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### Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ-A New Transdisciplinary Approach

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# Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

This book provides an original and comprehensive assessment of the hypotheses concerning the origin of resurrection Christology. It fills a gap in the literature by addressing these issues using a transdisciplinary approach involving historical-critical study of the New Testament, theology, analytic philosophy, psychology, and comparative religion.

Using a novel analytic framework, this book demonstrates that a logically exhaustive list of hypotheses concerning the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances and the outcome of Jesus' body can be formulated. It addresses these hypotheses in detail, including sophisticated combinations of hallucination hypothesis with cognitive dissonance; memory distortion; and confirmation bias. Addressing writings from both within and outside of Christianity, it also demonstrates how a comparative religion approach might further illuminate the origins of Christianity.

This is a thorough study of arguably the key event in the formation of the Christian faith. As such, it will be of keen interest to theologians, New Testament scholars, philosophers, and scholars of religious studies.

**Andrew Loke** is Associate Professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. He is the author of multiple books including *God and Ultimate Origins: A Novel Cosmological Argument* (2017), *The Origins of Divine Christology* (2017), and *A Kryptic Model of the Incarnation* (2014).

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# Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

A New Transdisciplinary Approach

Andrew Loke



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To  
Dr William Lane Craig  
For answering so many of my questions



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# Acknowledgements

This book has taken 14 years to write, and there are many to thank along the way.

The main idea first came when I was still working as a medical doctor back in 2006. A translation of the text of the Gospel of Judas had just been published by the National Geographic, generating a lot of publicity and interest in conspiracy theories concerning the historical Jesus. Sitting in my clinic one day after seeing a patient, I began to ponder how one might exclude all the conspiracy theories and (more broadly) various kinds of naturalistic hypotheses concerning Jesus' resurrection, and the idea came to me in the form of a logical syllogism which I develop in this book.

I would like to thank Professor Michael Wilkins for supervising my research paper on Jesus' resurrection at Biola University in 2007 and my schoolmate Manuel Cota for helpful comments. This resulted in an article published in 2009 by Oxford University Press titled 'The resurrection of the Son of God: a reduction of the naturalistic alternatives,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 60: 570–584. I am grateful to my other schoolmate Ray Yeo for encouraging me to expand it into a book, and to OUP for permission to reproduce the content of this article in this book. I would also like to thank Harold Leong, Timothy McGrew, and David Graieg, and my colleagues Mark Boone, Andrew Brenner, and Ellen Zhang for helpful discussions, and my research assistants Zhu Weida and Justin Grace for their help with the bibliography.

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January 13, 2020,  
Hong Kong

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Significance of the question

On Easter Day every year, millions of people celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. But did this event really happen? The proclamation that it did stands at the foundation of traditional Christianity, and throughout the centuries there has been intense debate concerning its truth. The contemporary debate is hamstrung by difficulties concerning whether it is in principle possible to reason from empirical evidence to Jesus' resurrection given its supposed miraculous nature, and whether all the naturalistic alternatives can be eliminated (Novakovic 2016; Shapiro 2016; Allison 2005a, 2005b). There is a lack of agreement concerning 'what is the task of historical research and to what extent can someone's faith convictions influence her evaluation of the available evidence' (Novakovic 2016, p. 128).

Additionally, in spite of the vast amount of literature on the historical argument for Jesus' resurrection—which has been the focus of at least 3,400 academic books and articles written since 1975 (Licona 2010, p. 19)—it has not yet been demonstrated in a single piece of work how all the naturalistic hypotheses can in principle be excluded. This problem is illustrated by the large monographs by Wright (2003), Swinburne (2003), Licona (2010), Bryan (2011), Levering (2019), and others. Although they make many good arguments, they do not consider a number of naturalistic hypotheses and various new combinations of them in recent literature, for example, swoon, remain buried, intramental, and mistaken identity hypotheses (Eisenberg 2016), and sophisticated combinations of hallucination hypothesis with cognitive dissonance, memory distortion, and confirmation bias (e.g. Philipse 2012; Carrier 2014; for discussion of these combinations, see Chapter 7 of this book). Now I am not claiming that demonstrating the exclusion of all possible naturalistic hypotheses is essential for the historical argument or for believing that Jesus resurrected—demonstrating that Jesus' resurrection is as good as (or better than) the currently available alternative naturalistic hypotheses would suffice to show the rational permissibility (or reasonableness) of believing that Jesus resurrected. Nevertheless, where offering the historical argument is concerned it would be better if the argument can be made more rigorous.

## 2 Introduction

This book offers a new contribution by addressing these and other issues using a transdisciplinary approach, that is, one which integrates different disciplines—in this case, historical-critical studies of the Bible, psychology, comparative religion, analytic philosophy, and theology—to create a new methodology that moves beyond discipline-specific approaches to address a problem. Utilizing an original analytical framework, I shall demonstrate that a logically exhaustive list of categories of hypotheses in relation to the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances and the outcome of Jesus' body can be formulated—indeed, this would be the first monograph on Jesus' resurrection to demonstrate a comprehensive coverage of all the categories of hypotheses. I shall show how such a methodological procedure contributes to the contemporary debate involving historians, philosophers, and theologians concerning the recognition of miracles. I shall address all these hypotheses and their combinations in detail and offer a corrective to the problematic analyses that beset their supporting arguments in recent literature.

In addition to the tools and methods of analytic philosophy, this monograph uses the methods of historical-critical biblical studies, such as a consideration of the religious, social, and cultural background of the earliest Christians, their understanding of sacred texts, their religious experiences, their interactions with surrounding cultures, and the challenges that they faced. This monograph also incorporates insights from psychology and comparative religion. It advances the assessment of the relevant evidence by addressing recent psychological research concerning memory distortion and philosophical discussion concerning miracles. It incorporates the perspective of comparative religion by examining claims of resurrection in other contexts, including that involving cognitive dissonance in the case of the rabbi ('Rebbe') Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), some of whose followers claim his 'resurrection' in the context of religious ridicule and scepticism (Marcus 2001). By engaging with various disciplines, this book demonstrates how a transdisciplinary approach can be useful for bridging the divide between biblical, theological, and religious studies and contributing to the discussions in each discipline concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

### 1.2 Introducing various theories concerning the origination of the doctrine of Jesus' resurrection

I shall begin by providing a brief historical overview of various theories concerning the origination of the doctrine that Jesus resurrected. These theories will be discussed in greater detail in the rest of this book.

The claim that Jesus resurrected was controversial right from the first century. The New Testament hints at the difficulty the first-century readers had with such a claim by portraying people scoffing it (Acts 17:32). Regardless of whether the account in Matthew 28:11–15 is factual (see Chapter 6), it indicates that first-century Jews could think of alternative naturalistic theories,

such as Jesus' disciples stole his body. The debate with non-Christian Jews concerning whether the body was stolen continued into the second century (e.g. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 108; regardless of whether Trypho was a real historical figure, Justin's work indicates that the objection he discussed was present during his time). The early Christians also had to respond to the claim (attributed to the early second-century Gnostic Basilides) that Jesus was not resurrected but escaped crucifixion by miraculous powers:

He appeared, then, on earth as a man, to the nations of these powers, and wrought miracles. Wherefore he did not himself suffer death, but Simon, a certain man of Cyrene, being compelled, bore the cross in his stead; so that this latter being transfigured by him, that he might be thought to be Jesus, was crucified, through ignorance and error, while Jesus himself received the form of Simon, and, standing by, laughed at them.

(Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.24.4)

The pagan philosopher Celsus, a prominent second-century opponent of Christianity, raised a number of objections to the resurrection. For example, he claims that discrepancies are present in the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' resurrection which render them historically unreliable and suggests that the supposed eyewitnesses had hallucinations of Jesus (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.60).

Christian scholars responded to these objections. With the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century the debate subsided, and the attention given to the historical argument for Jesus' resurrection declined subsequently. Craig notes, 'As the events connected with the origin of Christianity receded further and further into the past, arguments from miracles and the resurrection rested necessarily more and more upon faith in the accuracy of the biblical documents' (Craig 1985a, p. 49). A challenge was nevertheless raised in the seventh century by the Muslims, who defended the hypothesis that Jesus escaped crucifixion as a result of divine intervention (see Quran, *Surah* 4:157–8; the so-called Gospel of Barnabas, which proposes a similar hypothesis [see Ragg and Ragg 1907, ch. 217], is widely regarded as a late forgery written after the Quran).

With the advancement of historiography during the Renaissance, the historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus received renewed attention. Debate between sceptics and believers was revived and became heated during the so-called Deist Controversy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries after the removal of censorship laws in various parts of Europe. The most popular naturalistic hypothesis among the sceptics at that time was the theory that the disciples deliberately started a hoax by stealing Jesus' body, and it was defended with new arguments by Deists such as Thomas Woolston and Hermann Reimarus, the latter's writings widely regarded as the starting point of the so-called Quest for the Historical Jesus. Apologists such as Vernet responded with various arguments for the historical

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reliability of the Gospels. These include the argument that the Gospels contain many references to proper names, dates, cultural details, historical events, and opinions and customs of the time and evince an intimate knowledge of Jerusalem before its destruction, and the argument that many eyewitnesses would have been available at the time of writing to verify their contents (Craig 1985a, pp. 322–323). Philosophical arguments against the plausibility of miracles were raised by the French rationalists and (most famously) the Scottish sceptic David Hume (1711–1776), while evidentialist-type responses to Hume were offered by other scholars such as William Paley (1743–1805). A number of quasi-theological and cultural considerations contributed to the subsequent decline in popularity of such responses. These include Lessing's (1777) famous 'ugly great ditch' between history and faith (his claim that the accidental [i.e. contingent] truths of history can never become the proof for the necessary truths of reason), the prevailing mood of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, and the emphasis on subjective religious experiences by influential scholars such as Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard. Lessing's 'ugly great ditch' in particular has had a huge impact on subsequent thinkers. Among these, Ernst Troeltsch (1898/1991) argued that historical judgments are always probable and open to revision (the principle of criticism). Many theologians therefore concluded that the certainty of faith cannot be based on the results of historical study.

In the meantime sceptics continued to propose various naturalistic hypotheses. Interestingly, their proponents would often offer compelling arguments against other naturalistic hypotheses in the process of advancing their own. For example, the deliberate hoax hypothesis by Reimarus et al. was refuted by German rationalists Karl Bahrdt (1784) and Heinrich Paulus (1802), who defended the swoon (*Scheintod*) hypothesis (i.e. Jesus did not die on the cross). These hypotheses were in turn refuted by David Strauss (1808–1874). Strauss rejected the historicity of the Gospels' account of the empty tomb and offered an alternative naturalistic explanation for Jesus' 'resurrection appearances,' claiming that the disciples sincerely believed that Jesus was the Messiah and were deluded in thinking that he rose and appeared to them. Strauss' naturalistic intramental hypothesis was vigorously criticized by Theodor Keim (1883), who argued that the appearances were visions but they were miraculously caused by God in the form of heavenly 'telegrams' (I shall call this the supernatural vision hypothesis).

Nevertheless, various forms of naturalistic intramental hypothesis continued to be proposed. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, it was held by Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, and others. Bultmann (1965, pp. 47–48), for example, thought that the 'Jesus' resurrection appearances' refer to the experiences of the first Christians that were visionary and internal, i.e. the conversion of their hearts rather than their witnessing of a bodily resurrected Jesus. On the other hand, Keim's supernatural vision hypothesis was defended by Hans Grass (1956), who rejected the empty tomb accounts but held that Jesus appeared in Galilee through visions.

Meanwhile, neo-orthodox theologians who were strongly influenced by Kierkegaard, such as Karl Barth (1956, pp. 334–336, 351–352) and Emil Brunner (1952, pp. 366–372), affirmed that Jesus was resurrected miraculously, but regarded this conclusion to be held by faith without historical argument.

Against all the above, Wolfhart Pannenberg (1968) dropped a bombshell in German theological scholarship in the mid-twentieth century when he used historical and philosophical arguments to defend the empty tomb and the miraculous bodily resurrection of Jesus against the criticisms of Troeltsch et al. (see further the discussion on the problem of miracle in Chapter 8). In more recent years, similar arguments have been defended by many scholars (e.g. Craig 1989; Davis et al. 1998; Peters 2002; Habermas 2003; Swinburne 2003; Wright 2003; Licona 2010; Levering 2019).

These scholars would argue that, regardless of the ‘theological’ concerns of Lessing, Barth, and others and whether faith depends on proving the historicity of the resurrection appearances (Carnley 2019, p. 239), such arguments can in fact be offered to show that Jesus’ resurrection is the best explanation for the historical phenomena concerning the disciples’ claims to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus and the disappearance of Jesus’ body, a phenomenon which in any case demands a historical explanation. In response to Lessing’s ugly ditch, Troeltsch’s principle of criticism, and the question ‘how can the certainty of faith tolerate what Wilhelm Herrmann called “the continually changing” results of historical study,’ it has been replied that there is no adequate reason to think that the truths which religious beliefs are concerned with must be provided with proofs that are necessarily true. While humans desire beliefs which are logically impossible to be mistaken, there is no adequate reason why God (if he exists) should grant these with regards to matters of faith. It may be the case that God exists but He does not provide a necessary proof because He wants to give humans the space to make free choice with regards to faith, but this does not imply that He did not leave behind any evidence to let people know about his revelation in history. J.P. Moreland (1998, p. 263) argues that

God maintains a delicate balance between keeping his existence sufficiently evident so people will know he’s there and yet hiding his presence enough so that people who want to choose to ignore him can do it. This way, their choice of destiny is really free.

Likewise, O’Collins (2016, p. 44), citing the theme of sufficient but not overwhelming light which characterizes Pascal’s *Pensées* (nos. 394, 427, 429, and 461), observes, ‘The factor of relative concealment allows cognitive freedom to persist . . . we have enough light to make us responsible but not enough to take away our freedom.’

On the other hand, O’Collins (2016) observes that it is not the case that all the results are continually changing; moreover, changes often involve

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only secondary details (p. 90). Even though we do not possess a complete historical record, nevertheless historians can ‘reach genuine certainties about ancient matters such as the achievements of Julius Caesar and his death in 44 BC’ (p. vi).

Mathematical calculations cannot demonstrate the existence and career of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. But converging historical evidence would make it absurd to deny that he lived and changed the political and cultural face of the Middle East.

(p. 91)

While many historical truths cannot be demonstrated by mathematical calculations, philosophical logic, or repeated scientific experiments, they can be established beyond any reasonable doubt (*ibid.*). He notes, ‘historical experience and contingent truths have a power to shape and change human existence. . . . Both within Christianity and beyond, the concreteness of history repeatedly proves far more persuasive than any necessary truths of reason’ (p. 92). Craig observes that Lessing conflated necessity with certainty and mistakenly thought that necessary truths are more certain than contingent truths. Craig explains,

This is manifestly false, as the unsolved problems of mathematics like Goldbach’s Conjecture, which is either necessarily true or necessarily false, though no one knows which, shows. By contrast I have tremendous certainty that George Washington was once the President of the United States, though this is a contingent historical truth. There is no reason a contingent truth which is known with confidence might not serve as evidence for a less obvious necessary truth.

(Craig 2007a)

Meanwhile, sceptical scholars have continued to defend naturalistic hypotheses, with the intramental hypothesis appearing to be quite popular (e.g. Marxsen 1970 [‘illumination’]; Lüdemann 1994 [‘religious intoxication,’ ‘enthusiasm’]; Trocmé 1997, p. 38; Crossan 1998; Price and Lowder 2005; Vermès 2008; Carrier 2014 [‘hallucination’]; Ehrman 2014). A number of scholars have proposed the mistaken identity hypothesis. Suggested parallels include the claims of sightings of Bigfoot (Goulder 1996, pp. 52–55) and UFOs (Martin 1991, pp. 92–95) and misidentification of twins (Cavin 1993). Concerning the outcome of Jesus’ body, some sceptics have suggested that the women went to the wrong tomb on the Sunday morning while Jesus’ body remained buried elsewhere (Lake 1907) or that the body was left unburied and eaten by dogs (Crossan 1994, pp. 152–158). Alternatively, the body could have been removed by tomb robbers (Carrier 2005b, pp. 350–352), by Joseph of Arimathea (Lowder 2005, pp. 261–306), or even by natural forces such as earthquakes (Allison 2005a, p. 204).

Various combinations of naturalistic hypotheses have also been suggested, such as a combination of swoon, remain buried, intramental, and mistaken identity hypotheses (Eisenberg 2016) and sophisticated combinations of hallucination hypothesis with cognitive dissonance, memory distortion, and confirmation bias (e.g. Philipse 2012; Carrier 2014).

### 1.3 Introducing the relevant historical sources and important concepts

#### 1.3.1 *Christian and non-Christian sources*

Concerning the relevant historical sources, the misconception—popularized in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*—that the New Testament documents we read today are significantly different from the ones in the first century has long been debunked by scholars. Licona (2016, pp. 7–8) observes that ‘the wealth of manuscripts for the New Testament literature leaves us very few places where uncertainty remains pertaining to the earliest reading or at least the meaning behind it.’ (Shapiro’s (2016, p. 135) objection that accounts of Jesus’ resurrection might have been added into the Gospels in later centuries is refuted by this manuscript evidence.) Licona elaborates:

The manuscript support for our present critical Greek text of the New Testament is superior to what we have for any of the ancient literature. As of the time I am writing this chapter, there are 5,839 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. A dozen or so of these manuscripts have been dated to have been written within 150 years of the originals, and the earliest (P 52) has been dated to within ten to sixty years of the original. In contrast, of the nine *Lives of Plutarch* . . . only a few dozen Greek manuscripts have survived. The earliest of these is dated to the tenth or eleventh century, or roughly eight to nine hundred years after Plutarch wrote them.

(*ibid.*, Licona goes on to note D.A. Russell’s comment that the *Lives of Plutarch* ‘have been the main source of understanding of the ancient world for many readers from the Renaissance to the present day’)

Various accounts of Jesus and the earliest Christians are also found outside the New Testament (Van Voorst 2000), such as in the Gnostic writings (Franzmann 1996), the Arabic writings (Khalidi 2001), the Jewish Talmud (Schäfer 2007), the works of other ancient non-Christian scholars such as Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, Celsus, and Phlegon (see later in this section), and other early Christian writings dating from the ‘period of living memory,’ that is, the period from first to early second century within which people who could have known one of the living apostles were still alive (Bockmuehl 2007). However, the accounts in the Arabic writings and the Jewish



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Talmud are late and should be treated with great caution. Additionally, the contents of the ‘other Gospels’ such as the Gnostic Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas indicate that their authors made use of earlier traditions which can be found in the Four Gospels and modified them in accordance with their religious philosophy (Gathercole 2015). These ‘other Gospels’ reflect a certain chronological and cultural distance from the historical Jesus of first-century Palestine and were probably composed from the second century onwards (*ibid.*). Many scholars have convincingly demonstrated that these Gnostic Gospels are less historically reliable than the earlier Four Gospels (Jenkins 2001; Hill 2010). While the Four Gospels are commonly dated between AD 70–100 (Brown 1997), it has been argued that Mark and Luke were written earlier, before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Carson and Moo 2005). Many scholars think that Matthew and Luke used Mark as their source, together with at least one other source. It is also possible that there were multiple recensions of the Gospels (as a result of multiple drafts or authorial redactions to accommodate to different recipients), such that Luke (for example) could have used an earlier or later recension of Mark than the one possessed by Matthew (Licona 2016, p. 116).

Jesus’ crucifixion is attested by a number of ancient sources, both Christian and non-Christian. Outside of numerous references in the New Testament, it is mentioned in numerous early Christian writings and non-Christian writings such as Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3,<sup>1</sup> Tacitus’ ‘the most extreme penalty,’ *Annals* 15.44,<sup>2</sup> and Lucian’s *The Death of Peregrine*, 11. Aside from Paul’s letters, other documents in the first and early second century—such as the Four Gospels, Acts, 1 Clement, Letters of Ignatius, etc.—also claimed that various people witnessed the resurrected Jesus. As noted earlier, some of these claims were discussed by Celsus, a non-Christian philosopher who wrote an attack on Christianity titled *The True Word* in c. AD 177–180, most of which was preserved in the rebuttal by Origen written in AD 248 (Marcovich 2001, p. 14; Celsus’ attack on the Gospels indicates that he did not accept them uncritically). An earlier non-Christian reference (c. AD 140) was made by the Greek historian Phlegon in his ‘Chronicles,’ also preserved in the aforementioned rebuttal by Origen (*Contra Celsum*, 2.59). It states, ‘Jesus, while alive was of no assistance to himself, but that he arose after death, and exhibited the marks of his punishment, and showed how his hands had been pierced by nails.’ It is unlikely

1 While some scholars suspect that Christians may have distorted parts of Josephus’ reference to Jesus, the vast majority of scholars regard the references to Jesus as the brother of James, Jesus as a miracle worker, and his crucifixion as authentic. For a balanced discussion of the reasons for and against authenticity, see Paget (2001); Meier (1991–2016, Vol. 1, pp. 56–88).

