigent in the recent best-seller, *The Jesus Papers*. Baigent claims that the Roman leaders wanted to keep Jesus alive because he was advocating that the Jews should pay taxes to the Romans (Jesus said, “Give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s,” in Matthew 22:21, Mark 12:17, and Luke 20:25). Therefore, in order to both save the Jewish defender of Roman taxation and at the same time placate the Jewish leaders who wanted Jesus dead, they faked Jesus’ death, giving him drugs to make him appear dead, removing him from the cross, and treating him with medicinal herbs to revive him.¹⁰

There are huge problems with all of the theories that claim Jesus never died on the cross, not the least of which is that the vast majority of scholars disagree with this position. If we trust the claims of the Gospels, the water and blood that gushed from Jesus’ side when he was pierced by a spear were evidence that he had already died. As we discussed in Chapter 9, the detail about the water and blood strengthens the case that this was eyewitness testimony, since most people would have expected only the blood. The flow of water was evidence that the sacs around the heart and lungs had been ruptured, something that would definitely cause death, if it hadn’t yet occurred. Three medical doctors researched the historical evidence regarding the death of Jesus and published their opinion in an issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Their conclusion was that Jesus died on the cross:

Clearly, the weight of the historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear, thrust between his right rib, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby ensured his death. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.¹¹

But even if we assume Jesus didn’t die on the cross, he could never have appeared to his disciples only a few days later in a condition that would inspire them to claim he had conquered death. The bones in his feet would have been severely crushed by the stakes that nailed him to the cross, leaving him incapable of walking. And even if he could walk, he wouldn’t have presented the glorious image of divinity necessary for anyone to call him, “My

¹⁰ Michael Baigent, *The Jesus Papers* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

¹¹ See William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255, no. 11 (March 21, 1986), 1463.

Lord and my God!” as Thomas did upon first touching him. Even assuming this quote from Thomas was concocted as a means to convince others that Jesus really was God, why would any of the disciples willingly go to their deaths for a man who could barely walk, let alone stand in their presence after enduring the cross? Gary Habermas summarizes the issue:

A crucified but still living Jesus would have been in horrible physical shape: bloodied, bruised, pale, limping, unwashed, and in obvious need of medical assistance. Such a condition would have hopelessly contradicted the disciples’ belief that Jesus had appeared to them in a resurrected body. True, Jesus would have been alive, but not raised! Additionally, the frequently repeated New Testament teaching that believers would someday be gloriously raised just like Jesus would be groundless. Such a sickly body would hardly be an inspiration for theology.¹²

In other words, a limping, bruised Jesus is hardly an inspirational, martyr-producing Jesus. Even scholars who deny the resurrection don’t buy this theory. In his response to the claim that Jesus may have survived the crucifixion, one rationalist scholar called it “more miraculous even than the resurrection itself!”¹³

One other theory falls under the claim that Jesus didn’t die on the cross. This is the explanation of Jesus’ death put forth in the Qur’an: Jesus didn’t die on the cross, but “Allah raised him up unto Himself.”¹⁴ (Muslims have claimed that the *Gospel of Barnabas* also supports this theory, but this document turned out to be a fraud.¹⁵) As a historical source about Jesus, the Qur’an is far more dubious than the four Gospel accounts because it was written six hundred years later. Why would we believe something written about Jesus more than half a millennium later and discard multiple documents written within several decades of Jesus’ life? Moreover, why would non-Christian writers, such as Tacitus, Josephus, Lucian of Samosata, and the Jewish Talmud, all corroborate the Gospels’ account that Jesus had died by crucifixion? Were they all mistaken as well? If God really did raise Jesus up before he died and substituted a look-alike on the cross to die in his place, why would he deliberately deceive so many people? There is no evidence for this theory except for a claim in the Qur’an that post-dates Jesus’ death by six hundred years.

Psychological Phenomena Can Explain the Appearances

¹² Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and the Future Hope* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 16.

¹³ E. Le Camus, *The Life of Christ*, Vol. III (New York: The Cathedral Library Association, 1908), 486.

¹⁴ See Sura 4:157-158 of the Qur’an.

¹⁵ See Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002), appendix 3.

The eighth theory that we'll address is actually a series of different theories that can be grouped together as "psychological phenomena." According to these theories, the people who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus were really just experiencing hallucinations, delusions, visions, conversion disorder, groupthink, the effects of guilt or a desire for power, or something else sourcing from neurotransmitters playing tricks on their brains. One Christian theologian summarized his initial reaction to these theories when he claimed that, if they're true, "the Christian Church is founded upon a pathological experience of certain persons in the first century of our era. It means that if there had been a good neurologist for Peter and the others to consult, there never would have been a Christian Church."¹⁶ Could the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus be grounded only on the false perceptions of supposed eyewitnesses?