2 This reference in Tacitus is most likely authentic, for the Latin style is Tacitus’, the tone is anti-Christian, and all the manuscripts of Tacitus have this passage (Meier 1991–2016, Vol. 1, pp. 90–91).

that Origen fabricated what Phlegon wrote, given that it would have been easy for his readers to find out and given the awkwardness of the phrase that Jesus was ‘of no assistance to himself’ while alive.

### 1.3.2 *Why are there not more non-Christian sources?*

Licona (2010, p. 275) writes that it would be good if we had official documents from either the non-Christian Roman or Jewish governing bodies that mention the report that Jesus had risen from the dead, which we do not. Nevertheless,

What we do have is good. We have reports that Jesus had been raised from the dead from at least one eyewitness (Paul) and probably more (the Jerusalem apostles preserved in the kerygma). These reports are very early and provide multiple independent testimonies, as well as testimony from one who had been hostile to the Christian message previous to his conversion experience. The canonical Gospels probably contain some traditions that go back to the original apostles, although these may be identified with varying degrees of certainty. To the extent one is convinced that Clement of Rome and Polycarp knew one or more of the apostles, their letters may yield valuable insights pertaining to the apostolic teachings.  
(*ibid.*, pp. 275–276)

For those who wonder why not more non-Christian ancient authors mentioned the claims related to the resurrection of Jesus, Paget (2001, p. 615) observes,

We know from subsequent history that Jewish writers were in the main unwilling to engage polemically with Christianity in their extant writings, a point exemplified not only in later rabbinic writings, but also, if we are to believe Photius, in the one writing he attributes to Josephus’ contemporary and enemy, Justus of Tiberias. It would be wrong to assume that such people simply knew nothing about Christianity, or that they were unacquainted with Christians. Their silence could have been illustrative of their contempt for, or embarrassment about, Christianity, rather than their ignorance.

Therefore, it may well be the case that certain non-Christian ancient authors felt embarrassed about the claims concerning the resurrection of Jesus (e.g. they thought they could not explain them away convincingly) and thus they chose not to write about them, unlike Celsus who thought he could explain them away convincingly and chose to write about them. In any case, we still need to consider the writings which we do have. While many at that time would have mocked and dismissed the claim that Jesus resurrected as superstition without further consideration of the evidence

(cf. Acts 17:32; see Chapter 2), what is remarkable is that there were others who believed that Jesus resurrected and wrote about it. Given that the latter converted because they were convinced that Jesus resurrected, their writings would (of course!) be ‘writings of *Christian* ancient authors.’ The crucial question that needs to be answered is this: what are the reasons that compelled these people to believe and declare that Jesus resurrected and to be willing to face persecution for it (see Chapter 3).

### 1.3.3 *Are ancient mystery religions the sources for the New Testament accounts concerning Jesus’ resurrection?*

A popular thesis in the late nineteenth century was that of the history-of-religions school, which claimed ancient mystery religions as sources for the New Testament accounts concerning Jesus’ resurrection. Such theories have since been abandoned by most scholars. Evan Fales (2001), a rare contemporary advocate of such views, argues that the best approach to understand the New Testament is to study Near Eastern mythical figures, such as Tammuz, Adonis, Isis, and Osiris. He thinks that the Gospel of Matthew, for example, should be read figuratively, and that Matthew main purpose of writing was for social and cultural survival (Fales 2005, pp. 312–313, 333–334). Likewise, Carrier claims that the Gospel of Mark was intended to convey symbolic rather than historical truth and that the empty tomb was ‘educational fiction.’ He attempts to substantiate his claims by drawing parallels between Mark with contemporary writings and Old Testament literature. He draws parallels with the Osiris cult and Psalms 24, suggesting that Mark copied the phrase ‘who will roll away the stone’ from Genesis’ account of Jacob, and arguing that the empty tomb serves Mark’s reversal of expectation motive (Carrier 2005a, pp. 156–163). He likewise draws parallels between the accounts of the empty tomb in Matthew with Daniel in the lion’s den (Carrier 2005b, p. 360).

In reply, the nineteenth-century history of religion approach has been widely criticized for its extravagant use of parallels with new discoveries of manuscripts of Hellenistic religious texts and philological research on Greek, Egyptian, Iranian, and other ancient religions. As Peppard observes, ‘certain terms, concepts, and narratives of Hellenistic religions were isolated and magnified according to their perceived resemblances to the New Testament,’ and perceived resemblances were ‘framed as decisive influences on the development of early Christianity’ (Peppard 2011, p. 15, n. 34). By ignoring important differences, it is possible to draw literary parallels with a large number of unrelated literature using speculative and imaginative interpretations (Copan and Tacelli 2000, p. 166), and we have to be very careful not to jump to conclusions based on literary parallels alone in the absence of other evidence. Other scholars warn of *parallelomania*, defined as ‘that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation

as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction' (Sandmel 1962, p. 1). The fallacy of parallelomania can easily be illustrated by examples. For example,

What if we told you about a British ocean liner that was about eight hundred feet long, weighed more than sixty thousand tons, and could carry about three thousand passengers? The ship had a top cruising speed of twenty-four knots, had three propellers, and about twenty lifeboats. What if I told you that this ocean liner hit an iceberg on its maiden voyage in the month of April, tearing an opening in the starboard side, forward portion of the ship, sinking it along with about two thousand passengers? Would you recognize the event from history? You might say, 'Hey, that's the Titanic!' Well, believe it or not, you would be wrong. It's the Titan, a fictional ship described in Morgan Robertson's 1898 book called *The Wreck of the Titan: or Futility*. This book was written fourteen years before the disaster took place, and several years before construction began on the Titanic! (Robertson, WT, website). Here is the point: just as the fictional account of the Titan does not undermine the reality of the sinking of the Titanic, fictional accounts of dying and rising gods would not undermine the historical reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The presence of parallels alone proves nothing about borrowing or the historicity of Jesus.

(McDowell and McDowell 2017, p. 311)

Sandmel notes, 'Paul's context is of infinitely more significance than the question of the alleged parallels. Indeed, to make Paul's context conform to the content of the alleged parallels is to distort Paul' (ibid., p. 5).

The contextual considerations relevant to the writing of the New Testament go against the views of Fales and others. The Gospels' authors intended them as ancient biographies of Jesus rather than fiction (Burrige 2004). A biography can be defined as a form of historiography focusing on the life and character of a single person (Litwa 2019, p. 53). Some sceptics have excluded the Gospels from ancient historiography by claiming that the Gospels' authors did not weigh their sources (Miller 2015, p. 133). This objection ignores the fact that (1) ancient historiography did not have a single form with a single set of standards, (2) by writing in sober, nonpoetic forms the Gospels' authors distinguished their accounts from the dominant mythoi found in (say) Homer and Euripides, and (3) the Gospels' authors weighed their sources in the sense that they strongly valued eyewitnesses over hearsay (Luke 1:2) and were careful selectors of materials to include and exclude from previous texts (Litwa 2019, pp. 6–7). Against the suggestion that the resurrection narrative in Mark's Gospel is to be understood as a parable, Bryan (2011, p. 166) notes that, while biblical echoes and allusions were present, the author was rather careful to insert into his narrative of no less than three references (15:40, 47; 16:1) that 'known eyewitnesses whom

he names really did see what happened.’ Contrary to Crossan’s theory that the passion narratives are examples of ‘the Prophetization of History’ or of ‘the Historicization of Prophecy,’ Bryan (2011, pp. 205–206) argues that Crossan misunderstands the role of Old Testament allusions: ‘the purpose of such allusion is not, in general, to recount what has happened (that is the role of the named eyewitness . . .) but to enable the community to understand what has happened.’

Establishing the genre of historiography by itself does not imply that a *limited* number of non-historical details cannot be included or that claims of eyewitnesses cannot be made up.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many examples from ancient historiography can be given to show the contrary (Litwa 2019, pp. 197–198).<sup>4</sup> Of course, this does not prove that all the details in all historiographies are unreliable; to decide on the reliability of the details we would need to weigh them case by case in light of other considerations.

Litwa (2019) claims that the Gospels’ authors changed the details in the original accounts concerning Jesus to make them look like historiographical discourses (p. 10), arguing that the ‘parallels’ do not prove that they ‘borrowed’ from historicized Greek myths, rather they indicate a shared intellectual culture concerning what would be regarded as appropriate and plausible in a story concerning divine-man (p. 92). If Litwa merely states this without further argumentation, his argument would be guilty of committing the fallacy of begging the question against Jesus being truly such a great person who fulfilled those expectations of his intellectual culture; in particular, it would beg the question against Jesus being truly resurrected as a vindication of the claim that he was truly divine (Loke 2017a). Litwa therefore attempts to provide further argumentation to support his claim. For example, he argues that the original descriptions of Jesus’ resurrection appearances were subjective visions which later came to be objectified and described as palpable events (e.g. able to be poked and prodded by eyewitnesses, e.g. John 20:24–28).<sup>5</sup> However, Litwa’s view fails to

3 Cf. Bryan’s (2011, p. 4) argument that the New Testament writers ‘did not merely insist on it as a fine old story, their “myth” or “founding legend,” as a good Roman matron might tell her children the ancient stories of Romulus. . . . Rather, they insisted on telling each other, and anyone else who would listen, this very new story, even on occasion appealing in its regard to named “eyewitnesses” (*autoptai*) or to what a particular follower of the Lord “remembered” (*emnēmneusen*), as if they actually expected to be taken seriously.’ Litwa would reply that the ancient Romans regarded Romulus as a real historical figure and that mythic historiographies often claimed eyewitnesses as well.

4 For example, Litwa (*ibid.*) notes, ‘Lucian complained against many historians who falsely declared that they had seen the events they described. In his *True History*, he exposed the device in the historian Ctesias, “who wrote a history of the land of India and its characteristics, which [despite his eyewitness claim] he had neither seen himself nor heard from anyone else who was telling the truth.”’

5 Cf. Becker (2007), who likewise argues that the Easter experience of the earliest Christians was perceived as a visionary occurrence affected by the Holy Spirit, while the epiphany-like

provide an adequate explanation concerning how groups of the earliest Christians could have ‘seen’ the ‘resurrected Jesus’ together in the first place if these experiences were merely subjective visions, such that they came to believe and testify to others that they had ‘seen’ an objectively and bodily resurrected Jesus together (rather than they came to believe that they ‘saw’ Jesus’ spirit or believe that they hallucinated, etc.). I shall elaborate on this argument against Litwa’s view in Chapters 3 and 4. (Throughout his book Litwa also assumes that stories of miraculous resurrection, exorcism, and so on are no longer plausible for modern scholars; I respond to this so-called problem of miracle in Chapter 8.)

Litwa (2019) also claims that ‘recent scholarship has sufficiently demonstrated that Christian authors felt little inhibition about employing deceit in the cause of what they perceived as true’ (pp. 207–208), stating, ‘as the apocryphal Acts show, Christians regularly used fiction in the cause of truth’ (p. 262) and citing Ehrman (2012). He concludes, ‘we know that contemporaneous biographies readily mixed fact with fiction, especially when the fiction had some profound moral or spiritual payoff,’ such as ‘eternal life’ (p. 208).

However, Litwa’s claim does not answer how the earliest Christians could have come to perceive Jesus’ resurrection as true and view it as foundational to their hope of eternal life in the first place. As argued in the rest of this book, the best explanation is that Jesus did rise from the dead. Additionally, the apocryphal Acts mentioned by Litwa was written from the second century CE onwards by Gnostics who (as argued in other parts of this book) valued history far less than did the earliest Christians who authored the New Testament. Moreover, the New Testament documents were written in the first century CE, during a period when the apostles and their co-workers or those people who knew them were still around and can be verified (Paul was evidently concerned about forgery, which was why he practised the signing of his own documents with his own hand to authenticate them; see, for example, 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11). Given the close connections between the first-century Christian communities with these people, any attempts at faking the writings of the apostles would have been easily discovered and falsified. In the case of epistles, it is even more unlikely that any forger could falsely attribute the author and also the audience without being detected (Witherington 2006, Introduction; for other problems with Ehrman’s arguments see Witherington 2011).

Litwa himself notes that the Gospels’ writers were highly intelligent, and their choosing to write in the genre of historical biographies indicate that at the time of writing they would have wanted to write in such a way that

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stories of Easter in the Gospels describe a later understanding of Easter. Gant (2019, pp. 198–200) suggests that the disciples had subjective visions of Jesus as an exalted radiant heavenly being which later expanded into belief that Jesus bodily resurrected.

‘educated people would understand and accept as true, since more and more educated and high-status people were joining the Christian movements’ (p. 9). He also notes, ‘generally speaking, if readers do not consider a story to be “real,” they do not consider it to be plausible’ (p. 209). These considerations imply that the first-century readers of the Gospels were concerned about truth, and this was known by the Gospels’ authors such that they wrote in the genre of historical biographies. Given that these intelligent authors would also have known that their readers were in a position to verify and falsify some important details relevant to Jesus’ resurrection as argued in the rest of this book (e.g. concerning the guard at the tomb, see Chapter 6), they would not have made up those details.

Moreover, additional considerations favour the historical reliability of the Gospels. For example, the fact that the Gospels use recent traditions and that those which can be checked (especially Luke) are careful in their use of sources indicates that the Gospels should be placed among the most, rather than the least, reliable of ancient biographies (Keener 2003, p. 25; for details, see Keener 2019). Additionally, while many of the examples of historiographies and biographies discussed by Litwa were written at least 100 years after their subjects, the Gospels were written much closer to the time of Christ, and biographies written within living memory of their subjects were expected to provide accurate information about their subjects (Keener 2019). Furthermore, Allison observes that ancient Jewish readers found their past in the so-called historical books of their Scriptures which were understood as relating what really happened, and that there is evidence that the early readers of the Gospels understood them in that way as well (Allison 2010, pp. 443–445). Habermas (2001b) notes that the historical nature of these texts stands in stark contrast with Dumuzi and Inanna, Tammuz and Ishtar, and Isis and Osiris, who were not historical persons, and that there are other great differences between these tales and the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> Given their ancient Jewish monotheistic context, the earliest Christian leaders who insisted on worshipping only God the Creator would have resisted the influence of these polytheistic legends where deification of human figures is concerned (see Loke 2017a; contra Miller 2015, p. 129).

6 For example, with regards to the story of Osiris, Habermas (2001b, p. 79) notes, ‘Although the story varies so widely that it is virtually impossible to put a single sequence together, Isis rescues Osiris (her husband, brother, or son!) after he is cut up into fourteen pieces and floated down the Nile River! She finds all of the pieces except one and resuscitates him by any of several methods, including beating her wings over his body. In the ancient world, the crux of the story is Osiris’ death and the mourning afterwards, not any resuscitation. Further, either Isis or Horus, their son, rather than Osiris, is the real hero. This myth is another of the vegetation gods with a non-linear, non-historical pattern of thought. Moreover, Osiris does not remain on earth after Isis performs her magic; he either descends to the underworld or is called the sun. Even critical scholar Helmut Koester firmly states, “it is never said that [Osiris] rose.” For reasons like these, it would be exceptionally difficult to substantiate any charge of inspiring the New Testament teachings of Jesus’ death and resurrection.’

Finally, the hypothesis of Fales and others does not account for the testimonies of those who claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion (Habermas 2001b), who were known to and could be checked by the readers of the earliest Christian writings, and who were willing to sacrifice for the truth of what they saw (see Chapters 2 to 4 and Section 8.8 of this book; contra Miller 2015, pp. 8, 15, 195–196).

In support of his claim that Christianity evinces similarities with pagan religions, Carrier cites Justin's (*First Apology* 21) statement,

When we say . . . Jesus Christ the firstborn of God, was produced without sexual union, and that he was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascended to heaven, we propound nothing new or different from what you believe regarding those whom you consider Sons of God.

Citing Justin, Miller (2015) claims that early Christians understood Jesus' resurrection story as fictitious rather than historical in nature.

However, Justin's statement (if understood the way Carrier and Miller do) is questionable in light of the considerations mentioned earlier, and it should be understood in light of his apologetic strategy which tries to make Christian beliefs appear similar to pagans so as to justify his claim that pagans should not persecute Christians (*First Apology* 24). Contrary to Miller's and Carrier's understanding, it is arguable that in the rest of the *First Apology*, Justin, being aware that 'his argument hitherto could have left his pagan readers with the impression that he is saying that there is no difference between Christian doctrines and pagan myths' (Minns and Parvis 2009, p. 139), proceeds to clarify by asserting the superiority of Christ in contrast with the educative purpose of mythological writings (*ibid.*, citing 22.4 and 54.1). In contrast with 'the myths invented by the poets' (54.1), Justin pleads, 'And it is not because we say the same things as these that we ask to be accepted by you, but because we say what is true' (*First Apology* 23.1b), insisting that 'Jesus Christ *alone* has been born in a special manner the Son of God' (23.2a, emphasis mine). If Justin understood Jesus' resurrection story as fictitious rather than historical in nature, he would not have told the Jews the following, which presupposed that the Jews and earliest Christians understood the claim of Jesus' resurrection to be historical when they disputed over whether Jesus' body was stolen:

yet you not only have not repented, after you learned that He rose from the dead, but, as I said before, you have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.

(*Dialogue with Trypho*, 108)



### 1.3.4 *Assessing the historicity of the New Testament*

It has been noted earlier that the writers of the Gospels intended them as ancient biographies. Nevertheless, the process of sifting through the Four Gospels to determine which events attributed to Jesus can be traced back to the Jesus of history faces various difficulties. To address these difficulties, historians have devised various criteria for determining authenticity, such as the criterion of multiple attestation, the criterion of embarrassment, and the criterion of dissimilarity (Harvey 1982; Meier 1991–2016, Vol. 1; Porter 2000). However, there are various limitations or fallacies which beset these criteria and/or their applications (Keith and Le Donne 2012). For example, the criterion of dissimilarity, which claims that ‘we may confidently assign a unit to Jesus if it is dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early church,’<sup>7</sup> has been widely regarded as fundamentally flawed in principle. As Harvey (1982) argues in response to the prevalent scepticism following the second quest for the historical Jesus, the culture in which Jesus lived must have imposed certain ‘constraints’ on him, and he would have had to take into account these constraints in order to communicate to his audience. Contrary to the criterion of dissimilarity, it is far more plausible that an influential historical person should be in some ways indebted to his context (in the case of Jesus, the first-century Jewish context) and that he should have impact on his followers (the earliest Christians). Hence, other scholars have defended the criterion of ‘double plausibility,’ that is, of context (Jesus and Second Temple Judaism) and consequence (Jesus and early Christians) (Theissen and Winter 2002).

Keith (2011) has proposed a ‘Jesus-memory approach’ as an alternative to the aforementioned criteria approach but which likewise advocates a continuity between Jesus, his context, and his followers by using social memory theory. Citing French sociologist Halbwachs, Keith notes that the foundational argument of social memory theory is that ‘memory is not a simple act of recall, but rather a complex process whereby the past is reconstructed in light of the needs of the present’ (p. 168). Keith holds to a continuity perspective of this theory, emphasizing that ‘it is memory’s inherently social nature that enables it to preserve the past to an extent by transcending individual existence’ (p. 169). He concludes that ‘the overall implications of the Jesus-memory approach are significant—they challenge nothing less than the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith’ (p. 177; see further, later).

Ehrman objects that the problems with Paul’s letters are that he did not know Jesus personally and did not tell us very much about Jesus’ teachings and activities, while the problems with the Gospels are that they were not written by eyewitnesses but by highly educated Greeks in contrast with the

7 Quoted from Allison (2011, p. 3), who raises several objections against this criteria.

earliest disciples who were uneducated and spoke Aramaic. Ehrman thus claims that, as stories about Jesus spread, details were changed, episodes were invented, and events were exaggerated (Ehrman 2014, chapter 3).

Contrary to Ehrman, I have argued in Loke (2017a) that what Paul's letters tell us is already sufficient for us to infer that highest Christology originated from Jesus himself, and I shall argue in the next few chapters that Paul's letters contain significant evidence for Jesus' resurrection as well. Others have argued that Jesus and the earliest disciples probably spoke Greek alongside Aramaic (Porter 2011), that the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem had Aramaic and Greek speakers who lived alongside one another from the earliest days (Hengel 1990, pp. 9–18), that the Gospels have their basis in eyewitnesses' testimonies, and that the details are significantly preserved (Bauckham 2006; see discussion in Chapter 7). Scholars such as Daniel Wallace, Darrell Bock, Ben Witherington, Michael Kruger, and others have replied specifically to Ehrman's arguments and attempted a comprehensive defence of the historical reliability of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> For the historical argument for Jesus' resurrection such a comprehensive defence is unnecessary, for as Pannenberg and others have argued, all that needs to be shown is that the earliest Christian documents contain evidence of the conviction of the earliest Christians concerning the resurrection of Jesus, and that the origination of this conviction is best explained by Jesus' resurrection. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, despite disagreements about various aspects of the New Testament, there is widespread consensus among historical-critical scholars of various worldviews (including atheist and Judaist scholars) that (1) Jesus died due to Roman crucifixion, (2) very soon afterwards, a number of people had experiences that they believed were appearances of the risen Jesus, and (3) the body of Jesus was missing (Habermas 2005, 2013). It will be argued in the rest of this book that the best explanation for these facts is that Jesus resurrected.