Before we demonstrate the inadequacy of the psychological phenomena theories, let's first list the people who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus and were willing to suffer and die for their claim that he had risen. Based on the early Christian creed from 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Jesus appeared to Peter, then to the rest of the disciples, then to a group of more than five hundred people, then to James, then to all of the apostles, and finally to Paul. Even if this creed is concocted, there is historical evidence that all of the eleven remaining disciples, in addition to Paul and James, were willing to suffer for their firm belief that they had seen the risen Jesus. All of these men, with the exception of John, who died a natural death in his old age, were martyred for this belief. Therefore, not only did Jesus allegedly appear to multiple groups of individuals over a period of time, but these people were so sure of their experience that they were willing to suffer and die for it.

Let's start with the theory that the people who saw what seemed to be the post-resurrection Jesus were hallucinating, since this is the easiest to rule out. Ask any psychologist and you'll get the same answer regarding hallucinations: just like dreams, hallucinations are unique to a certain individual; two different individuals cannot experience the same hallucination. Psychologist Gary Collins summarizes the issue:

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren't something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce a hallucination in somebody else.

¹⁶ J. Gresham Machen in Ernest F. Kevan, *The Resurrection of Christ* (London: The Campbell Morgan Memorial Bible Lectureship, Westminster Chapel, Buckingham Gate, S. W. I., 14 June 1961), 10-11.

Since a hallucination exists only in the subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.¹⁷

Because hallucinations can't explain the multiple appearances of Jesus to groups of people, skeptics have proposed that the appearances of Jesus are not hallucinations, but *visions* or *illusions*. Skeptics have also proposed that the early Christian claim that Jesus had risen from the dead is the result of *groupthink*. Because they so desperately wanted their former leader to be alive, Jesus' grieving followers convinced each other that Jesus really was alive again. Alternatively, skeptics claim, the people who claimed to see the risen Jesus could have been *deluded* in their thinking, and their proclamation of Jesus' resurrection was simply a result of their false perception of reality. Skeptics point to many examples of people who have willingly died for deluded beliefs, such as the followers of Jim Jones, nine hundred of whom committed mass suicide in 1978, and the members of Heaven's Gate, thirty-eight of whom committed suicide in 1997 because they were convinced that their souls could board a spaceship hiding behind the Hale-Bopp Comet. Can the resurrection claims of the earliest Christians really be explained by visions, illusions, groupthink, or delusions?

Let's first consider visions and illusions. Since both can be described as the visual experience of something that isn't really there, I will use the terms interchangeably. The first weakness of the vision/illusion theory is that, even though visions are common throughout the Bible, the sightings of the risen Jesus were of a totally different nature. The disciples and Paul didn't just claim to have seen Jesus, but to have touched him, to have eaten with him, and to have conversed with him, all of which you don't do with a vision (see Matthew 28:9-10, Luke 24:13-35,36-49, John 20:10-18,19-23,24-31, 1 John 1:1-3, and Acts 1:4-8, 10:39-43). In the first few verses of Acts, the detail-oriented historian Luke claims that Jesus appeared to many people over the course of forty days, eating with them and providing "many convincing proofs that he was alive." It is impossible for multiple groups of people to experience the same vision over a long period of time, much less to eat, drink, and converse with that vision.

Moreover, the disciples were so sure of Jesus' *physical* presence with them that they were willing to face death with certainty that their own bodies would be raised from the dead as well. Paul was so convinced that Jesus' physical body had been transformed into a glorious and immortal body that he teaches on numerous occasions throughout his letters that Jesus will "give life to our mortal bodies" (Romans 8:11), that our mortal body will be "clothed with" the immortal (1 Corinthians 15:54), that Jesus will "transform our lowly bodies so they will be like

¹⁷ As quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 238.

his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21), and so forth. Paul clearly understood his experience of Jesus to be an objective physical reality, not a spiritual vision.

Another weakness of the vision/illusion theory is that the disciples didn’t readily believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, a sign that they were using their mental faculties correctly. They were acutely aware of the bizarreness of their experience, and Jesus even had to convince them he really was alive: “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:28-39).