### *1.3.5 Introducing some important concepts for subsequent discussion: earliest Christians, resurrection, natural, supernatural*

In this book, I shall use the term 'earliest Christians' to label those who claimed to follow Jesus during the period from c. AD 30 (shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus) to 62, when Philipians, the last of the earliest datable Christian documents viz. the seven undisputed Pauline epistles, is widely regarded by

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, [www.ehrmanproject.com/](http://www.ehrmanproject.com/). The historical reliability of the Gospels has also been questioned by scholars of the so-called Jesus Seminar (Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar 1997; Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1998). However, their arguments and methodology have themselves been severely criticized (Chilton and Evans 1999a, 1999b).

scholars to have been written.<sup>9</sup> I have argued elsewhere (Loke 2017a) that the Pauline epistles reflect the widespread Christological conviction among Christians from AD 30 to 62 and that they regarded Jesus as ‘truly divine,’ that is, on the Creator side of the Creator–creature divide and of equal ontological status as God the Father. Given the proximity of this period to the historical figure of Jesus, a number of these earliest Christians would have known him personally. In this book, ‘earliest Christian leaders’ refer to the Apostles, such as members of ‘The Twelve’<sup>10</sup> and Paul, as well as their co-workers such as Silas and Timothy (for a discussion of the historical evidence of Jesus’ earliest followers and their competitors [the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Samaritans, and others], see Meier 1991–2016, Vol. 3).

Some scholars have claimed that Christianity was wildly diverse at the beginning of its history and that we should speak of ‘earliest Christianities’ rather than ‘earliest Christianity.’ They have argued, ‘throughout the first century, and from the earliest evidence we have in Q, *Thomas*, and Paul, there were many different groups that claimed Jesus as their founder’ (Cameron and Miller 2004, p. 20). Yet it is evident from the quotation that even these scholars would acknowledge this common element among the supposedly existent diverse groups: despite their differences they all claim to follow Jesus (I address the arguments of these scholars in Chapter 3). By using the term ‘Christians’ broadly to refer to ‘those who claimed to follow Jesus’ rather than as ‘those who followed certain doctrines about Jesus,’ I avoid begging the question in my historical argument by not assuming that Christians were those who believed that Jesus was bodily resurrected and that this was the ‘orthodox’ view. I shall define ‘earliest Christianity’ as the religion of those who claimed to follow Jesus during the period from c. AD 30 to 62; this definition leaves open the question concerning the extent of diversity within this religion. In Chapter 3, I shall show, based on evidence rather than definition, that there was widespread acknowledgement in earliest Christianity that Jesus was bodily resurrected.

There is widespread agreement among contemporary historical-critical scholars that a number of people had experiences which they believed were appearances of the resurrected Jesus shortly after his crucifixion and which motivated their proclamation of the Christian gospel (Habermas 2006a, p. 79). This conclusion has been reinforced in recent years by the arguments in N.T. Wright’s landmark book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003). In over 800 pages, Wright argues that the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances ‘took place as real events . . . they are, in the

9 For the authenticity of these seven letters, see Dunn (2003); a number of scholars have argued for the authenticity of other letters; see, for example, Carson and Moo (2005).

10 ‘The Twelve’ (ὁ δώδεκα) is a title referring to those who were selected by Jesus to be apostles from the beginning, rather than referring to the number of disciples (after the death of Judas only 11 of these apostles remained); see Fee (1987, p. 729). In any case, the absence of Judas Iscariot after the crucifixion is not relevant to the argument I will be making.

normal sense required by historians, provable events; historians can and should write about them' (Wright 2003, p. 709). It is the 'negative burden' (p. 7) of Wright's book to challenge the view of other scholars who have interpreted the resurrection of Jesus as a non-bodily resurrection (see e.g. Schillebeeckx 1979, pp. 320–397; who claims that the 'resurrection' is the Christian community's way of expressing its experience of God's grace and faith-filled conversion to Jesus). Wright provides an abundance of evidence in his attempt to show that the term *anastasis* and its cognates (e.g. *exanastasis*) and related words almost always referred to bodily resurrection in the ancient Mediterranean world among *both* pagans and Jews. (*Anastasis* means 'standing up'; this refers to the dead body which was normally buried in a supine position [Gundry 2000, p. 118]. On this point, see also Wright's interaction with Crossan in Stewart 2006; Madigan and Levenson 2008; Licona 2010, pp. 400–437, 543–546.) Wright notes the exception found in the position ascribed to Hymenaeus and Philetus in 2 Timothy 2:17–18: 'among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection (*anastasis*) has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.' Wright states that this exception possibly anticipated later Gnostic rethinking and the late second-century *Letter to Rheginos*. Wright argues that this exception 'used the language of resurrection to denote something to which that word-group had never before referred' (Wright 2003, pp. 267–270, 681). Wright (2008, p. 42) concludes, 'that was a misunderstanding likely to occur, of the whole question, but it doesn't alter the overwhelming impression of unanimity.'

Wright's analysis of ancient beliefs about life after death in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds has been criticized for ignoring counterexamples (Bryan 2011; Lehtipuu 2015). Nevertheless, in an important recent study published in the journal *New Testament Studies*, James Ware (2014) argues that the meaning of the earliest Christian formula's (preserved in 1 Cor. 15:3–5) central affirmation that Jesus 'has been raised (*egeirō*)' (1 Cor. 15:4) provides decisive confirmation that the earliest Christians believed and proclaimed that Jesus was bodily resurrected. In a similar vein, Cook (2017) argues that, on the basis of the semantics of *anistēmi* and *egeirō* and the nature of resurrected bodies in ancient Judaism and ancient paganism, one can conclude that Paul could not have conceived of a resurrection of Jesus unless he believed the tomb was empty. 'Consequently, according to the normal conventions of communication, he did not need to mention the tomb tradition' (p. 75; contra Chilton 2019, p. 71, who neglects this point when he claims that 'in Paul, there can be no story of an "empty tomb," because there is not a reference to a tomb in the first place'). Cook notes,

this is not to deny that there was a spiritual or metaphorical usage of resurrection words in the New Testament and early Christianity (Col. 2:12; 3:1; Eph. 2:5–6). The metaphorical uses in the deutero-Paulines, however, are based on the image of the resurrection of Christ.

(*ibid.*)

The reference to the spiritually dead (but physically alive) people in Ephesians 2:5 does not take away from Ware's (2014, p. 494) point that, *when used with reference to the physically dead (as in Jesus' case in 1 Cor. 15:3–5)*, the term *egeirō* ('raise') refers unambiguously to the reanimation or revivification of the corpse. (This conclusion refutes the two body view of Carrier [2005a] and others; see further, Chapter 6.)

It might be objected that the portrayal of Herod and some of his contemporaries being mistaken that Jesus was the resurrected John the Baptist in Mark 6:14–29 could not have been referring to a revivification of the corpse, since Jesus and John the Baptist are contemporaries. In reply, there is no difficulty in thinking that the portrayal of those who said that Jesus was John the Baptist raised (*egeirō*) from the dead (Mark 6:14) and Herod who thought the same (v. 16) intended to convey a literal bodily resurrection, since they might not have known that Jesus was a contemporary of John (Lane 1974). There is no indication that these people had met Jesus before or that they had thoroughly researched Jesus' background; all that is stated is that they had heard that there was a person known as Jesus who had done some remarkable things (v. 14). Moreover, the context of that passage says that John's body was taken away by John's disciples after his execution instead of being retained by Herod (v. 29), and the body was said to have been laid in a tomb (v. 29) without any indication that Herod knew where it was. Thus it is reasonable to think that Herod, who executed John (v. 27) and 'disturbed by an uneasy conscience disposed to superstition, feared that John had come back to haunt him' (Lane 1974) and thought that the resurrected John was now known as Jesus and possessed miraculous powers. Thus, Mark 6:14–29 does not constitute a counterexample to Ware's conclusion.

In this book, the term 'resurrection' (and 'bodily resurrection') refers to the understanding established in Ware's article ('revivification of the corpse') unless otherwise stated. It should be noted that such a revivification of the corpse does not exclude the possibility of the revived corpse retaining certain properties it had previously while acquiring certain new properties. Thus, it is not a contradiction to think that the resurrected body could have certain physical properties, such as being able to eat fish, while also possessing certain transphysical properties (to use Wright's terminology), such as being able to come and go through locked doors, as portrayed by the Gospels and indicated by Paul's use of the term 'spiritual body' in 1 Corinthians 15 (see the discussion on 'better resurrection' in Chapter 2, 'solid evidence' in Chapter 4, and 'transphysicality' in Chapter 5). A contradiction is defined as 'A and not-A at the same time.' 'Going through locked doors' is not equivalent to 'not being able to eat fish.' Thus 'going through locked doors' is not contradictory to 'being able to eat fish.' Likewise, choosing to conceal oneself for a duration of time before revealing oneself in another duration (see Chapter 5) is not a contradiction, since these events took place at different times. This contradicts Chilton (2019, p. 69), who

mistakenly thought that these depictions are contradictions, which led him to unwarrantedly conclude that the early Christians' differing conceptions of the ways God governs the world produced different understandings of the Easter event.

Chilton (2019, pp. 70–71) claims that those scholars who affirm Jesus as raised in the 'same' flesh with which he died and regard Jesus' resurrection as physical (citing N.T. Wright) 'is unequivocally denied by Paul himself in his discussion in 1 Corinthians.' In reply, the word 'same' is ambiguous; it can mean (1) numerically identical over time or (2) having identical properties. For example, saying that 'Bruce Chilton is the same person who wrote *Resurrection Logic* a year ago' does not imply that he possessed the same properties a year ago; on the contrary, he has grown older and changed in other ways. Likewise, Paul's analogy of the sowing of seed (1 Cor. 15:36–37) for the resurrection indicates numerical identity over time: although the seed and the plant are qualitatively different, they are numerically the same in the sense that there is continuity between them: the dormant plant that goes into the soil grows by incremental measurable and observable steps into the plant (Davis 2006, p. 57; Ware 2014, p. 486; this point is neglected by Welker 2007). The distinctness which is emphasized in 1 Corinthians 15: 44–54 concerns the different properties of the two stages of the one continuous thing and does not imply their discontinuity (see further the reply to the 'two body view' and discussion of 'flesh and blood' in Chapter 6). Thus, those scholars who affirm Jesus as raised in the 'same' flesh and regard Jesus' resurrection as physical does not contradict Paul if what they are affirming is that the resurrected body is in some ways continuous (numerically identical) with the pre-resurrected physical body which takes on new (transphysical) properties after resurrection rather than merely 'comes back to his former life' (Chilton 2019, p. 225, n. 15).

Against the element of physicality of Jesus' resurrection, one might object by citing the portrayal of Jesus' resurrection appearance to Saul in Acts (9:1–9, 22:6–11, and 26:12–18) which indicates that only Saul saw Jesus and heard distinct words while his companions did not. 'The lack of an intersubjective sharing of this experience, however, should warn us against too straightforward and too simple attempts to testify to the objectivity of the resurrection' (Welker 2007, p. 462).

In reply, there is no indication in the text that Jesus was said to have appeared to Saul's companions. They only saw the light surrounding Jesus' appearance to Saul and fell to the ground, which indicates the objectivity of this appearance, but they were not said to have seen Jesus' appearance itself. If my three daughters were standing in front of me, I covered one of them with a cloak, and all of them saw the cloak surrounding her but only she saw that there was a luminous object on the inner side of the cloak while the other two daughters did not see this, this does not deny that the luminous object which she saw was physical.

The notion of spiritual body explained earlier answers Carnley's (1987, p. 71) question of 'what exactly it was that the primitive Christians were trying to describe.' Chilton (2019, p. 69) objects that any claim of normativity of Paul's view of Jesus' resurrection for the earliest Christians would be misleading given that Paul's disagreements with other authoritative teachers were notorious. In reply, it will be shown in Chapter 3 that it is Paul's affirmation of the agreement between him and other authoritative teachers concerning the Gospel, in a letter to those who knew these other teachers and also knew of their disagreements on some matters other than the Gospel, which provides such a powerful indication that they shared the same view concerning Jesus' resurrection which is fundamental to the Gospel. Carnley (2019, pp. 212–213) objects that if Jesus' resurrection is understood as a bodily resurrection and historical event, it would be difficult to determine how the empirical experience of his resurrection might differ from the experience of a mere resuscitation, and it would call into question the actual death of Jesus. In reply, the empirical experience of transphysicality explained in Chapter 5 indicates that it was not the experience of a mere resuscitation, while the evidence concerning the crucifixion indicates that Jesus could not have survived it naturalistically.

In his writings, Wright has lodged a complaint against the use of the words 'natural,' 'supernatural,' and 'miracle.' He writes, 'The very word "miracle" itself, and for that matter the words "natural" and "supernatural," are in fact symptomatic of a very different range of possible world-views from those which were open to Galilean villagers in the first century' (Wright 1996, pp. 187–188).

It is true that the meanings of the words 'natural' and 'supernatural' have changed over time. Nevertheless, Collins (2018, section 10.A.2) notes that even though these terms were not used by the biblical authors, they did have ideas about causation and the causal properties of created things, and the idea that God can add something new to the processes he has made, such that, with such an infusion, the result goes beyond what the causal properties of the created things would have produced. For example, they were aware that virgins normally would not conceive (Luke 1:34), but they believed that God can cause that to happen (Luke 1:35–37). Collins adds,

No one worth interacting with ever thought that God was normally absent and that he intervened in a haphazard or arbitrary fashion. Further, the notion of 'natural' and 'supernatural' is a legitimate abstraction from the biblical materials and gives us a good sense of what a sensible Galilean villager—such as Joseph, the fiancé of Mary—would have understood.

(*ibid.*; see further the discussion on the problem of miracles in Chapter 8 of this book)

### 1.3.6 *Introducing the difficulties that beset the contemporary debate*

Wright also argues for the resurrection being the most probable explanation for the facts of the empty tomb and post-mortem appearances. Nevertheless, many sceptics remain unpersuaded by Wright's inadequate handling of the naturalistic hypotheses. These sceptics claim to be able to think of many naturalistic alternatives to the resurrection, and it seems impossible to them that one can ensure that all these alternatives had been considered and excluded before arriving at the conclusion for the resurrection. As Dale Allison remarks,

Wright's attempt . . . to dismiss naturalistic hypotheses is too brief for my tastes, although more pages would still fall short; one just cannot decisively eliminate all the unorthodox alternatives.

(Allison 2005a, p. 347, n. 583. Among the 'unorthodox alternatives' he suggests are that Jesus' body was stolen and that the disciples experienced hallucinations.)

Similar arguments have also been made in debates on the resurrection of Jesus. For example, in his exchange with Craig, Ehrman claims that he can 'dream up' 20 naturalistic alternatives concerning the empty tomb (Craig and Ehrman 2006, p. 13). Habermas notes that there is a resurgence of interest in naturalistic hypotheses in recent years, observing that 'the last couple of decades have produced more than forty suggestions favouring about a dozen different alternative scenarios to account for the New Testament report that Jesus was raised from the dead' (Habermas 2001a, pp. 179–196).

Other historians claim that the resurrection 'is not a matter which historians can authenticate' (MacCulloch 2010, p. 93) and insist that it must be approached as an article of faith concerning the mystery of God (Carnley 2019). Now Ehrman notes,

historians, of course, have no difficulty whatsoever speaking about the belief in Jesus' resurrection, since this is a matter of public record. For it is a historical fact that some of Jesus' followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution.

(Ehrman 1999, p. 231)

However, the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection is one issue, whether it happened is another, and what explains it (if it did happen) is yet another. The resurrection is supposed to involve supernatural causation if it did happen, but a study of causation of the supernatural or spiritual realm is regarded by many historians to belong to the discipline of theology rather than history (Webb 2011, pp. 78–79). Many historians would hold to a form of 'methodological naturalism,' which understands history 'as description and explanation of cause and effect of human events within the natural sphere



alone, without making ontological claims beyond the natural sphere' (Webb 2011, p. 79). The difficulty concerns whether it is in principle possible for historians to reason from certain historical facts to Jesus' resurrection.

Additionally, the issue of bias highlighted by Martin Kähler at the end of the nineteenth century presents a challenge, which is emphasized by contemporary postmodernist thinkers. Kähler argues that, unlike other figures of the past, Jesus has in every age exerted too powerful an influence on all sorts of people and still makes too strong a claim on everyone. Thus, we cannot have an unbiased historical record of him or an unbiased historian assessing the record, and therefore the historical-critical project is completely undermined (Kähler 1892/1964, pp. 92–95).

In summary, the contemporary debate concerning the origination of belief in Jesus' resurrection is hamstrung by difficulties related to (1) the elimination of all the 'unorthodox alternatives' (Allison's phrase), (2) whether it is in principle possible for historians to reason from certain historical facts to Jesus' resurrection, and (3) the issue of bias.

## 1.4 The approach of this book

### 1.4.1 *Concerning the elimination of alternatives*

In this book, I shall use a transdisciplinary approach which addresses the aforementioned difficulties.

With regards to the difficulty of eliminating all the 'unorthodox alternatives,' I shall demonstrate that all the possible naturalistic alternatives can be essentially reduced to a few known ones, such that all of them are considered before the conclusion for the resurrection is made. Such a reduction would be a useful first step towards eliminating all the 'unorthodox alternatives,' and it would add clarity to the discussion. By analyzing the structure of the dialectic concerning the post-mortem appearances syllogistically, it will be shown that all the possible naturalistic alternatives to Jesus' resurrection concerning the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances can be essentially reduced to a few known ones, as follows. (Note that hypotheses such as the women went to the wrong tomb while the body of Jesus remained buried elsewhere, tomb robbery of the body, and so on are alternatives concerning the empty tomb [see (7) to (9.2.2.2) in the following text], not the post-mortem appearances. Hypotheses such as Jesus was raised from the dead by aliens or angels are alternatives to God as the cause for Jesus' resurrection [see Chapter 8], not alternatives to Jesus' resurrection per se):

(1) Either (1.1) or (1.2) is true:<sup>11</sup>

(1.1) There were no people in mid-first-century (AD 30–70) Palestine who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus (the New

11 Note that 'or' is taken in the exclusive sense in this syllogism as well as the next.

Testament accounts of such people are all legends: call this the legend hypothesis).

- (1.2) There were people in mid-first-century Palestine who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus, in which case either (2.1) or (2.2) is true:
    - (2.1) All of them did not experience anything which they thought was the resurrected Jesus (no experience hypothesis).
    - (2.2) At least some (if not all) of them did experience something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, in which case either (3.1) or (3.2) is true:
      - (3.1) All of these ‘experiences of Jesus’ were caused intramentally in the absence of appropriate<sup>12</sup> sensory stimulus (call this the intramental hypothesis; examples include hallucinations, ‘subjective vision,’ ‘stimulus,’ ‘religious intoxication,’ ‘enthusiasm,’ and ‘illumination’).
      - (3.2) At least some (if not all) of these ‘experiences of Jesus’ were caused by an extramental entity, in which case either (4.1) or (4.2) is true:
        - (4.1) For all these experiences, the extramental entity was not Jesus (for example, they mistook another person for Jesus: mistaken identity hypothesis).
        - (4.2) For at least some (if not all) of these experiences, the extramental entity was Jesus, in which case either (5.1) or (5.2) is true:
          - (5.1) Jesus did not die on the cross (swoon/escape hypothesis: that is, either Jesus swooned on the cross, exited the tomb and showed himself to the disciples later [‘swoon’], or Jesus had secretly escaped prior to the crucifixion, somebody else was crucified, and Jesus showed himself to the disciples later [‘escape’]).
          - (5.2) Jesus died on the cross (i.e. the extramental entity they experienced was Jesus who rose from the dead), in which case
- (6) Jesus rose from the dead (resurrection).

The syllogism covers all the possibilities exhaustively. Although each of the hypotheses noted in the syllogism has been discussed by others in the literature, a logically exhaustive reduction of all possible hypotheses has not been accomplished by any author before, hence my unique contribution to the discussion. Such a reduction is significant in at least the following respects.

First, while a significant number of scholars would agree that something was experienced by the disciples soon after Jesus’ crucifixion, many would affirm with E.P. Sanders that ‘what the reality was that

12 ‘Absence of appropriate’ means absence of what was taken by the perceiver to be an extramental entity. For example, the perceiver thought that they saw or touched an extramental entity, but there wasn’t any.

gave rise to the experiences I do not know' (Sanders 1993, p. 280). One of the main reasons for this agnosticism is that many explanations seem possible for these experiences. Based on the aforementioned syllogism, however, we can know that essentially there are seven and only seven possible categories of explanations concerning the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances, viz. legends, no experience, intramental, mistaken identity, swoon, escape, and resurrection. It should be emphasized that there are essentially no other possibilities apart from the ones listed earlier (although various combinations of these possibilities are possible; these combinations are considered in Chapter 7). The list is therefore an important starting point towards answering the question, 'What gave rise to the experiences?'

Second, the list helps to ensure that all possible categories of hypotheses as well as their combinations are considered before the conclusion concerning whether the resurrection is the best explanation is reached.

Third, by reducing the myriad of alternative theories that have been (in Ehrman's phrase) 'dreamed up' (or yet undreamed of) to essentially six, it will be demonstrated in the following chapters that, once certain considerations are established, all the alternatives and their combinations can reasonably be excluded.<sup>13</sup>

All the possible naturalistic alternatives concerning the empty tomb can likewise be reduced to a few known ones, as shown by the following syllogism:

(7) Either (7.1), (7.2), or (7.3) is true:

(7.1) Jesus was not crucified (escape hypothesis).

(7.2) Jesus was crucified and he was not buried (unburied hypothesis).

(7.3) Jesus was crucified and he was buried, in which case either (8.1) or (8.2) is true.

(8.1) The body of Jesus remained buried (remain buried hypothesis).

(8.2) The body of Jesus did not remain buried, in which case either (9.1) or (9.2) is true:

(9.1) The body was removed by non-agent(s), e.g. earthquakes (Allison 2005a, p. 204), animals, etc. (removal by non-agent hypothesis)

(9.2) The body was removed by agent(s), in which case either (9.2.1) or (9.2.2) is true:

13 I have previously explained in Loke (2009) that all the alternative naturalistic explanations can be shown to fail once certain evidentially significant details in the Gospels (e.g. in Luke 24:36–43) are established. I now think that all the alternative naturalistic explanations can be shown to fail even without having to establish those evidentially significant details (even though I think a good case can still be made concerning Luke 24:36–43; see Chapter 4). For details, see the following chapters.

- (9.2.1) Others removed the body, either
  - (9.2.1.1) Friends of Jesus (removal by friends hypothesis),
  - (9.2.1.2) Enemies of Jesus (removal by enemies hypothesis), or
  - (9.2.1.3) Neither friends nor enemies, e.g. tomb robbers (removal by neutral party hypothesis).
- (9.2.2) Jesus himself removed his body, in which case either (9.2.2.1) or (9.2.2.2) is true:
  - (9.2.2.1) Jesus did not die on the cross: he swooned on the cross and exited the tomb later (swoon hypothesis), or
  - (9.2.2.2) Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead, and exited the tomb (resurrection).

This syllogism exhaustively covers all the possibilities. The significance of such a logically exhaustive list of hypotheses is similar to that for the post-mortem appearances.

First, based on the list we can know that essentially there are nine and only nine possible categories of hypotheses concerning the empty tomb, viz. escape, unburied, remain buried, removal by non-agent, removal by friends, removal by enemies, removal by neutral party, swoon, and resurrection.

Second, the list helps to ensure that all possible categories of hypotheses as well as their combinations are considered before the conclusion concerning whether the resurrection is the best explanation reached.

Third, by reducing the myriad of alternative theories to essentially eight, it will be demonstrated in the following chapters that, once certain considerations are established, all the alternatives as well as their combinations can reasonably be excluded.

#### *1.4.2 Concerning whether it is in principle possible for historians to reason from certain historical facts to Jesus' resurrection*

Moving on to the next difficulty concerning whether it is in principle possible for historians to reason from certain historical facts to Jesus' resurrection, one can ask the following question: Why cannot a historian—in principle—argue that there are reasons and evidence for thinking that (I), (II), (III), and (IV) are true:

- (I) There were people who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus shortly after his crucifixion,
- (II) they had some kind of experiences,

(III) what they experienced was not caused intramentally but extramentally,  
 (IV) the extramental entity was not another person but the same Jesus who died on the cross.

What follows logically from (I), (II), (III), and (IV) is

(V) Therefore, Jesus resurrected.

Hurtado thinks that historians cannot ‘prove’ that the resurrection of Jesus occurred because history is based on analogies, and there is nothing analogous to the resurrection<sup>14</sup> (cf. the principle of analogy in Troeltsch 1898/1991). With regards to the case for or against the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, Novakovic (2016, p. 128) thinks that the main difficulty is caused ‘by the lack of agreement of what is the task of historical research and to what extent can someone’s faith convictions influence her evaluation of the available evidence.’ She explains,

for some, the term ‘historical’ means that an event took place in time and space regardless of whether it is caused by natural or divine activity, while for others the term ‘historical’ is applicable only to the events whose occurrence can be demonstrated with historical arguments based on empirical evidence that are independent of someone’s religious beliefs.

(*ibid.*)

Dale Martin (2017) argues that, while historians can reasonably affirm that ‘Paul and some other disciples of Jesus sincerely believed they saw him sometime, somewhere after his death,’ historians cannot reasonably conclude anything about what these first Christians saw (p. 212), only that they ‘experienced a vision, or saw a figure from a distance they took to be Jesus, or saw a play of light they later decided was the body of Jesus’ (*ibid.*).

However, with respect to (I), (II), (III), and (IV), historians do regularly assess whether people made certain claims in history, whether people witnessed someone rather than saw a hallucination or mistook something else for another person, and whether people died, and analogies to these can be found. These are naturalistic explanations, and since it is uncontroversial that such *naturalistic* explanations are suitable for historical investigation, historians who are concerned about the historical origins of Christianity can

14 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKS1WVdGURs&list=WL&index=25&t=635s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKS1WVdGURs&list=WL&index=25&t=635s). Hurtado also raises a theological objection by saying that according to Acts 10:41 God only chose to let the risen Jesus appear to some people but not all, and thus God does not intend to provide a ‘proof.’ Hurtado fails to note that in Acts 1:3 and 17:31 ‘proof’ is mentioned with reference to Jesus’ resurrection. The lack of more evidence (e.g. appearing to all) does not mean the lack of any evidence (e.g. appearing to some). Concerning the question of why the God of the Bible does not provide more evidence, see the quotes by Moreland and O’Collins in Section 1.2.

and should assess them. In the following chapters, it will be shown that (I), (II), (III), and (IV) can indeed be demonstrated with historical arguments based on empirical evidence that are independent of someone's faith convictions and religious beliefs.

Some historians might reply that the problem is that the supernatural is supposedly involved in the resurrection.

However, the need to consider supernatural causation is not even present up to the point of establishing (I), (II), (III), and (IV). Rather the need arises only after conclusion (V), 'Therefore, Jesus resurrected,' is reached. It is only then that we need to reflect on whether 'Jesus resurrected' has a natural or supernatural cause (this is discussed in Chapter 8). There is no logical necessity that Jesus' resurrection must be caused supernaturally. Against Ehrman's view that Jesus' resurrection would have been impossible apart from the miraculous action of a divine agent,<sup>15</sup> Licona suggests the alternative logical possibility of an 'alien in a parallel universe whose doctoral project was to deceive humans into believing he is divine' (Licona 2014, p. 124)—this illustrates the point about lack of logical necessity mentioned earlier (concerning the alien hypothesis, etc., see Chapter 8). Licona observes that 'historians can offer a positive verdict pertaining to the historicity of an event while leaving its cause undetermined. This is a common practice of historians outside of the guild of biblical scholars' (Licona 2014, p. 122). For example,

Plutarch noted that, although the corpse of Scipio Africanus laid dead for all to see, there were three competing hypotheses pertaining to the cause of his death: He died of natural causes, he intentionally drank poison and committed suicide, he was smothered by thugs while he slept well.

(Licona 2014, p. 122)

Braaten (1999) writes, 'the resurrection is to be considered an historical event because it is the subject of reports that locate it in time and space. It happened in Jerusalem a short time after Jesus was crucified' (p. 155). Establishing the cause of this event (if it happened) is distinct from establishing the event itself.

Therefore, there is no logical necessity that bars historians from reasoning from certain historical facts to Jesus' resurrection—which they can in principle do by arguing that there are reasons and evidence for thinking that (I), (II), (III), and (IV) are true, as explained previously. On the other hand, if a historian were to exclude *a priori* the possibility that Jesus' resurrection occurred, it would be to import unwarranted philosophical assumptions into his/her judgment (see Chapter 8). Concerning the historical question whether

15 See the April 2009 debate between Bart Ehrman and Michael Licona at <http://vimeo.com/35235544>.

Jesus was observed dead and was observed alive—an empirical question!—a historian should make his/her judgment based on historical considerations—such as those which I will be defending in subsequent chapters—rather than assuming beforehand on the basis of unwarranted philosophical or theological assumptions whether Jesus' resurrection is or is not possible and then make his/her judgment on the basis of such assumptions.

Can a historian infer a supernatural cause for an event? With regards to the assumption of methodological naturalism for the practice of history, Licona notes, 'the term "history" is itself an essentially contested concept; that is, there is no widely accepted definition for the term' (Licona 2014, p. 119). Nevertheless, it is helpful to clarify that historical inquiry 'concerns events in the past involving humans as agents' (Webb 2010, p. 16), the involvement of humans as agents distinguishes the discipline of history from other disciplines which study the past (e.g. cosmology, which studies the formation of galaxies).

Licona (2014) raises a number of objections to the assumption of methodological naturalism for the practice of history, viz.

- 1 Historians need not adopt a definition of history based on the least common denominator of beliefs among historians.
- 2 Methodological naturalism may handicap historians, preventing them in some cases from providing a fuller and more accurate account of the past.
- 3 The boundaries between disciplines are somewhat artificial.
- 4 It is questionable whether methodological naturalism would have the pragmatic benefit that its proponents desire.

With regards to 1, 3, and 4, issues concerning 'the least common denominator of beliefs,' 'boundaries between disciplines,' and 'pragmatic benefit' are of secondary importance. The more important issue is the quality of justification offered for the beliefs, boundaries, and benefits in question, in particular whether these assist or hinder the task of the historian in their inquiry of the past. In this regard I consider objection 2 to be the most important. Here Licona cites molecular biologist Michael Behe's challenge in the form of the following illustration:

Imagine a room in which a body lies crushed, flat as a pancake. A dozen detectives crawl around, examining the floor with magnifying glasses for any clues to the identity of the perpetrator. In the middle of the room, next to the body, stands a large, grey elephant. The detectives carefully avoid bumping into the pachyderm's legs as they crawl, and never even glance at it. Over time the detectives get frustrated with their lack of progress but resolutely press on, looking even more closely at the floor. You see, textbooks say detectives must 'get their man,' so they never consider elephants.

(Behe 1996, p. 192)

Licona also provides a thought experiment of ‘a number of spacecraft suddenly land on Earth occupied with intelligent alien beings who are able to communicate with us’ and argues that the study of human history can include an engagement with the interaction with these beings even though they are non-humans. Historians should not *a priori* exclude the possibility of God interacting with humans.

In response, Behe’s illustration effectively shows how methodological restriction can hinder one from finding out what happened in the past, and Licona’s thought experiment is helpful for illustrating that history involves humans but should be open to the possibility of interaction with non-human persons. However, it might be objected that these examples do not really address the reasons why many historians would opt for methodological naturalism and avoid the conclusion of a divine cause. Some of these reasons are as follows: the difficulty of examining divine causation, the worry that the acceptance of a divine cause for a past event would hinder inquiry, and the worry about God-of-the-gaps explanation. I consider the first reason to be compelling and I shall discuss it here; the other two reasons will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Concerning the first reason and the illustrations by Behe and Licona, some historians might object that elephants or aliens are amenable to empirical confirmation, whereas an invisible God is not. Licona anticipated this objection and argued that, just as scientists regularly posit unobserved theoretical entities (e.g. black holes, quarks, strings, and gluons) to explain observable phenomena, historians can do the same. He also noted that, in any case,

ancient human agents, such as Pontius Pilate and Herod Agrippa, are no more observable to modern historians than are ancient divine agents, such as the three persons who appeared to Abraham and the angels who appeared to the women at the empty tomb of Jesus. Since we have no direct access to the past, all ancient history is known to varying degrees through inference.

Elsewhere Licona (2010, p. 103) writes,

Although a historian does not have direct access to the past, a scientist does not have direct access to the experiments she performed last year in the lab but can only refer to her notes . . . physicists posit numerous entities to which they have no direct access, such as quarks and strings. Zammito comments that ‘an electron is no more immediately accessible to perception than the Spanish Inquisition. Each must be inferred from actual evidence. Yet neither is utterly indeterminable.’

Licona makes very good points. Nevertheless, there remains an important difference between positing an unobserved physical entity and an unobserved supernatural entity. The difference is that one cannot examine all



the appropriate intermediate causal processes linking (say) a divine cause to the effects in the same way one examines physical mechanisms (Grünbaum 1991), since the former involves a nonphysical entity and is not a natural law which can be tested, discovered, or controlled in the laboratory. Furthermore, being a personal and free agent, God cannot be expected to behave in ways similar to physical entities or natural laws. Additionally, God is, according to the understanding of many monotheistic traditions, a beginningless and timeless First Cause of the universe, and scientific observations cannot confirm or exclude an entity that is beginningless and timeless, since scientific observations are limited to the observation of processes that occur in time. Therefore, science cannot confirm or exclude the existence of God in this sense. However, it can be argued that science can provide the evidence which can be utilized by the premises of deductive and inductive philosophical arguments for the existence of God (for examples, see Craig and Moreland 2009).

Insofar as the discipline of history models itself closely to science, it would face the same methodological problems related to the confirmation of God (rather than, say, an angel, a demon, or a previously unknown naturalistic explanation such as an alien) as the cause of an event. Distinguishing between God and other causes belongs to the realm of philosophy and theology rather than history and science. Licona (2014, p. 124) seems to agree when he says, ‘in fact, I cannot think of any strong “historical” reason for preferring God to an alien as the cause of Jesus’ resurrection.’ Philosopher Alan Padgett notes that if the resurrection of Jesus happened at all, it is a past event which took place in space and time. ‘If Jesus rose from the dead, this event has a date, and it took place at a certain location in space, just outside Jerusalem’ (Padgett 1998, pp. 303–304). However, he goes on to note, ‘historical science is incapable of making a theological judgement about whether or not God could or did raise Jesus’ (ibid.). To conclude that it is the God of Israel who raised Jesus from the dead would require additional arguments from the disciplines of philosophy of religion (including comparative religion; see Chapter 8), and the study of these arguments is beyond the usual training given to historians.

Rae (2016) complains that the methodological naturalistic method of historical criticism is incapable of discerning the work of God. This causes the biblical scholar to investigate the Bible as if God is not active in history and therefore to be unable to understand the Bible on its own terms. Evans (1996, p. 349) notes,

Ironically . . . the historical assumptions governing this quest seem designed to make it difficult if not impossible to recognize anything really special about Jesus. If Jesus really performed miracles, or thought of himself as divine, the assumptions of historical criticism would make it nearly impossible to discern this.

Now it is one thing to understand the Bible from within the conceptual world of the text itself, with its affirmation of God who created the universe and works out his purposes in history as emphasized by Rae (2005, 2016). It is another thing to think about whether what is understood is true and whether one can show that it is true. (One might make similar remarks concerning the study of the Quran, for example.) The methodological naturalistic method of historical criticism should be understood as one of the methods but not the only method available to the biblical scholar (Evans 1999). This method can yield many conclusions about the past, without yielding everything that can be known about the past, such as discerning whether God is at work. The latter would require philosophical and theological arguments which the biblical scholar can consult (see Chapter 8; for an example of an eminent biblical scholar using such arguments, see Craig Keener's book on *Miracles* [2011]).

It should be noted that science and history do not own the monopoly to truth concerning the past and present and that philosophical arguments can lead to knowledge. It is a mistake to claim that conclusions not attainable by methodological naturalism are illegitimate (Evans 1999, p. 182). Proponents of scientism might object by claiming that science is the only way of knowing the nature of reality.<sup>16</sup> Scientism, however, is susceptible to the objection that scientism cannot be proven by science itself and that its advocates 'rely in their argument not merely on scientific but also on philosophical premises' (Stenmark 2003, pp. 783–785). Moreover, the scientific method itself requires various forms of philosophical reasoning, such as deductive and inductive reasoning, for the development of its explanations. Additionally, science itself cannot answer the question 'why scientific results should be valued'; the answer to this question is philosophical rather than scientific. The criteria for a good scientific theory themselves are philosophical in nature (Ellis 2007, Section 8.1; Loke 2014b). I have argued in Loke (2017b) that the conclusions of those philosophical arguments (e.g. the argument for a Divine First Cause) which can yield answers that are more epistemically certain than scientific discoveries should be regarded as knowledge about reality on at least the same level as scientific facts. While science is a way of knowing, philosophy is another way of knowing.

McGrath (2018) observes the emergence and significance of the notion of multiple situated rationalities, which affirms the intellectual legitimacy

16 In a helpful article, Mikael Stenmark (1997) discusses various forms of scientism and observes that while the word 'science' has a variety of meanings, 'what is characteristic of scientism is that it works with a narrow definition of science . . . the advocates of scientism use the notion of science to cover only the natural sciences and perhaps also those areas of the social sciences that are highly similar in methodology to the natural sciences' (p. 20). Such a methodology typically involves a systematic study using observation and experimentation.

of transdisciplinary dialogue. Noting the notion of multiple levels of reality, McGrath explains that the natural sciences themselves adopt a plurality of methods and criteria of rationality, making use of a range of conceptual tool-boxes that are adapted to specific tasks and situations, so as to give as complete an account as possible of our world (p. 2). For example, with regards to the scientific study of a frog jumping into a pond,

The physiologist explains that the frog's leg muscles were stimulated by impulses from its brain. The biochemist supplements this by pointing out that the frog jumps because of the properties of fibrous proteins, which enabled them to slide past each other, once stimulated by ATP. The developmental biologist locates the frog's capacity to jump in the first place in the ontogenetic process which gave rise to its nervous system and muscles. The animal behaviourist locates the explanation for the frog's jumping in its attempt to escape from a lurking predatory snake. The evolutionary biologist adds that the process of natural selection ensures that only those ancestors of frogs which could detect and evade snakes would be able to survive and breed.

McGrath concludes that 'all five explanations are part of a bigger picture. All of them are right; they are, however, different' (pp. 59–60). Just as science itself brings together different explanations to help us see the bigger picture, there is a need to bring together different disciplines that would complement one other in our attempt to gain a fuller understanding of reality. I shall show in Chapter 8 that one can offer philosophical arguments for God rather than demon or angel as the cause of Jesus' resurrection. While science by itself cannot identify a miracle, science can be used by philosophical argument to rule out certain naturalistic alternatives as one of the steps towards identifying a miracle. For example, a recent study concludes that collective hallucinations are not found in peer-reviewed medical literature, and that 'collective hallucination as an explanation for the disciples' post-crucifixion group experiences of Jesus is indefensible' (Bergeron and Habermas 2015; see further, Chapter 4). The identification of miracle is truly transdisciplinary and requires not only science but also history, philosophy, and theology.

In this book, it will be shown that the methodological naturalistic method of historical criticism can yield the empirical conclusion that Jesus was crucified and was seen alive three days later (Chapters 2 to 7), that the cause of this conclusion can be explained by philosophical considerations (not restricted to the methodological naturalistic method) which indicate that the best explanation is that God raised Jesus from the dead (Chapter 8), and that this warrants the theological understanding of history as the place in which 'God is bringing about his purpose of reconciliation and new life' (Rae 2005, p. 155; see Chapter 9).

### 1.4.3 Concerning the issue of bias

Concerning the issue of bias, in reply to Kähler and the postmodernists, one can concede that there might not have been any unbiased historical record of Jesus written by completely neutral observers, and that the authors of the New Testament documents could have been biased in favour of affirming his resurrection. Nevertheless, the question that needs to be asked is what could have caused the bias of these authors (if they had any) in the first place. As will be argued in the rest of this book, the most reasonable explanation for such bias (if any) is that Jesus truly resurrected. It should be noted that, while the ‘appearances of Jesus’ are interpretations of certain experiences, what caused these experiences still needs to be explained. Against the view that ‘pre-resurrection’ Jesus is ‘historical’ while ‘post-resurrection’ Jesus is ‘interpreted,’ Jens Schröter argues that this dichotomy is false, for everything we say about the past is interpreted (Schröter 2014, p. 201). Schröter’s position is consistent with an epistemological position known as critical realism.

Critical realism affirms the existence of a real world independent of the knower (realism). At the same time, it acknowledges that the only access we have to this reality is through the human mind involving reflection, interpretation of information through a grid of psychological states such as expectations, memories, and beliefs, and the expression and accommodation of that reality with tools such as mathematical formulae or mental models (hence critical) (A. McGrath 2001–2003, Vol. II, ch. 10; Wright 1992, pp. 32–44).