The *Psychiatric Dictionary* defines an illusion as “an erroneous perception, a false response to a sense-stimulation.” The dictionary clarifies that “in a normal individual this false belief usually brings the desire to check often another sense, or other senses may come to the rescue and satisfy him that it is merely an illusion.”¹⁸ This is precisely what the witnesses of the risen Jesus did. They couldn’t believe their eyes, and turned to other senses such as hearing and touch to confirm that they weren’t just having a vision. Following is how one Christian apologist emphasizes that the sightings of Jesus in the Gospels could not just be illusions or visions:

The very kind of evidence which modern science, even psychologists, are so insistent upon for determining the reality of any object under consideration is the kind of evidence that we have presented to us in the Gospels regarding the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, namely, the things that are seen with the human eye, touched with the human hand, and heard by the human ear. This is what we call empirical evidence.¹⁹

Those who claimed to have seen Jesus alive again after his crucifixion sought to confirm their experience with their other senses because they probably thought they were having a vision at first. They weren’t so easily convinced that Jesus was physically alive, and they knew others wouldn’t be easily convinced either, which is why they put so much emphasis in the written accounts on their having touched, conversed, and eaten with the risen Jesus.

Another issue with the vision/illusion theory is that only certain types of individuals experience visions, and the likelihood that a diverse group of people would all have the same vision is extremely remote. For example, perhaps it would be understandable for the distraught and grieving disciples to envision Jesus alive again, but this same explanation wouldn’t account for the appearances to the skeptics Paul and James, who wouldn’t have been nearly as eager to see Jesus alive. In order for the psychological phenomena theories to explain all of the minimal

¹⁸ L.E. Hinsie and J. Shatsky. *Psychiatric Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 280.

¹⁹ Wilbur Smith, *Therefore Stand* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1945), 400.

facts, there would have to be three different reasons to account for the visions by the disciples, Paul, and James respectively, and the probability is infinitesimally low for the disciples, Paul and James to have all experienced the same vision of the risen Jesus for very different psychological reasons.

For this same reason, we can also rule out groupthink and delusion as explanations for the appearances of Jesus. Groupthink occurs in a highly cohesive group, whose members are reticent to voice dissent for fear of upsetting the group's cohesion. Similarly, groups of people share the same delusion when they share similar convictions and acquire their deluded beliefs through the influence of a very persuasive and charismatic leader. Perhaps if the disciples were the only ones to have seen the risen Jesus, their belief in the resurrection could be explained by visions, groupthink, or delusions. But neither Paul nor James shared the disciples' intense desire to see Jesus alive again, and therefore neither was in the frame of mind in which they could have been influenced by the forces of groupthink or delusional persuasion.

So if Paul wasn't eager to see the risen Jesus, what psychological reasons *could* account for his conversion? Some skeptics claim that Paul was suffering from "conversion disorder," a psychosis in which a person experiences sensory distortions that have their source in the brain and not in the environment. The person suffering from conversion disorder may lose his sight, become paralyzed, experience pain, lose his voice, have seizures or tics, and so forth, all for neurological rather than biological reasons. Because Paul was blinded following what he claims was an appearance of Jesus on the road to Damascus (see the story in Acts 9), some people have claimed he had a conversion disorder. The first issue is that conversion disorders usually affect women, adolescents, men in a battle situation, people of low socioeconomic status, or people with a low IQ. Paul fits none of these profiles. Moreover, even if Paul did suffer from conversion disorder, it doesn't explain how he heard Jesus speaking to him. This would have to be accounted for by an auditory hallucination. And even if Paul did have both a conversion disorder and an auditory hallucination, this doesn't account for Jesus' appearances to all of the others, nor does it account for the empty tomb. The same weaknesses apply to all of the other theories for Paul's conversion, including his desire for power or his guilt over having persecuted a group of people he may have come to admire. While these theories may provide some level of explanation for Paul's own conversion, they have to be combined with other theories to account for the conversion of the disciples, the conversion of the skeptic James, and the empty tomb.

Let's take a look at an explanation of the five minimal facts that uses one possible combination of the various theories. Skeptics may propose that someone stole the body from the tomb, causing the disciples to believe that Jesus really rose from the dead. Due to their state of grief and disillusionment, they had visions of the risen Jesus and confidently proclaimed this experience far and wide. On hearing these claims, Paul began to feel guilty for persecuting Christians, and had a vision of the risen Jesus as a result of a conversion disorder and an auditory hallucination. Meanwhile, the devout Jew James, after refusing to believe in his brother's claims, also felt guilty and believed the claims of the disciples. He too may have had a vision of what he claims was the risen Jesus, explaining why he is mentioned in the 1 Corinthians 15 creed and why he willingly went to his death for his belief in Jesus. In order for this theory to work, many different events—each of which is itself very rare—must coincide, the chances of which are extremely remote. Even if we greatly overestimate the probabilities and claim that there is a 10% chance that someone stole the body, a 1% chance that all of the disciples had the same vision, a 1% chance that Paul had a conversion disorder, a 1% chance that Paul also had an auditory hallucination, and a 1% chance that the devout Jew James changed his mind and subsequently had the same vision, the chances that all five of these happened is $.1 \times .01 \times .01 \times .01 \times .01$, or only one in a billion. Again, this is even using probabilities that are much larger than the true ones.