Criticism realism takes into account of Evans’ (1999, p. 185) observation that the ‘notion of weighing evidence is quite complex. How evidence should be weighted depends on, among other things, one’s assessment of the honesty of a source and upon one’s general background beliefs, including metaphysical beliefs.’ Evans also notes,

The facts cannot be settled in isolation from broader theories. Even a criterion so apparently objective as multiple attestation cannot be applied in isolation from one’s theories about the relations the Synoptic Gospels have to each other and to Q (if Q existed), to the dating of the fourth Gospel, to Thomas and to many other factors.

(p. 187)

With regards to interpretation, the ‘Jesus-memory approach’ advocated by Keith (2011) emphasizes,

All memory is dually hermeneutical insofar as memory is a selective/deselective process (some of the past is remembered and some is forgotten) and memories are, from the start, produced and organized by language and thought categories that the individual has borrowed

from his or her social context. In other words, there is no memory, no preserved past and no access to it, without interpretation.

(p. 170)

Given this, the attempt to uncover solely the actual objective past by getting 'behind' the text is a facade, for all Jesus' tradition and all memory is an indissoluble mix of the past and the present. 'The present would have nothing to remember if it were not for the past; the past would not be capable of being remembered if it were not for the frameworks of the present' (p. 170). Given that the actual past happened and some of it was preserved through social memory, to discover 'What really happened?' one should pay close attention to the Jesus traditions within their narrative framework in the written tradition rather than dismiss all such interpretative framework of the Gospels. While one needs to consider whether the past had been accurately remembered and interpreted, one should not assume that to discover the past one has to remove all elements of interpretation, for

the interpretations of the past themselves are what preserve any connection to the actual past. If the influence of the actual past is observable only through the present interpretations of the past that it enables, then removing Jesus traditions from the written Gospels also removes any bridge to the actual past.

(p. 173)

Le Donne (2009) observes that while a history unmediated and unrefracted by culturally significant categories does not exist, historical Jesus analysis is possible in virtue of the essential connection that exists between perceptions of Jesus and interpretations of Jesus in the tradition, and cultural representations are constrained by the empirical reality of events and persons. He writes, 'the historical Jesus is the memorable Jesus; he is the one who set refraction trajectories in motion and who set the initial parameters for how his memories were to be interpreted by his contemporaries' (*ibid.*, p. 268). Therefore,

The historian's job is to tell the stories of memory in a way that most plausibly accounts for the mnemonic evidence. With this in mind, the historical Jesus is not veiled by the interpretations of him. He is most available for analysis when these interpretations are most pronounced. Therefore, the historical Jesus is clearly seen through the lenses of editorial agenda, theological reflection, and intentional counter-memory.

(p. 134)

With respect to the critical process of knowing, Little insightfully observes,

There is no fundamental difficulty in reconciling the idea of a researcher with one set of religious values, who nonetheless carefully traces out the

religious values of a historical actor possessing radically different values. This research can be done badly, of course; but there is no inherent epistemic barrier that makes it impossible for the researcher to examine the body of statements, behaviors, and contemporary cultural institutions corresponding to the other, and to come to a justified representation of the other. . . . The set of epistemic values that we impart to scientists and historians include the value of intellectual discipline and a willingness to subject their hypotheses to the test of uncomfortable facts. Once again, review of the history of science and historical writing makes it apparent that this intellectual value has effect. There are plentiful examples of scientists and historians whose conclusions are guided by their interrogation of the evidence rather than their ideological presuppositions. Objectivity in pursuit of truth is itself a value, and one that can be followed.

(Little 2012, Section 3.2)

According to historian Brian Fay,

historians seek to describe accurately and to explain cogently how and why a certain event or situation occurred. . . . For all the talk of narrativism, presentism, postmodernism, and deconstruction, historians write pretty much the same way as they always have (even though what they write about may be quite new).

(Fay 1998, p. 83)

It is true that the uniqueness of Jesus, which Kähler highlighted, might make the task described by Little and Fay more difficult. Some scholars have argued that the attempts of modernity to uncover the historical Jesus have been characterized by diverse conclusions which are largely influenced by the socio-cultural, political, and religious (or anti-religious) agendas of those engaged in it (Torrance 2001, pp. 216–217). Likewise, the possession of different worldviews (e.g. atheist, theist) with their different understanding of ontology can influence their conclusions concerning miraculous claims such as the resurrection. Such differences in agendas and worldviews might explain the lack of consensus concerning whether Jesus resurrected. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the task is in principle impossible or that every conclusion is as good as another is. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that throughout history there have been those who had confessed their bias against Jesus' resurrection or who had approached it from a contrary worldview (e.g. Buddhism), but who changed their views after examining the evidence (e.g. Morison 1930; Williams 2002). Cases like these refute the widespread misconception expressed by Vermès (2008, p. 141: 'To put it bluntly, not even a credulous non-believer is likely to be persuaded by the various reports of the resurrection; they convince only the already converted').

These cases also illustrate that bias or preconceptions concerning Jesus can be overcome.

The case of professor Paul Williams, an eminent Buddhist historian and philosopher who for over 20 years was a practising Buddhist himself, is particularly illuminating. In a book which detailed his conversion from Buddhism to Catholic Christianity, he explained that he felt the force of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. In his own words, ‘The evidence for resurrection being the most likely explanation of what happened at the first Easter is very strong. Most people do not realize quite how extraordinarily strong the evidence is’ (Williams 2002, p. 20). After examining the relevant historical evidence, he came to the following conclusion:

I am not convinced by alternative explanations of the resurrection. Thus I have to accept that as far as I can see it is more rational to believe in the resurrection than in the alternatives. . . . I have thus chosen to believe. And my belief is based on reasons. I argue that it is a rationally based belief that for me makes more sense than the alternatives.

(*ibid.*, pp. 20–21)

Thus, it is not the case that the bias of the scholar and of the writers of ancient texts<sup>17</sup> would necessarily undermine the historical project concerning the resurrection of Jesus (although it is helpful to be aware of bias in one’s reading, including the reading of my argument!). What matters is whether the proposed hypothesis is able to account for the evidence, including the ‘uncomfortable facts.’<sup>18</sup>

## 1.5 An overview of the rest of the book

In this chapter, I have shown that historians can in principle argue for or against the conclusion that Jesus resurrected. However, it is beyond the discipline of history to adjudicate whether this event (if it happened) was caused by God rather than, say, an alien or an angel. (This does not mean that no good philosophical and/or theological reasons can be offered for thinking that it was caused by God.) In the rest of this book, I shall demonstrate using historical arguments that the best explanation for the origination of the belief that Jesus resurrected is that it happened, and I shall demonstrate using philosophical and theological arguments that the best explanation for the occurrence of this event is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

17 I address the issue of confirmation bias in Chapter 7.

18 For further discussion of other issues related to postmodernists’ critique of history as well as responses to these criticisms, see, for example, McCullagh (1998); Thiselton (1992); Wolterstorff (1995); Murphy (1997).

It is beyond the scope of this book to go into the details concerning the exegesis of all the relevant texts. This would require several monographs and in any case it has been well covered in recent literature (e.g. Craig 1989; Wright 2003; Allison 2005a; Licona 2010; Bryan 2011; Ware 2014). Instead, I shall focus on the evaluation of the naturalistic alternatives to Jesus' resurrection which have been discussed in the literature, using the transdisciplinary approach explained earlier. I have demonstrated that, other than Jesus' resurrection, there are six and only six possible categories of naturalistic hypotheses concerning the claims about Jesus' post-mortem appearances. In the following chapters, each of them will be evaluated against its alternative, as follows: legends hypothesis (Chapter 2), no experience hypothesis (Chapter 3), intramental hypothesis (Chapter 4), and mistaken identity, swoon, and escape hypotheses (Chapter 5). I have also demonstrated that other than Jesus' resurrection, there are eight and only eight possible categories of naturalistic hypotheses concerning the outcome of Jesus' body viz. escape, unburied, remain buried, removal by non-agent, removal by friends, removal by enemies, removal by neutral party, and swoon hypotheses. These will be evaluated in Chapter 6. I shall evaluate various combinations of naturalistic hypotheses in Chapter 7.

In short, I shall demonstrate in the following chapters that (I) 'there were people who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus shortly after his crucifixion,' (II) 'they had some kind of experiences,' (III) 'what they experienced was not caused intramentally but extramentally,' and (IV) 'the extramental entity was not another person but the same Jesus who died on the cross.' As explained earlier, what follows logically from (I), (II), (III), and (IV) is the conclusion that Jesus resurrected. In Chapter 8, I shall discuss the objections to Jesus' resurrection based on its apparently miraculous nature. The conclusions and implications of this book will be summarized in Chapter 9.



## 2 The earliest Christians claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I shall examine whether there were people in mid-first-century Palestine who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus.

To begin, it is recognized by almost all historians that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in c. AD 30, as attested by first- and second-century Christian and non-Christian sources (see Chapter 1). As will be explained later, the evidence indicates that the contents of those New Testament passages which mentioned Jesus' resurrection and numerous 'eyewitnesses,'<sup>1</sup> including individuals and groups of people, were proclaimed in the first century. These include passages in the Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), Acts, and the letters of Paul. In particular, the undisputed letters of Paul (Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon) were written from c. AD 50–62, approximately 20–32 years after Jesus' death, and they reflect the beliefs of the earliest Christians from AD 30 to AD 62 (Hurtado 2003, pp. 85–86). No doubt a number of these Christians had known the historical figure of Jesus personally. 1 Corinthians 15:3–11, which listed a number of these 'eyewitnesses,' was written in c. AD 55. It states:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace

1 The word 'eyewitnesses' is placed in inverted commas here to indicate that these are the people who *claimed* to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus. Hence, I am not begging the question by presupposing that they actually witnessed the resurrected Jesus. Whether they did witness the resurrected Jesus or not is discussed in the following chapters.

of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

This passage claims Jesus' post-mortem appearances to both individuals (Cephas [i.e. Peter], James the brother of Jesus, and Paul) and groups such as the 'Twelve,' the 'more than five hundred brethren,' and the other apostles in 1 Corinthians 15:7, which is a different group from the Twelve mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:5 (Dunn 2003, p. 856, n. 136, cf. 1 Cor. 9:1, 5–6 [mentioned Barnabas]; Rom. 16:7 [mentioned Andronicus and Junias]). The appearances began a very short period of time after Jesus' crucifixion, as implied by the third-day motif which is multiply attested (Licona 2010, pp. 325–329: 'After three days' Matt. 27:63; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; 'Three days and three nights' Matt. 12:40; 'In three days' John 2:19–20; 'On the third day' Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Luke 9:22; 24:7, 46; Acts 10:40; 'The third day': 1 Cor. 15:4; Luke 18:33; 'This is the third day' [since the crucifixion occurred]: Luke 24:21). A theological understanding of this motif does not exclude a historical basis, which is argued for by Bruce (1977, p. 93):

The statement that it was 'on the third day' that Christ rose is based not on any Old Testament scripture but on historical fact. Such an expression as 'after three days' (not to speak of 'three days and three nights'), used in predictions of the resurrection before the event (e.g. in Mk 8:31), might have the general sense of 'in a short time'; but after the event we regularly find it dated 'on the third day,' because it was actually on the third day that the tomb was found empty and Jesus first appeared in resurrection to Peter and others.

It has been objected that the list of supposed eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 could have been interpolated into 1 Corinthians by someone else after the letter was written. Others have objected that, even if the list of supposed eyewitnesses was written by Paul in mid-first century, it could be that some (if not all) of the details (e.g. concerning the 'more than five hundred brethren') were errors which either originated from him or from others who passed the information to him. I shall address these objections in turn.

## **2.2 Is 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 a later interpolation?**

The first objection has been raised by Robert Price (2005), who claims that 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 contains a later interpolation.<sup>2</sup> He argues that the

<sup>2</sup> Price (2005, pp. 92–93) claims that his arguments fit some of the nine criteria for detecting interpolations listed in Munro (1990) viz. (1) manuscript evidence, (2) perceived disparities

Jacobean-Petrine polemics reflected in verses 3–11 are either alien to Paul or anachronistic for him<sup>3</sup> and claims that this polemics belongs to later period polemics in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, the *Epistle of Peter to James*, and Luke-Acts (Price 2005, p. 93). Price notes that a few textual witnesses (Marcion, b, and Ambrosiaster) lack ‘what I also received’ in verse 3a, and suggests that either the scribes omitted these from the original to harmonize 1 Corinthians with Galatians, or added these to the original to subordinate Paul to the Twelve (ibid.). He also claims that verses 3–11 do not fit well with the context of 1 Corinthians 15, arguing that since the Corinthians had already believed in Jesus’ resurrection (v. 11, 17), giving evidence for the resurrection is out of place (p. 96).

In reply, on the one hand, Price’s arguments that the Jacobean-Petrine polemics reflected in verses 3–11 are extremely speculative.<sup>4</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, it is possible to draw literary parallels using speculative interpretations with almost anything.

Marcion (followed by b and Ambrosiaster) could have omitted ‘what I also received’ in verse 3a because of his high view of Paul. Other scholars have shown that, contrary to Price, the statements in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 do not conflict with Paul’s claim in Galatians 1:11–12 that the gospel he proclaimed was not received from a human source nor taught but was received through a revelation of Jesus Christ. The reason is that Galatians 1:11–12 can be understood as referring to how Paul *initially* received the gospel, that is, through direct revelation of Jesus. This does not preclude other Christians subsequently telling him about a gospel tradition which he later passed on to the church at Corinth. Price (2005, p. 74) objects by claiming that Galatians 1:12 (‘Paul says what he preached was not taught

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between the ideologies of the supposed interpolation and its context, (3) stylistic and linguistic differences, (4) fittingness with context, (5) relatedness of themes and concerns with later literature, (6) literary/historical coherence with later literature, (7) external attestation, (8) indirect textual evidence, and (9) motivation for interpolation. With regards to stylistic and linguistic differences, Price (2005, p. 92) admits that this is inconclusive: while their presence could be due to interpolation, they could also be due to pre-Pauline tradition taken over by him (as many scholars have argued, see Section 2.3).

3 Price (2005, pp. 84–88, 92) argues for a gradual elevation of James in the traditions, until a later interpolation was inserted in 1 Corinthians 15:7 saying that he saw the Lord.

4 For example, Price (ibid.) argues that the appearance ‘to all the apostles’ (v. 7), which included Peter, implied a second tradition that ‘Jesus appeared to James first, then followed by Peter and the other apostles’ to counter polemically that Jesus appeared to Peter first (v. 5). In response, it could be that Jesus appeared to Peter first, and then to him again together with ‘the Twelve,’ and after the appearance to James, he appeared again to Peter together with ‘all the apostles,’ a larger group than the Twelve that includes others who have been with Jesus from the beginning (Acts 1:21–22). If that is so, and if this passage were written to convey what actually happened, then verses 5–7 would be how the text would read. It is unjustified to cut out a verse and interpret that the text implies a polemic when the text could have merely intended to convey what actually happened.

him by human predecessors') contradicts 1 Corinthians 15:3 ('he received it from human predecessors'). However, Paul nowhere says in 1 Corinthians 15 that his preaching was *entirely* taught by human predecessors; he was rather citing a summary of the resurrection appearances which was also preached by other early Christians as evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Additionally, Galatians 1:12 does not say that Paul learned the *entirety* of his understanding of Christianity, *without remainder*, by *private* revelation. Surely the Damascus Christians who cared for and baptized him would have spoken to him prior to the baptism (Davis 2006, p. 48). McKnight further explains,

At Galatia, where Paul was being accused of being an abbreviator of the Jerusalem gospel (and therefore wrong), Paul asserts that his gospel did not come from Jerusalem but from Jesus Christ. In other words, Paul is talking about the source of his gospel to the Galatians. On the other hand, at Corinth Paul is seeking to demonstrate the essential continuity of his gospel with other apostolic expressions of the gospel and the heritage his gospel has. However much Paul wanted to assert that his gospel was independent in source, he did not shrink at the same time from observing that the Jerusalem leaders 'gave him the right hand of fellowship' . . . in other words, they approved of his independently derived gospel. The gospel Paul preached was consistent with the gospel of his predecessors; but the gospel Paul preached was not from them, since Paul got it by direct revelation.

(McKnight 1995, pp. 69–70)

Sturdy (2007, p. 64), another rare scholar who has argued that the tradition of 1 Corinthians 15 is post-Pauline interpolation, claims that we would not expect the Paul of 2 Corinthians 5:16 ('even though we once knew Christ according to the flesh, we know him no longer in that way') to be interested in formulaic traditions handed down about the Lord. In reply, 'according to the flesh' should be taken with the verb ('knew') rather than the noun ('Christ') (Dunn 1998, p. 184). It refers to knowing Christ in terms of outward appearance of worldly status; this was Paul's pre-conversion understanding of Jesus, which he now rejects (Keener 2005, pp. 184–185). What 2 Corinthians 5:16 rejects is the evaluation of Christ in accordance with the value system of this world; it does not reject an interest in knowing about Christ on the basis of testimonial evidence preserved in formulaic traditions.

In reply to Price's objection concerning fittingness with context, verses 3–11 can be understood as an attempt to establish the fact of the resurrection while the rest of the chapter explains the implications (Davis 2006, pp. 48–49). Even though the Corinthians in general had already believed Jesus' resurrection, a number of them were sceptical about the resurrection

(1 Cor. 15:12). It is therefore fitting for Paul to mention the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, on the basis of which he argues for the future resurrection of the believers. Paul's argument can be understood as such:

Premise 1: If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised (v. 13);

Premise 2: But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead (v. 20, this is established by the appearances mentioned in v. 3–11).

Conclusion: Therefore, there is resurrection of the dead.

On the other hand, the manuscript evidence is against Price's speculative theory. The authenticity of verses 3–11 is recognized by virtually all historical-critical scholars, as it is attested by all the extant copies of 1 Corinthians 15.

Price (2005, p. 92) admits that there is no extant copy of 1 Corinthians 15 that lacks verses 3–11, but he claims that this lack does not stultify his argument since there are no texts at all from the period during which he suggests the interpolation occurred. He cites Ehrman as saying that theologically motivated changes are to be expected in the first three centuries when both text and theology are in state of flux (*ibid.*, p. 97, n. 7). Price admits,

though snippets of my passage (including few if any of the 'appearance' statements, interestingly) appear here and there in Patristic sources, these citations are indecisive, since writers like Tertullian and Irenaeus are too late to make any difference, while in my view the date and genuineness of 1 Clement and the Ignatian corpus are open questions.

(p. 93)

In his reply to critics, Price claims that, just as it is not unreasonable to think that when the Caliph Uthman had the text of the Koran standardized, he destroyed all previous copies and their dangerous variants, the early Christian authorities did the same to biblical manuscripts as well.<sup>5</sup>

In reply, Price's argument assumes that all the copies which contained the original version of 1 Corinthians 15 (without v. 1–11) vanished without leaving a trace in the subsequent records, which is implausible. Precisely because early Christianity was in state of flux, no early Christian leader had the authority of a caliph to ensure that all previous copies which contained what Paul originally wrote were destroyed without leaving a trace. Trobisch (1994, pp. 3–4) notes, 'compared to any other letter collection . . . the letters of Paul have survived in an enormous number of manuscripts that provide a large number of variant readings.' This contradicts Price's idea that there was a standardization process by early Christian authorities. The

<sup>5</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/theemptytomb/davis>. Accessed May 12, 2018.

fact that ‘snippets’ of verses 3–11 appear in Patristic sources indicates that this passage was known to various early writers (regardless of whether they chose to cite the ‘appearance’ statements), including the ‘heretic’ Marcion in the mid-second century. Various other portions of 1 Corinthians were cited by Clement of Rome (late first century AD), Polycarp of Smyrna (writing between AD 110 and 150), and the Shepherd of Hermas (c. AD 115–140) (Gregory and Tuckett 2007). No interpolator of the late first–early second century would have had the power and authority to alter all the copies of 1 Corinthians possessed by those different communities of varying (sometimes even opposing) theologies to which these writers belonged. Moreover, to accomplish that feat would require an alteration of a large amount of documents across diverse places. This would have to include the copies of 1 Corinthians available at that time, and these copies would have to be searched from across the Mediterranean and altered without leaving a trace in the surviving manuscripts from diverse places. This, evidently, is practically impossible.

One might ask, ‘could it be that the interpolation occurred very early (i.e. prior to the end of first century), before copies of the letter spread to various places?’ In reply, it should be noted that copies of the letters of Paul were already circulated to various places during Paul’s lifetime. Gamble (1995, p. 97) observes,

Galatians is addressed ‘to the churches of Galatia’ (1:2) that is, to several communities in a discrete region. . . . Similarly, the letter to the Romans, addressed to ‘all God’s beloved in Rome’ (1:7) was directed to different house churches in the city (compare 16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15). . . . In the cases of Galatians and Romans it was a matter of circulating a single letter among different groups that together constituted the addressees. It is likely that this was achieved not merely by a series of public readings but by making copies: the first recipients of a Pauline letter were probably no better able than we to digest it at one reading and would have wished to retain it for subsequent consideration.

Moreover,

There is compelling evidence that some authentic letters of Paul did in fact circulate from an early time in communities other than those to which they were originally addressed. The textual traditions of Romans and 1 Corinthians preserve clear indications that these letters circulated at one time in generalized or catholicized forms from which their local addresses (Rom. 1:7, 15; 1 Cor. 1:2), and perhaps other particulars (Rom. 16), had been eliminated in favor of broad designations of their recipients.

    (‘Those who are beloved by God’ [Rom. 1:7] and  
    ‘those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus’  
    [1 Cor. 1:2b]) (ibid., p. 98)

Given that the copies were widely circulated soon after they were written, the distortion would have to occur almost immediately after 1 Corinthians was written and before the circulation occurred, that is, around AD 55. In that case, it would still be true to say that its contents originated from around the mid-first century, which is all that is required for the subsequent steps of my argument for Jesus' resurrection (see later). Otherwise, once the copies spread to diverse places, it would have been practically impossible to synchronize the alteration of the manuscripts in diverse places such that all of them contained the interpolation, without leaving a trace of the original version. Sceptics might object that many documents were indeed destroyed later by Christians. In response, some of these writings did survive (e.g. the Gnostic Gospels in the Nag Hammadi library), and we have many traces of them in other early documents, for example the writings of early church fathers. Moreover, one reason why many of the heretics' writings did not survive is that no one actively promoted the copying and preservation of their writings as their adherents died off (see Gamble 1995, p. 127). By contrast, given the high regard the early Christians had for the writings of the apostles, they would have been interested in preserving their contents. The fact that no extant copy of 1 Corinthians 15 lacks verses 3–11 is therefore a significant refutation of Price's hypothesis.

### 2.3 Did the people listed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 really claim to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus?

#### 2.3.1 *An outline of the considerations involved*

As noted earlier, it might be objected that, given that a list of supposed eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 was written by someone (say, Paul) in mid-first century, it could still be that some (if not all) of the supposed eyewitnesses did not actually exist. Rather, the list could have contained erroneous information which either originated from Paul or from others who passed the information to him. De Jonge observes that 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 only contains a claim made by third parties about Peter and the rest of the Twelve; it does not contain, for example, Peter's claim about himself in the first person such as 'I have seen the resurrected Jesus' (de Jonge 2002, p. 41). How then can we know whether Peter and the rest of the Twelve really existed and claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus?

Before we discuss this objection further, it should first be noted that Paul said that he received the gospel; he did not originate it, rather the Gospel already pre-existed before he had any part in it (Gal. 1:13; cf. 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6). As Bryan (2011, p. 48) observes, the terms in 1 Corinthians 15:3 *παράδιδωμι* ('deliver') and *παραλαμβάνω* ('receive') echo the language in which both Greek and Jewish traditions spoke of the faithful handing on a true teaching (Bryan cites 'Abot 1, Wis. 14:15, Josephus, *Against Apion*

1.60). Moreover, the non-Pauline characteristics in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 also indicate that Paul is passing on a prior tradition (*ibid.*). Craig (1989, pp. 2–3) summarizes the characteristics as follows: (i) the phrase ‘for our sins’ using the genitive case and plural noun is unusual for Paul; (ii) the phrase ‘according to the Scriptures’ is unparalleled in Paul, who introduces scriptural citations by ‘as it is written’; (iii) the perfect passive verb ‘has been raised’ appears only in this chapter and in a pre-Pauline confessional formula in II Timothy 2:8; (iv) the phrase ‘on the third day’ with its ordinal number following the noun in Greek is non-Pauline; (v) the word ‘appeared’ is found only here and in the confessional formula in I Timothy 3:16; and (vi) ‘the Twelve’ is not Paul’s nomenclature, for he always speaks of the twelve disciples as ‘the apostles.’

The aforementioned considerations imply that Paul received the information about the ‘eyewitnesses’ who had existed even earlier (Theissen and Merz 1998, pp. 487–490; Allison 2005a, pp. 233–239; Licona 2010).<sup>6</sup>

Psychological studies have indicated that people are careful to form conclusions based on valid evidence when the topic is important, when the costs of false confirmation are greater, and when people are held personally responsible for what they say and care about their reputation among sustained relationships with known audiences, and that groups characterized by scepticism tend to arrive at more accurate conclusions (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007, pp. 166, 173–174). In the rest of this chapter, I shall utilize these considerations for my subsequent discussion concerning the reliability of the list of ‘eyewitnesses’ in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11.

### 2.3.2 *The importance of the issue*

The Corinthians were being told in the same letter that Jesus’ resurrection was the basis of a religion for which believers were to be prepared to give up their lives. 1 Corinthians 15:17–19 says,

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

And in verses 30–32,

And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our

<sup>6</sup> Licona (2010, p. 319) notes, however, ‘Differences of opinion exist over whether “for our sins” and “according to the Scriptures” in the first line belonged to the original tradition and the same can be said of “on the third day” and “according to the Scriptures” in the third line. Differences of opinion also exist over whether 15:5b–7 is part of the same tradition or that Paul has combined two or more traditions.’ These differences of opinion do not affect my argument in this chapter.



Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'

### 2.3.3 *There were sceptics among Paul's audiences at Corinth*

Reimarus had suggested that stories of the dead being raised in the Scriptures and the teachings of the Pharisees made it easy for Jews to accept the apostles' claim that Jesus had risen (Reimarus 1971, p. 2).

In reply, Bryan (2011, p. 9) observes that there were varieties of Judaism in Jesus' time, and some were sceptical of bodily resurrection. For example, the Sadducees asserted that 'there is no resurrection' (Mark 12:18–27; par. Matt. 22:23–33, Luke 20:27–40; also Acts 23:8, Josephus *Ant.* 18.16) (Bryan 2011, pp. 10–11).<sup>7</sup> Some Jews (e.g. Philo of Alexandria, the author of 4 Maccabees) taught only the immortality of the soul, without subsequent restoration into embodiment (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Additionally, the restorations to life portrayed in Scripture (e.g. 1 Kings 17:10–24; 2 Kings 4:8–3; in the New Testament, the stories of raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43 par.), the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–17), and Lazarus (John 11:1–44) are subjected to the limitations and weaknesses of life as we know it, and which would again end in death (Bryan 2011, pp. 14, 37). Bryan cites Hebrews 11:35: 'Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection,' and he notes the contrast between 'resurrection' and 'better resurrection' and verse 39 which says that all these people of faith still have not yet received what was promised. The 'better resurrection' and the promise is the new mode of being portrayed by the authors of Daniel 12:1–3 ('shine like the dome of the sky'), 2 Maccabees (7:9, 11, 14, 21–23, 28–29, 12:40–46, 14:46), and Wisdom 2–3, which speak of what will finally happen to the faithful dead: it will no longer be subject to the limitations of life as we know it (*ibid.*, pp. 14–16). Such a resurrection was claimed to have happened to Jesus by the New Testament writers.

Beliefs about bodily resurrection were also present in ancient Zoroastrianism and paganism (Carrier 2009, chapter 3, noting, for example, that Celsus mentioned a list of people whom some pagans believed resurrected, though he himself was sceptical; see Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.55, 3.26, 3.22). Nevertheless, Bryan (2011, pp. 30–31) observes that the existence of these stories does not alter the fact that many ancient pagan writers were against

<sup>7</sup> Bryan (*ibid.*) notes that for them God's judgment and retribution are sure, but they are not after the individual's death, or if they do come after death, then they come through one's descendants (Sir. 11:26–28 cf. Exod. 20:5).

what these stories imply. Keener (2005, p. 122) observes that ‘educated, elite Corinthians probably followed views held by many philosophers, such as immortality of the soul after the body’s death. Many viewed the body as earthly, the soul as heavenly (Heraclitus *Ep.* 9; Seneca *Dial.* 12.11.6), including some Jews (Wis 9:15–16; *Sipre Deut.* 306.28.2).’ Keener continues,

Some Greeks (like Epicureans and popular doubts on tombstones) denied even an afterlife. Yet even Greeks who expected an afterlife for the soul could not conceive of bodily resurrection (which they would view as the reanimation of corpses) or glorified bodies. The closest analogies were old myths about deceased souls brought back from Hades; annually returning underworld deities connected with spring vegetation; witches magically resuscitating corpses; and (most common in novels) recovery from merely apparent death.

(*ibid.*)

The church at Corinth evidently included ‘converts’ to Christianity who remained sceptical of the resurrection, as indicated by 1 Corinthians 15:12: ‘But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?’

The New Testament indicates the difficulties the first-century audiences had with such a claim by portraying them as scoffing the idea (Acts 17:32; regardless of whether this passage in Acts is historical or created by first-century Christians, it shows that this scepticism was present among the first-century people).

Even the apostles themselves were portrayed as rejecting this claim initially. ‘But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them’ (Luke 24:11; see also Matt. 28:17; pseudo-Mark 16:11). These observations refute the idea that first-century people were all gullible enough to accept the claim of bodily resurrection uncritically. (This does not deny the fact that—as in all ages including the modern one—there would have been a few people who were gullible in this sense, such as the portrayal of Herod and some of his contemporaries who believed that Jesus was the resurrected John the Baptist in Mark 6:14–29, as well as modern-day Elokists who believe that Schneersohn was resurrected; see discussion in Chapter 7 in which I compare and contrast this case with the apostles’ belief that Jesus resurrected). Regardless of whether the account in Matthew 28:11–15 is factual, it indicates that first-century Jews were capable of thinking about alternative naturalistic explanations to Jesus’ resurrection by claiming that Jesus’ disciples stole his body.

Moreover, Bryan (2011, p. 9) observes,

Even in the Scriptures, stories of the dead being raised are invariably presented as exceptional. That, after all, is why they are interesting.

And even Pharisaic hope was, of course, a hope for what God might do in the future. As far as normal and present experience was concerned, neither the Scriptures nor Pharisaic teaching will have altered the fact that Jews just as much as Gentile invariably experienced the dead as staying dead.

Graham Stanton also notes,

Miracles were not accepted without question in antiquity. Graeco-Roman writers were often reluctant to ascribe ‘miraculous’ events to the gods, and offered alternative explanations. Some writers were openly sceptical about miracles (e.g. Epicurus, Lucretius, Lucian). So it is a mistake to write off the miracles of Jesus as the result of the naivety and gullibility of people in the ancient world.

(Stanton 2001, p. 66)

Additionally, from their writings, it is evident that the earliest Christians were rational enough to debate (e.g. Gal. 2:11–21), to think about the evidence for their faith (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:6), to consider its consequences (1 Cor. 15:14–19)—such as having to face frequent dangers and martyrdom (1 Cor. 15:30–32)—and to persuade others to hold to their views.

Given these considerations, if someone in the first century claimed that there were ‘eyewitnesses’ of Jesus’ resurrection, the earliest Christians would want to check them out (see next section).

### *2.3.4 People were told to check out the purported eyewitnesses and they had the means to do that*

Sceptics question the standard of evidence most people followed back in the first century, and they question whether the supposed eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection were interrogated (Carrier 2009). In reply, Paul indicated to the Corinthians what the standard of valid evidence was in 1 Corinthians 15:6: to consult the ‘eyewitnesses’ themselves. Keener (2005, p. 124) observes that similar appeals to public knowledge can be found in the writings of Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 1.50–52; *Life* 359–62) and Cicero (*Verr.* 1.5.15; 2.1.40.103). If there were indeed such ‘eyewitnesses’ as 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 claimed, most of them would still be alive in AD 55; indeed, it was said that among the ‘more than five hundred brethren,’ most of them ‘remain until now’ (v. 6). Bauckham observes that the commonsensical idea of ‘checking out’ these important ‘eyewitnesses’ is implicit in 1 Corinthians, a letter which was intended for public reading in the churches. Paul is in effect saying in 1 Corinthians 15:6, ‘If anyone wants to check this tradition, a very large number of the eyewitnesses are still alive and can be seen and heard’ (Bauckham 2006, p. 308).

Given the early date of 1 Corinthians 15:3–11, the Corinthians could check with the eyewitnesses of Jesus, the eyewitnesses of the author of 1 Corinthians, and even with the author (Paul) himself about what he preached to find out whether the message had been distorted or whether there were indeed ‘more than five hundred brethren’ who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus at once. Concerning checking with Paul, Gamble (1995, p. 101) notes, ‘the tangled correspondence of Paul with the Corinthians, if not typical, certainly indicates that Paul needed to and did keep track of what he had written.’ Gamble also observes,

It is clear, however, that Paul relied heavily on letters to stay in touch with and to supervise his congregations. There was, in fact, much traffic in letters: Paul’s letters to the churches (more than the few that have been preserved), the churches’ letters to him (compare 1 Cor. 7:1), and letters used by other teachers on their own behalf in the communities (compare 2 Cor. 3:1, 2 Thess. 2:2). Paul’s associates, who served as his personal emissaries and liaison to the congregations, often had a hand in his correspondence, not only as letter carriers. It was Paul’s custom to name others together with himself as cosenders of his letters. This was probably not a formality but a reflection of the involvement of his associates in the conception, if not in the composition, of many of the letters. The evidence strongly suggests that Paul’s missionary enterprise had a corporate structure and a school dimension and that Paul and his associates thought it important to formulate the apostle’s teaching in writing and to employ those writings in the furtherance of Paul’s missionary aims.  
(*ibid.*, p. 99)

One might object that given that the details concerning the ‘five hundred’ (e.g. their names) are absent (Lindemann 2014a, p. 87), how would the Corinthians be able to check?

In reply, on the one hand, the fact that we do not have these details at present does not imply that the first-century audiences did not have the details. On the other hand, scholars have pointed out that New Testament writers often omit details that must have already been known to them (e.g. Luke’s omission of Mark 6:45–8:26) (Craig 1984). Other passages in 1 Corinthians (e.g. 9:5) indicate that there were various traditional narratives about the apostles and Jesus which would have been known to the Corinthians and other early Christian communities (Jervell 1972). On 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 Gerhardsson (2003, p. 89) remarks,

Elementary psychological considerations tell us that the early Christians could scarcely mention such intriguing events . . . without being able to elaborate on them. . . . A preacher can begin with an outline but he cannot go on forever repeating mere outlines.

Likewise, Allison observes that 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 contains only a bare outline listing the individuals and groups to whom Jesus was supposed to have appeared, without mentioning the details of the appearances. Allison insightfully argues that since the Christians in Corinth (or anywhere else) would not have believed based on the scanty information in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 alone without knowing (or at least wanting to know) some of the details (e.g. what did these disciples see? Did they touch Jesus?), 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 must have been a summary of traditional resurrection narratives which were told in fuller forms elsewhere (Allison 2005a, pp. 235–239). That is, Paul knew that these details were already in circulation in the form of various traditional narratives which were known to his audiences (e.g. the Corinthians), therefore he did not see the need to mention them. Wright argues that these fuller accounts would have been required to provide the material for which Paul and the others created a theological and biblical framework and from which they drew further eschatological conclusions such as the notion of the ‘spiritual body’ (1 Cor. 15:35–49). Hence, the existence of these fuller accounts with their details would have been required to answer ‘why did early Christianity begin,’ and ‘why did it take this shape’ (Wright 2003, pp. 608–614).

It should be noted that the early Christian movement (though geographically widespread) was a network of close communication, the early Christian leaders (which included the apostolic ‘eyewitnesses’) were quite mobile, and it is very probable that Jewish Christians would have travelled yearly to Jerusalem for festivals (Bauckham 2006, pp. 32, 306). Hurtado observes,

A well-attested ‘networking’ was another feature of early Christianity. This involved various activities, among them the sending and exchange of texts, believers travelling for trans-local promotion of their views (as e.g. the ‘men from James’ in Gal. 2:11, or Apollo’s travels to Corinth in 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:5–9; 16:12), representatives sent for conferral with believers elsewhere (as depicted, e.g. Acts 15:1–35), or sent to express solidarity with other circles of believers (as e.g. those accompanying the Jerusalem offering in 1 Cor. 16:3–4). After all, travel and communication were comparatively well developed in the Roman world generally, among wealthy and a good many ordinary people, for business, pilgrimage to religious sites/occasions, for health, to consult oracles, for athletic events, sightseeing, and other purposes. ‘So’, as Richard Bauckham observed, ‘the context in which the early Christian movement developed was not conducive to parochialism; quite the opposite.’ Indeed, in that world of frequent travel and communication, the early Christians particularly seem to have been given to networking, devoting impressive resources of time, money, and personnel to this, and on a wide trans-local scale.

(Hurtado 2013, p. 454)

Given these considerations, contacts with the 'eyewitnesses' and hearing the traditional narratives from them would have taken place naturally, and investigative letters would not have been necessary (cf. Carrier 2009).

Price (2005) thinks that it is unlikely that someone could have counted 'more than five hundred brethren' and claims that this indicates the fictive character of a narrative. In reply, while an exact head count might be unlikely, it is not difficult to estimate a number of 'more than five hundred brethren.' For example, by looking at the audience present in a football stadium, I can be sure that the audience is more than five hundred even though I have not taken a head count.

Price (2005, pp. 80–81) questions the reliability of the detail concerning the 'more than five hundred brethren' by asking why it is absent from the Gospels if it is part of an early tradition. Price rejects the explanation that the Gospels' authors were responding to another set of needs and situation, for he thinks that the apologetic motives which scholars have suggested for 1 Corinthians 15 would have been present in the Gospels' authors as well. He argues that if such an overwhelmingly potent proof of the resurrection as the appearance to the 'more than five hundred brethren' had occurred, it would have been widely repeated from the beginning and be included in the Gospels.

In reply, there are valid and invalid forms of argument from silence, and Price's argument is an invalid form of argument from silence. An argument from silence works only when it can be shown that the silence would have been broken if the conclusion were otherwise. Price's argument is invalid because it fails to meet this condition. To illustrate, Price fails to consider the possibility that an oral tradition concerning the 'more than five hundred brethren' mentioned by Paul had already been circulated among early Christians and known by the Gospels' authors and their audiences, thus the Gospels' authors did not see the need to mention it. For example, suppose that the 'more than five hundred brethren' were with the 11 disciples who 'saw the Lord' in Galilee, as portrayed in Matthew 28:16–20 (Robertson and Plummer 1911, p. 337). The author of Matthew might not have thought it necessary to mention this detail but chose to keep the narrative focused on the 11 instead. On the other hand, if the 'resurrection appearance' to the 'more than five hundred brethren' indeed occurred in Galilee, many of them would have remained there, and this would explain why there were only 120 believers in Jerusalem as portrayed in Acts 1:15 (cf. Acts 2:7, which refers to them as Galileans). Against Lüdemann who claims that the appearance to the five hundred brethren is a legendary reference to the event of Pentecost, Craig (2000, p. 191) objects that most of those people were still alive in AD 55 when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, and hence they could be questioned about the experience and correct the legendary developments. Moreover, the event of Pentecost was fundamentally different from a resurrection appearance; in Acts 2:1–13 all the characteristics of an Easter narrative are missing, above all the appearing of Christ. Against this, Chilton

argues that the narrative in Acts 2 is related to Jesus' resurrection in the sense that

the steady outworking of that theme during the course of the book of Acts is skilful and programmatic, so that there is a broadening and at the same time an intensification of the conception of God's Spirit as released by the resurrection.

(2019, p. 112)

However, Chilton confuses the effect of Jesus' resurrection ('God's Spirit as released by the resurrection') with the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, which is offered as a proof to sceptics of resurrection by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6 as explained earlier. Thus, Chilton's argument is invalid.

### *2.3.5 Paul assumed responsibility and cared about his reputation with his known audiences in Corinth, and the costs of false confirmation would have been high*

Paul assumed responsibility for the tradition which he passed on to the Corinthians. He was evidently not a stranger to the Christians in Corinth, and his tangled correspondences with the Corinthians indicate that he cared about his reputation as an apostle.

Moreover, Paul claimed that this tradition was what other apostles were preaching too (1 Cor. 15:1, 11). Paul's statement that most of the 'more than five hundred brethren' 'remain until now, but some have fallen asleep' carries the implication that Paul knew many of these 'survivors' (Bishop 1956, pp. 343–344). Various textual evidence indicates that Paul knew others (e.g. James, Peter and other apostles; see Gal. 1–2) whom he listed as 'eyewitnesses' of Jesus' resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 and that he had personally met them and talked to them, and that he knew that the Corinthians knew them too (1 Cor. 1:12, 9:1–5). Sceptic psychologist Whittenberger (2011) objects that the report that a group of people saw Jesus may have been generated by an individual disciple having a hallucination not only of Jesus but of his fellow disciples together with him. However, in such a case the report would have easily been falsified by the readers of 1 Corinthians checking with Peter and his fellow disciples. As Bryan (2011, p. 54) observes,

Some among the Corinthians were certainly familiar with the teaching of Cephas (1 Cor. 1:12). Evidently they knew who James was and were aware of other apostles (15:8), and it is hardly likely that none among them had ever heard any of them teach. In other words, the assertion of eyewitness testimony made both by Paul and by the apostolic formula

was easily open to challenge unless, as must have been the case, he and the Corinthians knew perfectly well that it was correct.