Historians refer to these types of combination theories as “ad hoc” because they rely too much on speculation in order to achieve a pre-determined final purpose, in this case, an explanation to disprove the resurrection. Generally, those who insist on such combination theories do so because they rule out a supernatural explanation at the outset. That is, they base their theory on an *a priori* assumption, an assumption they consider factual before they even look at the evidence (hence the term “a priori,” or “prior to”). However, if God exists, which is very likely based on the evidence presented in the first three chapters of this book, supernatural events are not only possible but expected, especially if God is a personal God of love who wants to establish a relationship with the humans he created. Given the existence of a personal God and the claims that Jesus made about himself, which we will cover in the next chapter, the resurrection is the best explanation of the historical facts.

Additional Evidence for the Resurrection

On top of the arguments we have just reviewed from *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, there are additional reasons to believe that Jesus really did rise physically from the dead two thousand years ago. As we have

touched on already, the claim of Jesus' bodily resurrection is an extremely unlikely invention because neither the Jews nor the Greco-Roman pagan religions of the first century expected a man to rise physically from the dead. Many people may say, "Well, it was easy for them to believe back then, but now we wouldn't be so gullible!" But people back then weren't so likely to believe in the bodily resurrection of a single individual either. Even in ancient times, people knew that the dead didn't rise. They may have believed in revivification—that someone could bring a dead person back to life (as Elijah had done in 1 Kings 17)—but for a dead person to come back to life in a completely restored and "glorious" body that could walk through walls was completely out of the question. As Wright emphasizes: "Proposing that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead was just as controversial nineteen hundred years ago as it is today. The discovery that dead people stay dead was not first made by the philosophers of the Enlightenment."²⁰

As noted in the opening of Chapter 16, N. T. Wright devotes more than five hundred pages of his seven hundred-plus-page book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, to a thorough examination of the ancient understanding of the afterlife. He concludes that regardless of the religious or cultural background of the ancient person—be it Roman, Greek, Jewish, Egyptian, and so forth—no one expected a man to rise from the dead and appear on earth in a newly restored body. The pagans believed, if anything, in a spiritual afterlife, and the Jews believed in a physical resurrection of all people at the end of history when God restored the creation and established his kingdom. Practically overnight, however, people began to proclaim the bodily resurrection of Jesus, claiming they saw him, talked with him, touched him, and ate with him after his death. Worldviews usually change gradually over long periods of time, during which there is considerable discussion and debate. But soon after Jesus' death, we see a dramatic and sudden change in the worldview of Jews and non-Jews alike.

Moreover, Wright claims that within a hundred years before and after Jesus, there had been many other movements whose leaders claimed to be the Messiah. However, each of these other messianic movements ended abruptly with the execution of their leader. No one else claimed to have seen their leader gloriously alive again after his death simply because no one would have ever thought up such a strange concept. They knew people would laugh at such a thing. But if none of these other movements lived on, why did Jesus' followers make the outrageous claim that he had physically risen from the dead? What was it about Jesus' death that resulted in the sudden creation of a

²⁰ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 10.

dramatically different worldview? The only logical explanation was that Jesus really did rise physically from the dead and appear to others in a transformed, “transphysical” body.

What’s more, Jews had faithfully observed the Sabbath on Saturday for thousands of years, and they were distinctive among other religions in their claim that there was only one God.²¹ Why then, shortly after Jesus’ death, did thousands of Jews stop celebrating the Sabbath on Saturday and start celebrating it on Sunday, the day Jesus allegedly rose from the dead? Why would formerly devout Jews begin to worship Jesus as God soon after his death, which logically contradicted everything monotheistic Jews had believed for millennia? Wright argues that there is only one plausible explanation for the birth of the Christian church, with its very different views of the afterlife and its distinctive symbols and rituals. That single plausible explanation is that the resurrection happened. As Wright puts it, “The proposal that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead possesses unrivalled power to explain the historical data at the heart of early Christianity.”²²

If Jesus rose from the dead, taking on a new immortal and glorious body, what does this say about who he is? If the resurrection happened, Jesus either was God incarnate or otherwise had a special relationship with God, for only the creator of the laws of physics could accomplish a bodily resurrection from the dead. In the next chapter, we examine the claims that Jesus made about himself and his relationship to God the Father, claims that many skeptics believe were concocted by the early church. But if Jesus really did rise from the dead, his claims of divinity are not just more believable. They must be true.

²¹ For example, Deuteronomy 6:4 states: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This is one of the main components of the “Shema Yisrael,” the center of Jewish morning and evening prayer services and a clear expression of their belief in only one God.

²² Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 718.