Given these considerations, Paul would not have made up the list of supposed eyewitnesses, or passed on one which was made up by others and which he himself did not know was correct.<sup>8</sup> If these people did not exist and claim to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus, falsification would have been easy and the costs would have been high. The Corinthian Christians would have discredited Paul and warned their relatives and friends about Paul's harmful hoax which tells people to risks their lives for a faith that was based on the ridiculous belief of bodily resurrection supported by a false list of 'eyewitnesses.' In that case, Paul's letters would have been discarded, rather than kept as divinely authoritative writings by the Corinthian Christians or considered to be 'weighty and strong' (2 Cor. 10:10) by his sophisticated opponents in Corinth. As Peter Kreeft (2003, p. 74) succinctly observes,

Paul says in this passage (v. 6) that most of the five hundred are still alive, inviting any reader to check the truth of the story by questioning the eyewitnesses. He could never have done this and gotten away with it, given the power, resources and numbers of his enemies, if it were not true.

Given the aforementioned reasons for thinking that what Paul says is true, it is not incorrect to conclude that Peter, the rest of the Twelve, and others claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus, even though (as de Jonge (2002, p. 41) observes) 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 only contains a claim made by third parties.

### *2.3.6 Other early documents also mentioned Jesus' resurrection and various eyewitnesses*

Aside from Paul's letters, there are other documents in the first and early second century—such as the Four Gospels, Acts, 1 Clement, Letters of Ignatius, and so on—which also claim that there were various eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. As Theissen and Merz (1998, p. 490) observe concerning the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11, 'The credibility of this tradition is

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the existence of 'The Twelve,' other evidence includes multiple attestation in Markan tradition, Johannine tradition, and the 'Q tradition' (Matt. 19:28 and Luke 22:30), the diverse yet largely overlapping lists of names, the extremely early tradition in 1 Cor. 15:5, as well as the argument from embarrassment relating to the role of Judas Iscariot as one of the Twelve (Meier 1991–2016, Vol. 3, pp. 128–147).



enhanced, because it is in part confirmed by the narrative tradition, which is independent, and because in the case of Paul we have the personal testimony of an eyewitness who knew many of the other witnesses.’ Summarizing the work of Allison (2005a) and others, Licona (2010, p. 322) notes, for example,

The appearance to Peter in 1 Corinthians 15:5 may be alluded to in Mark 16:7 and is specifically mentioned in Luke 24:34, though not narrated. In fact, Luke agrees with the tradition in placing the appearance to Peter chronologically prior to the group appearance to the disciples. ‘The fact that the name Peter is used in Luke 24:12 while Simon is used in 24:34 again points to different sources or traditions.’ The appearance to the Twelve in 1 Corinthians 15:5 is clearly narrated by Luke and John. Allison provides another chart of this appearance in Matthew, Pseudo-Mark (Mk 16:9–20), Luke, and John showing similar setting, appearance, response, commissioning, and promise of assistance.

It has often been claimed by sceptics (e.g. Vermès 2008) that Paul’s account of Jesus’ resurrection is not in agreement with the narrative traditions in the other Four Gospels, which also do not agree with each other, and that the apparent contradictions are irreconcilable. A typical list of apparent discrepancies is as follows (listed in Ehrman 2014, p. 134):

Who was the first person to go to the tomb? Was it Mary Magdalene by herself (John)? Or Mary along with another Mary (Matthew)? Or Mary along with another Mary and Salome (Mark)? Or Mary, Mary, Joanna, and a number of other women (Luke)? Was the stone already rolled away when they arrived at the tomb (Mark, Luke, and John), or explicitly not (Matthew)? Whom did they see there? An angel (Matthew), a man (Mark), or two men (Luke)? Did they immediately go and tell some of the disciples what they had seen (John), or not (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)? What did the person or people at the tomb tell the women to do? To tell the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee (Matthew and Mark)? Or to remember what Jesus had told them earlier when he had been in Galilee (Luke)? Did the women then go tell the disciples what they were told to tell them (Matthew and Luke), or not (Mark)? Did the disciples see Jesus (Matthew, Luke, and John), or not (Mark)? 1 Where did they see him?—only in Galilee (Matthew), or only in Jerusalem (Luke)?

Sceptics argue that the lack of agreement between the details of the resurrection narratives in the Gospels, together with their attribution to Jesus’ teachings that have an excellent *Sitz im Leben* in the early church, suggest that the details are the invention of the Gospels’ authors in accordance with their own agendas (Casey 1996, p. 192).

However, even if the authors did have an agenda, having an agenda does not necessarily imply that the details recorded by the Gospels' authors are not credible. While having an agenda might have caused these authors to invent these details to make their case more convincing, it might also be the case that the authors did not invent the details but were convinced by them, and thus they had the agenda to include these details in their accounts—according to the needs of their audiences—to convince others also. The sceptics' assumption that 'if a purported event meshes well with an author's redactional motive, then the author made up the event' is unjustified, for there is no reason why the occurrence of a given event cannot dovetail with the author's editorial purposes' (Davis 2006, p. 54). The apparent lack of agreement indicates that the stories were not carefully made up by a group of Christians conspiring to tell the story of Jesus' resurrection. Keener argues that, even at their latest possible date of composition, the Gospels derive from a period relatively close to the events, when testimonies that had been given by 'eyewitness' remained central to the church, and at least Luke seems to have had direct access to eyewitness corroboration for some of his traditional material (Luke 1:1–4; Keener 2003, p. 32). The apparent lack of agreement is what we would expect from first-hand accounts of a shocking event given by eyewitnesses very soon after the event. As Wright (2003, p. 612) argues,

The stories exhibit . . . exactly that surface tension which we associate, not with tales artfully told by people eager to sustain a fiction and therefore anxious to make everything look right, but with the hurried, puzzled accounts of those who have seen with their own eyes something which took them horribly by surprise and with which they have not yet fully come to terms.

Consider this: If Tom, Dick, and Harry witnessed a shocking event (e.g. a tsunami) and each of them was asked individually to give an account shortly afterwards, they would not have reported every single detail or in the same way. Rather, each of them would emphasize different details as they told the story with excitement. This is what we see in the Gospels. Wright (2003, pp. 611–612) argues,

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. . . . Irrespective of when the gospels reached their final form, the strong probability is that the Easter stories they contain go back to genuinely early oral tradition.

While the writers added in different details to the earlier sources (e.g. Luke on Mark), they still included plenty of details which are embarrassing

to their case (e.g. women finding the tomb, disciples at Emmaus not recognizing Jesus, etc.). As attorney Herbert Casteel (1992, p. 213) remarks, these are ‘numerous details of the very type that false accounts would be careful to avoid.’

Vincent Taylor (1953, pp. 59–62) argues that each early Christian community would preserve the memory of an appearance of Jesus to figures known to that community and retain the memory of appearances with local associations, and that the individual evangelists drew on one or the other of these local traditions available to them. Thus, the diversity in the accounts of the appearances constitutes no argument against their historicity. Taylor explains this with regards to the women at the tomb:

Naturally, at different centres of Palestinian Christianity the lists would differ. All agreed that Mary of Magdala was one of the number, but at one centre the names of local women would be remembered, and at another centre those of others. Luke’s (Caesarean) tradition preserved the names of Joanna and Susanna, Mark’s (Jerusalem) tradition a second Mary and Salome.

(Taylor 1957, p. 652)

Bryan (2011, pp. 167–168) observes, ‘Matthew, on this view, will have omitted Salome, because his community did not know her.’ He notes Bauckham’s suggestion that the differences in the women named at various points in the evangelists’ narratives, far from being grounds for not taking them seriously, may actually indicate ‘the scrupulous care with which the Gospels present the women as witnesses’ (ibid.).

The suggestion by Brown and Taylor is consistent with the recent work on memory and the historical Jesus by Le Donne (2009), who proposes that typological memory representations are the means by which the perception and cognition of actual persons and events were rendered intelligible and remembered. These representations were subsequently subjected to differential historical development in different tradent<sup>9</sup> communities. He suggests that the Gospel traditions preserve different ‘mnemonic trajectories’ that can be triangulated to identify an originating zone of ‘historical plausibility.’

Therefore, instead of saying that these are the invention of the Gospels’ authors, the differences in details as well as the excellent *Sitz im Leben* of the teachings can be explained as follows: each of the authors of the Gospels chose from the pool of *historical* material (consisting of a collection of early traditions) those details which fitted the particular needs of his audience and told the stories according to his own style, thus explaining the differences

9 The Oxford English Dictionary defines tradent as ‘a person who hands down or transmits (especially oral) tradition.’

between the traditions (and also the differences between the Gospels' resurrection narratives).

Sceptics often argue that one can see legendary embellishment in the later accounts compared to the earlier accounts (e.g. the young man at the tomb in Mark becomes an angel accompanied by earthquakes in Matthew) (Carrier 2005a, pp. 165–166).

There are a number of problems with such arguments, however. First, the amount of details does not seem to follow a consistent pattern when we compare the later accounts with the earlier ones. For example, following the argument for embellishment, one might expect a larger number of eyewitnesses and resurrection appearances in the later accounts compared to the earlier ones, but the opposite is the case: Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 15, which is the earliest, contains the greatest number of eyewitnesses ('more than five hundred brethren') and the largest number of appearances. It is more likely that the authors took into consideration the needs of the audiences when they decided the amount of details to include. Second, some of the details can be understood as clarifications rather than embellishments. For example, the inference that the 'young man' in Mark 16:5–7 is an angel can be justified by the context, which describes him as dressed in white and conveying divine revelation. He does not simply report what he found, but gives it an authoritative explanation and goes on to convey a message from Jesus himself, recapitulating what he had said privately to the Twelve in Mark 14:28, and conveying not comment but command (France 2002, pp. 675–679; compare the use of 'young man' for angel in Tob. 4:5–10, 2 Macc. 3:26, 33, etc., see Gundry 1993, p. 990). Thus, the latter account in Matthew can be understood not as an embellishment but a clarification; in other words, Matthew merely makes the identification of the young man as an angel more explicit. Third, the inclusion of more details does not have to be regarded as embellishment, rather, it 'could simply be a matter of a later writer adding new and truthful traditions that were known to his own community, purposely filling in the gaps' (Habermas 2013, p. 477).

Concerning the apparent lack of agreement, Wright notes that first-century writers who intended to tell others what actually happened took for granted that they were not obliged to mention every event or every detail of an event. Wright (2003, pp. 648–649) observes, for example,

'when Josephus tells the story of his own participation in the various actions that started the Jewish-Roman war in AD 66, the story he tells in his *Jewish War* and the parallel story he tells in the *Life* do not always correspond in detail.

Many of the differences between the Gospels can be explained by literary devices which were also employed by other ancient historians, such as Plutarch (c. AD 45–120) (Licona 2016). In several biographies Plutarch frequently covers the same ground, thus creating a number of parallels and

editing his materials in ways similar to the writers of the New Testament Gospels, compresses stories, sometimes conflates them, inverts the order of events, simplifies, and relocates stories or sayings (Evans, in Licona 2016, p. x). When it comes to the editing and paraphrasing of the words of Jesus, the authors of the Gospels were far more conservative than the compositional practice of Plutarch, or Josephus in his paraphrasing of Jewish Scriptures (*ibid.*). Indeed, a comparison of the paralleled pericope of Jesus' aphorisms and parables shows a high degree of stability and reliability of transmission (McIver 2011).

Sceptics question why many important details in the Gospels concerning the resurrection do not have multiple attestations but were mentioned in one source only. In particular, why they were not mentioned in the earliest account in 1 Corinthians 15? Carrier (2005a, p. 151) argues that since 1 Corinthians 15 is a defence of the resurrection, Paul would have used all the evidence he had; but he only gave a list of witnesses without mentioning the earthquakes, etc., which suggests that there is no other evidence and thus these details were invented later.

In response, the apostles often surprise us by what they fail to refer to, even though it will serve their purpose (Allison 2005a, p. 306). David Wood argues,

Creeds are designed to be concise so that they can be easily memorized and communicated to others. If the 'simplicity' of the creed in 1 Corinthians means that Paul is unaware of the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' resurrection, then the simplicity of the Nicene Creed (fourth century AD) should mean that the writers are unaware of the Gospel narratives.

(Wood 2008)

Given that Paul and the Corinthians knew the other 'eyewitnesses' (see earlier), and given the argument that the details were already in circulation in the form of other traditions known by the Corinthians (Section 2.3.4), Paul would not have perceived the need to mention the details, thus he merely summarized them. As argued previously, some of these traditions were later written down separately in the Gospels. While the Gospels were written later than the letters of Paul, the resurrection traditions which were included in the Gospels could have originated earlier than the letters of Paul, and this would explain why Paul's letters did not have to include many of the details found in the Gospels (concerning whether the details of those traditions had been significantly modified when they were later included in the Gospels, see the rest of this chapter and Section 4.6).

Given that none of the New Testament writers was obliged to write a complete account, one must be careful not to regard differences which resulted from the incompleteness of the relevant accounts as contradictions. (To illustrate the distinction between difference and contradiction: if I say

to my wife on one occasion, 'I am going to give you a rose' and on another occasion, 'I am going to give you a red rose,' there are differences between the two statements, but no contradiction.) Now Vermès (2008, p. 106) complains that the number of Jesus' 'resurrection appearances' greatly differ in the various Gospels, noting that there is none in Mark ('shorter ending'). However, the fact that the author of Mark probably ends his gospel without mentioning the resurrection appearances (Mark 16:8) does not imply that he thought that they did not exist; on the contrary, he hinted that he was aware of their existence in Mark 14:28. Another of the 'flat contradictions between the sources' cited by Vermès (2008, p. 106) is that

the accounts differ regarding the number and identity of the women who visited the tomb: one, Mary Magdalene, in John and Mark B; two, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, in Matthew; three, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, in Mark A; and several, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and other women from Galilee, in Luke.

But Vermès fails to consider that, although John mentions only Mary Magdalene by name (20:1), her first-person plural language in verse 2 indicates that she is speaking for more than one person: '*we* don't know where they have put him' (Blomberg 2001; emphasis in original). None of the Gospels' authors was obliged to provide a complete list of the names of the women involved or a complete account of what the women were told to do. Thus there is no real contradiction between the portrayal of telling the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee (Matthew and Mark) and to remember what Jesus had told them earlier in Galilee (Luke); there is no reason why it couldn't be both!

Ehrman complains that such attempts to resolve the differences require 'a lot of interpretive gymnastics,' and that

it is solved in a very curious way indeed, for this solution is saying, in effect, that what really happened is what is not narrated by any of these Gospels: for none of them mentions two angels! This way of interpreting the texts does so by imagining a new text that is unlike any of the others, so reconcile the four to one another. Anyone is certainly free to construct their own Gospel if they want to, but that's probably not the best way to interpret the Gospels that we already have.

(Ehrman 2014, pp. 134–135)

However, such attempts at reconciling the accounts, while widely disparaged by many biblical scholars today, are in fact utilizing methods recognized in historical studies. For example, historian Gilbert Garraghan (1973, p. 314) writes, 'almost any critical history that discusses the evidence for important statement will furnish examples of discrepant or contradictory

accounts and the attempts which are made to reconcile them.’ With regards to the role of ‘imagining’ (the word Ehrman used), historians Paul Conkin and Roland Stromberg (1971, pp. 214–215) note,

a historian, confronted with, and in some way baffled or disturbed by, disparate phenomena that seem to give evidence for some human past, begins to construct imaginary accounts or narratives, perhaps including within them several causal judgments, in an attempt to unify and make some sense out of all the confusing phenomena; that he constantly checks each invented story against a residue of acquired knowledge (vicarious verification) as well as against the focal phenomena, that he keeps up this game until he finds a story consistent with what he already knows, and which gives some pattern to his phenomena (or most of them); that his narrative also almost inevitably implicates other, as yet unexperienced phenomena; that he then, either directly or by inferential, deductive chaining (desired phenomenon A necessitates B, and B necessitates C, which if found will have the same evidential significance as A) seeks out the specifically indicated evidence, knowing always that one unpredicted and noncoherent phenomenon will falsify his story; that he keeps restructuring his story until, finally, with the most diligent search of all evidence then available, he has so integrated the original phenomena and the induced phenomena as to have a quite unified, plausible, and supported account.

Wenham (1992, p. 128) complains that many biblical scholars ‘give up too easily’ instead of doing the necessary historical spadework:

Of course, the individuality of different writers must be respected, and the distinctive aims of different works (where these can be discerned) must be taken into account. Forced harmonizing is worthless. The tendency today, however, is the opposite—to force the New Testament writings into disharmony, in order to emphasize their individuality. . . . The harmonistic approach, on the other hand, enables one to ponder long and conscientiously over every detail of the narrative and to see how one account illuminates and modifies another. Gradually (without fudging) people and events take shape and grow in solidity and the scenes come to life in one’s mind.

Ehrman’s complaint that ‘that’s probably not the best way to interpret the Gospels’ confuses (A) ‘interpreting the Gospels’ with (B) ‘showing that there is no incompatibility between the Gospels.’ These are two distinct tasks. For (A), one might ask for positive evidence to show that an idea is what a Gospel author expresses, but for (B) it is perfectly legitimate to suggest a possible scenario which a particular Gospel author may not have thought of, as long as the possibility is not contradictory to what he expressed. Ehrman’s

dismissal is based on a misunderstanding of the intention of (B)—such efforts do not have to be perceived as attempts to understand what each of the Gospel authors had in mind but rather as attempts to show that what each of them has expressed is not contradictory to the other. ‘Not being what a Gospel author had in mind’ is not the same as ‘contradictory to what a Gospel author expressed.’ We also need to distinguish (B) ‘showing that there is no incompatibility between the Gospels’ from (C) ‘showing that a particular account of reconciling the Gospels is true.’ For (C), one would have to provide evidence to show that a particular account is true. However, for (B) it is sufficient to suggest a possible (not necessarily actual) scenario that is not contradictory with the Gospels and then say, ‘for all we know, this is how it could have happened.’ In response to those who argue against the historicity of the traditions concerning Jesus’ resurrection, it is enough to show that the arguments for or against the historicity of those traditions are finely balanced and that these traditions remain broadly viable, in which case a historian can then plausibly choose to accept them based on other grounds (Wilckens 2002).

For all their apparent differences in the minor details, the Gospels’ accounts show sequential similarities concerning the main outlines of the story with the early tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8, such as concerning Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection on the third day, appearances to individuals and appearances to the group of disciples (Allison 2005a, pp. 235–239). The following is one logically possible scenario which takes into consideration the other details:<sup>10</sup>

*Very early<sup>11</sup> a group of women, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Joanna set out for the tomb. Meanwhile two angels appearing in human form are sent; there is an earthquake and one angel rolls back the stone and sits upon it. The soldiers faint and then revive and flee into the city. The women arrive and find the tomb opened.<sup>12</sup>*

10 Adapted from Casteel (1992, pp. 212–213); Bock (2002, pp. 394–404); Geisler and Howe (1997, pp. 365, 377, 400).

11 Mark 16:2 says ‘when the sun has risen’, while John 20:1 states ‘Early . . . when it was still dark.’ Geisler and Howe (1997, p. 377) harmonizes these two accounts by suggesting that Mark 16:2 denotes early dawn (cf. Ps. 104:22), when it was still dark relatively speaking. Licona (2016, p. 171) suggests that ‘it is possible that it was “still dark” (per John) when the women left for the tomb, and they arrived “after the sun had risen” (per Mark). Everyone who has taken time to view a sunrise knows that the amount of daylight changes significantly between ten minutes prior to sunrise and ten minutes after.’

12 Ehrman (2014, p. 134) asks, ‘was the stone already rolled away when they arrived at the tomb (Mark, Luke, and John), or explicitly not (Matthew)?’ In reply, Wenham (1992, p. 78) points out, ‘first century writers had to work without the help of such modern aids as parenthesising brackets, and that, since Greeks care little about relative time, the use of the pluperfect tense was much less favoured by them than by us. Often in the New Testament the aorist tense needs to be rendered by an English pluperfect. So Matthew 28:2 could be inserted in brackets and translated with no impropriety: (*And behold there had been*



*Without waiting, Mary Magdalene, assuming someone has taken the Lord's body, runs back to the city to tell Peter and John.<sup>13</sup> The other women enter the tomb and see the body is gone. The two angels<sup>14</sup> appear to them and tell them of the resurrection. The women then leave to take the news to the disciples.<sup>15</sup> Peter and John run to the tomb with Mary Magdalene following. Peter and John enter the tomb, see the grave clothes, and then return to the city, but Mary Magdalene remains at the tomb weeping. She saw two angels,<sup>16</sup> who ask why she is weeping, and Jesus makes his first appearance to her.<sup>17</sup> Jesus next appears to the other women who are on their way to find the disciples. Jesus then appears to Peter. He appears subsequently to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and then appears to a group of disciples including all of the Eleven except Thomas in Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>*

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*a great earthquake. For an angel of the Lord had descended from heaven, and had come and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards had trembled and become like dead men.) . . . We may thus conclude that the earthquake took place before the arrival of any women and that the terrified guards had already left by the time they arrived.'*

- 13 John 20:2. Against this, Vermès (2008, p. 106) thinks that Mark 16:1–6 implies that Mary Magdalene (together with other women) also heard the young man telling her that Jesus has risen. In reply, the third person plurals ('they,' 'them') used in the passage might be referring to the women as a group, but this does not exclude the possibility that a member of the group might have left. Wenham (1992, p. 128) notes that probably "the women" and "them" do not refer precisely to the two mentioned by name. Matthew is giving the detail necessary to convey his message, further elaboration would have been pointless distraction.'
- 14 Luke 24:4 and John 20:12. Vermès (2008, p. 106) complains that Mark 16:5 and Matthew 28:2–5 say that there is one man/angel. However, Mark and Matthew do not say that there is *only* one. They probably wanted to focus on the angel that spoke to the women. Shining the 'literary spotlight' in this way is a legitimate narrative device which is used by ancient historians (see Licona 2016, p. 172; Licona notes that while Luke 24:4 describes 'two men in dazzling/ lightning-like clothing,' Luke has angels in mind, since he goes on to call them 'angels' (24:22–23), and 'white or shining clothing in the New Testament are often the mark of a heavenly visitation' (p. 173). One might object that Mark 16:5, Luke 24:3–4, and John 20:11–12 portray the angels inside the tomb, while Matthew 28:2–6 portrays the angel sitting on the stone he had rolled away from the tomb. Licona replies that Matthew 28:6 has the angel say, 'Come! See the place where he was laid,' which suggests movement to somewhere else in this context (i.e. movement into the tomb) (ibid.).
- 15 Vermès (2008, p. 105) complains that while Mark 16:8 states that the women said nothing to anyone, Matthew 28:8 says that the women ran to bring his disciples word. In reply, Hurtado (2016b) argues, 'said nothing to anyone' should be understood as said nothing to anyone else on their way back to the disciples, 'for they were afraid.' See further, Chapter 6.
- 16 John 20:12.
- 17 John 20:11–16.
- 18 John 20:19–24. One might ask, 'According to John's account Jesus did not appear to Thomas the first time he appeared to the apostles as a group, but does this not contradict Luke 24:33–36, which portrays that the Eleven were at the gathering?' In reply, Bock (1996, Vol. 2, p. 1921, n. 27, citing Arndt and Plummer) suggests that Eleven is a general way to refer to the group of apostles without Judas; it does not imply that all 11 apostles

Crossley (2013, p. 490) objects that according to Luke-Acts, the resurrection appearances and the ascension do not take place in Galilee but in Jerusalem, and he claims that this is contrary to Mark and Matthew. In reply, although Jesus and the angels had told the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee (Mark 16:7, Matt. 28:10), the disciples' persistent unbelief of the women's words—indicated in the text of Luke itself (24:11)—might have necessitated Jesus appearing to them in Jerusalem first (Luke 24:36–43). Later they went to Galilee as instructed (Matt. 28:16), but perhaps failing to see Jesus initially, the disciples, still discouraged and doubtful, went fishing (John 21), after which Jesus appeared to them. Vermès (2008) objects by claiming that Luke excludes any departure from Jerusalem, citing Jesus' instruction to them in Luke 24:49 to tarry in Jerusalem. In response, Licona (2016, p. 177) observes,

In Luke 24:1–53, Jesus' resurrection, all of his appearances, and his ascension to heaven are narrated as though having occurred on that Sunday. That Luke compressed the events in this manner is clear, since in the sequel to his Gospel, Luke says Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days before ascending to heaven (Acts 1:3–9).

Given this, it is possible that the command to tarry (v. 49) was not given until after they had been in Galilee as instructed (Matt. 28:16) and came back to Jerusalem from there (Geisler and Howe 1997, p. 400). After all, Acts (which was written by the same author as Luke) told us there was a gap of 40 days, but this was not evident in Luke 24. When interpreting the New Testament, it is important to realize that first-century writers do not always write in strict chronological order without gaps in between, sadly this important hermeneutical principle is often ignored by those who claim that there are contradictions in the New Testament.

In closing, it should be emphasized once again that my argument in this chapter as well as the main argument of this book does not depend on the harmonization given being a true account of what happened. Rather, the harmonization is offered to show that the oft-repeated claim that the discrepancies are irreconcilable is—strictly speaking—false.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the conclusion that (1.2) there were people who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus shortly after his crucifixion, and these people included individuals (Cephas, James the brother of Jesus,

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were present. Even if Thomas was present earlier in Luke 24:33, it could be that Thomas left in the middle of Peter and other disciple's earlier reports while expressing his doubt, prior to Jesus' appearance to the group.

and Paul) and groups such as the ‘Twelve,’ the ‘more than five hundred brethren,’ and ‘the other apostles.’

The existence of these people are implied by the very early tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11, which lists these people. The alternative hypothesis (1.1.1) that the list in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 contains later interpolation is contradicted by the manuscript evidence and other considerations explained previously. The alternative hypothesis (1.1.2) that the details in the list contain erroneous information which either originated from Paul or from others who passed the information to him is contradicted by the indications that Paul and the Corinthians knew these ‘eyewitnesses’ as well as the other historical considerations mentioned earlier. In particular, I have noted the importance of the claims of Jesus’ resurrection for the earliest Christians (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:17–19, 30–32) and the presence of sceptics of bodily resurrection among the audience of the early preachers of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:12; cf. Acts 17:32; Luke 24:11; Matt. 28:17; pseudo-Mark 16:11). I have also noted Bauckham’s (2006, p. 308) observation that the commonsensical idea of ‘checking out’ the important ‘eyewitnesses’ is implicit in 1 Corinthians 15:6, and I have replied to various objections concerning this point. Paul assumed responsibility for the tradition which he passed on to the Corinthians, and his tangled correspondences with the Corinthians indicate that he cared about his reputation as an apostle. Various textual evidence indicates that Paul knew others (e.g. James, Peter, and other apostles; see Gal. 1–2) whom he listed as ‘eyewitnesses’ and proclaimers of Jesus’ resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11, and that he knew that the Corinthians knew them and/or could check them out too (1 Cor. 1:12, 9:1–5, 15:6). Moreover, the early Christians were quite mobile, Jewish Christians would have travelled yearly to Jerusalem for festivals, and a well-attested ‘networking’ among early Christians existed (Bauckham 2006; Hurtado 2013). Falsification by his numerous opponents at Corinth and elsewhere would have been easy, and the costs would have been high. Given these considerations, Paul would not have made up the list of supposed eyewitnesses or passed on one which was made up by others and which he himself did not know was correct. I have also observed that, aside from Paul’s letters, there are other documents in the first and early second century—such as the Four Gospels, Acts, 1 Clement, Letters of Ignatius, etc.—which also claimed that there were various eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. Thus the credibility of the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 is enhanced ‘because it is in part confirmed by the narrative tradition, which is independent’ (Theissen and Merz 1998, p. 490).

Sceptics might object that (1.1.2) explains the apparent contradictions in the New Testament concerning the ‘post-mortem appearances,’ which is often assumed to be irreconcilable. In reply, many of the apparent contradictions can be explained by literary devices which were also employed by other ancient historians such as Plutarch (Licona 2016). Utilizing the work of Vincent Taylor (1953), Wright (2003), and recent work on memory and the historical Jesus by Le Donne (2009), I have argued that each of

the authors of the Gospels chose from the pool of early traditions those details which fitted the needs of his audience, and told the stories according to his own style. I have noted that first-century writers (e.g. Josephus) who intended to tell others what actually happened took for granted that they were not obliged to mention every event, nor every detail of an event (Wright 2003, pp. 648–649), and I have argued (with respect to examples cited by Vermès 2008; Ehrman 2014) that one must be careful not to regard an apparent contradiction which resulted from the incompleteness of the relevant accounts as a real contradiction.

I have explained that attempts at reconciling apparently contradictory accounts (e.g. Bock 2002), while widely disparaged by many biblical scholars today, are in fact utilizing methods recognized in historical studies (Garraghan 1973, p. 314; Conkin and Stromberg 1971, pp. 214–215). Ehrman's (2014, pp. 134–135) complaint that 'that's probably not the best way to interpret the Gospels' confuses (A) 'interpreting the Gospels' with (B) 'showing that there is no incompatibility between the Gospels.' These are two distinct tasks. For (A), one might ask for positive evidence to show that an idea is what a Gospel author expresses, but for (B) it is perfectly legitimate to suggest a possible scenario which a particular Gospel author may not have thought of, as long as the possibility is not contradictory to what he expressed. Ehrman's dismissal is based on a misunderstanding of the intention of (B)—such efforts do not have to be perceived as attempts to understand what each of the Gospel authors had in mind but rather as attempts to show that what each of them has expressed is not contradictory to the other. 'Not being what a Gospel authors had in mind' is not the same as 'contradictory to what a Gospel author expressed.' We also need to distinguish (B) from (C) showing that a particular account of reconciling the Gospels is true. For (C), one would have to provide evidence to show that a particular account is true. However, for (B) it is sufficient to suggest a possible (not necessarily actual) scenario that is not contradictory with the Gospels and then say, 'for all we know, this is how it could have happened.' I have offered a possible harmonization which shows the falsity of the claim that the discrepancies are irreconcilable.

On the other hand, the apparent lack of agreement indicates that the stories were not carefully made up but is what we would expect from first-hand accounts of a shocking event given very soon after the event (Wright 2003, p. 612), and they include numerous embarrassing that false accounts would be careful to avoid (Casteel 1992).

In conclusion, given the aforementioned historical considerations, it is reasonable to conclude with Theissen and Merz (1998, p. 490) concerning the post-mortem appearances listed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 that 'There is no doubt . . . they come from people who attest an overwhelming experience.'

# 3 The earliest Christians experienced something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus

## 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that there were people in mid-first-century Palestine who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus. In this chapter, I shall argue that at least some (if not all) of them did witness something which they thought was Jesus.

As noted in Chapter 1, the no experience hypothesis (these people thought they had experienced the resurrected Jesus, but none of them had any such experience) was popular during the Deist Controversy. It was then suggested that the apostles learned that power and free meals would eventually come to religious leaders, and therefore they lied by proclaiming that they had seen the bodily resurrected Jesus in order to start a religion (Allison 2005a, pp. 207–208). Its popularity declined among scholars after the detailed refutations by William Paley and others. Nevertheless, variations of it can still be found today. For example, it has recently been proposed that the disciples' love for Jesus, their loyalty to one another, or their belief that the cause for Jesus would be a necessary good for all humankind could have made them proclaim that they had seen the resurrected Jesus and suffer willingly for it, even though they did not have any such experience.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, the earliest Christians initially believed in Jesus' resurrection not because they had such experiences, but because they ruminated about his traumatic crucifixion and turned to Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 53 to try to understand it, by which they came to believe that Jesus was the Righteous One and that God must have vindicated and exalted him. They subsequently thought that if Jesus was exalted, he was no longer dead, and so they later circulated the stories of his resurrection.<sup>2</sup> Although the disciples' willingness to die for Jesus' resurrection has been offered as evidence for

1 This suggestion is noted in Carrier (1999, 2005), although he goes on to say that 'Nevertheless, I think it more probable that Peter and James, and certainly Paul, maybe several others, saw *something* that inspired their faith.'

2 This is adapted from the hypothesis suggested by Ehrman in Craig and Ehrman (2006, p. 29). Ehrman goes on to suggest, 'Believers who knew he had been raised from the dead

their credibility by Origen, Paley, and others, Ehrman has recently objected by asking what the evidence is that these disciples died for their belief in the resurrection (Craig and Ehrman 2006, p. 29). After all, it has been argued that, apart from Peter and James, there is no solid proof that any members of the Twelve were martyred (Meier 1991–2016, Vol. 3, p. 213), and in many cases the reason for which the persecutors persecuted Christians was not the resurrection but other reasons, such as viewing them as posing a threat to the Temple (Regev 2009).

The case against the no experience hypothesis is therefore not as straightforward as many people think. In order to address the myriads of possible objections to the underlying assumptions and supporting arguments, it will be useful if these objections can be essentially reduced to a few known ones, such that all of them are considered before the conclusion that ‘at least some (if not all) of these people did witness something which they thought was Jesus’ is made. By analyzing the structure of the dialectic syllogistically, I shall now show that this can be done, as follows:

(2.2.1) Either (2.2.1.1) or (2.2.1.2) is true:<sup>3</sup>

(2.2.1.1) Those who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus in mid-first-century Palestine were not willing to suffer for their religion.

(2.2.1.2) At least some (if not all) of those who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus were willing to suffer for their religion, in which case either (2.2.2.1) or (2.2.2.2) is true:

(2.2.2.1) They did not have any reasons for it.

(2.2.2.2) At least some (if not all) of them had reasons for it, in which case either (2.2.3.1) or (2.2.3.2) is true:

(2.2.3.1) They did not believe that Jesus resurrected and had other reasons for why they claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus.

(2.2.3.2) At least some (if not all) of them believed that Jesus resurrected, in which case either (2.2.4.1) or (2.2.4.2) is true:

(2.2.4.1) They believed that Jesus resurrected not because they had witnessed something which they thought was Jesus—they did not have such an experience, but they claimed that they had such an experience.

(2.2.4.2) At least some (if not all) of them had witnessed something which they thought was Jesus.

I shall assess each of these disjunctions in the rest of this chapter.

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started having visions of him,’ and thus his hypothesis cannot strictly be classified as no experience hypothesis since the disciples did have certain experiences *later* (i.e. visions).

3 Note that ‘or’ is taken in the exclusive sense in this syllogism as well as the next.

### 3.2 At least some (if not all) of those who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus were willing to suffer for their religion

Concerning the disjunction (2.2.1.1) vs (2.2.1.2), as noted earlier the extent of martyrdom of earliest Christianity has been questioned in recent literature. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it is not required for the objector of the no experience hypothesis to show that these disciples did die for their faith, but that they were *willing* to suffer and die for their faith. Their genuine willingness to give up everything and die for their faith can be inferred from the following considerations:

First, these disciples knew that their leader (i.e. Jesus) was already vilified and brutally crucified, and yet they chose to proclaim him knowing that a similar fate could well befall them for doing that. After all, it was usual to execute the followers of insurgents alongside them, and it is likely that most of the followers of Jesus were hiding, in fear of their lives, at the time of his death (Joanna McGrath 2006, p. 298).

Second, persecutions were indeed meted out against these disciples. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul admitted that he was persecuting Christians in his pre-Christian days (Gal. 1:13, 22; see also 1 Cor. 15:9, Phil. 3:6), and dating back 14 years (Gal. 2:1) from the time Galatians was written, his persecution of Christians took place at the very beginning of Christianity. James Dunn notes that, from a historical point of view, ‘there is no doubt that Saul was heavily involved in persecution of the embryonic Christian movement’ (Dunn 2008, p. 335; Dunn summarized the evidence on pp. 335–345). This shows that, even though there was no ubiquitous empire-wide attempt to eradicate Christians as in the later centuries (and there is an ongoing scholarly debate over the extent to which early Christians were actually persecuted), there were persecutions directed against the very first Christians who, of course, would have included these disciples. The portrayal in Acts 8:1 that ‘a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria’ does not imply that the apostles were not persecuted, but ‘only that they did not leave Jerusalem. This may be explained, for example, by their having taken a lower profile for a while’ (Kankaanniemi 2010, p. 155).

Moreover, Paul, who subsequently became an apostle himself, was persecuted for his belief in Jesus as indicated by his appeals to public knowledge of his sufferings (1 Cor. 4:11–13; 15:30; 2 Cor. 11:23–26; Phil. 1:7; 1 Thess. 2:2, 9; for the historicity of the persecution of Paul, see Hurtado 2005, pp. 172–174). Such an admittance to being a persecutor and an appeal to public knowledge of persecution are reasons to think that the early Christian references to persecution cannot be explained away as merely rhetorically motivated claims. Rather, these references have basis in history, which is only to be expected given that their opponents bothered to get Jesus crucified (the fact that they persuaded Pilate to crucify Jesus is not only attested

by all the Gospels, but also by Josephus [*Antiquities* 18:64] and the Talmud [*Sanhedrin* 43a]).

Finally, at least a number of the ‘eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus’ did die from the persecutions against Christians. James, the brother of Jesus, who was attested to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7; see also Chapter 2), was killed by the Jews as recorded by Josephus (*Antiquities*, Book 20, chapter 9). The apostle James who was one of the Twelve was executed by King Herod according to the author of Acts (Acts 12:2), and Dunn notes that no one doubts the historicity of this report (Dunn 2008, p. 406, n. 114). The early church fathers unanimously affirmed that Peter and Paul were publicly executed under Nero’s persecution of Christians (Habermas and Licona 2004, pp. 56–60, 270–274, n. 46–57). Tertullian (*Scorpiace* 15) states that this was in the Roman public record when he writes,

And if a heretic wishes his confidence to rest upon a public record, the archives of the empire will speak, as would the stones of Jerusalem. We read the lives of the Caesars: At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith. Then is Peter girt by another, when he is made fast to the cross.

McDowell (2015, p. 91) notes,

If there were no such public records, Tertullian would have automatically undermined his credibility. His appeal to them indicates his confidence that they existed and, if examined, would corroborate his testimony. Therefore, Tertullian was likely relying upon even earlier public records about the Neronian persecution and the fates of Peter and Paul.

McDowell responds to other objections and concludes on page 91 that the martyrdom of Peter is ‘the highest possible probability,’ citing John 21:18–19, 1 Clement 5:4–5 (which mentions that this happened ‘in quite recent time’ and ‘of our own generation’), Ignatius’ *Letter to the Smyrneans* 3.1–2 and *Letter to the Romans* 4.3, *Apocalypse of Peter* 14.4, *Ascension of Isaiah* 4:2–3, *the Acts of Peter*, Dionysius of Corinth, Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25, and Tertullian *Scorpiace* 15, and noting that ‘lack of any competing narrative weighs favorably for the traditional view.’

Suetonius (*Nero* 16.2, ‘punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief’) and Tacitus also noted Nero’s persecution of Christians, the latter observing,

Mockeries were added to their deaths, so that wrapped in the skins of wild animals they might die torn to pieces by dogs, or nailed to crosses they were burned to death to furnish light at night when day had ended. Nero made his own gardens available for this spectacle and put on



circus games, mingling with the people while dressed in a charioteer's uniform or standing in his chariot.

(*The Annals* 15.44.2–5; for defence of the historicity of Nero's persecution of Christians, see Jones [2017]; Van der Lans and Bremmer [2017]; cf. Shaw [2015])

Historian Paul Maier (2013, p. 55) notes, 'rarely do both friendly and hostile sources agree on anything, but the persecution of Christians is one of them.' The willingness of the earliest Christians to suffer for their religion can be seen from the fact that they continued their mission even though they had seen their fellow Christians persecuted and killed for it (Habermas and Licona 2004, pp. 59–60).

### 3.3 At least some (if not all) of them believed that Jesus resurrected

Concerning the disjunction (2.2.2.1) vs (2.2.2.2), some sceptics might object that people sometimes act without thinking, and the disciples may have been in a state of frenzy. In response, as noted in Chapter 2 the earliest Christians were rational enough to debate (e.g. Gal. 2:11–21), to think about the evidence for their faith (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:6), to consider its consequences (1 Cor. 15:14–19)—such as having to face frequent dangers and martyrdom (1 Cor. 15:30–32)—and to persuade others to hold to their views. Furthermore, after the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples had time to think about consequences before they proclaimed the resurrection, and after they began preaching many of them had many years to reflect on the consequences of their proclamation. Therefore, we can be quite sure that the disciples had reasons for which they were willing to suffer for their religion.

Concerning the disjunction (2.2.3.1) vs (2.2.3.2), as noted earlier, some sceptics have suggested that the disciples might have claimed that Jesus resurrected without believing it. They might have lied out of self-serving motives (e.g. desire for free meals) or 'noble' ones (e.g. love for Jesus, loyalty to one another, belief that the cause for Jesus would be a necessary good for all humankind) in order to persuade others to follow Christianity.

However, these suggested motives would not work. If the disciples lied out of self-serving motives (e.g. desire for free meals), they would not have been willing to be tortured and to die for what they knew was a lie. J.P. Moreland (1998, p. 252) notes, 'It's not as though there were a mansion awaiting them on the Mediterranean. They faced a life of hardship. They often went without food, slept exposed to the elements, were ridiculed, beaten, imprisoned.' If the disciples wanted to make a name for themselves and be remembered by posterity, it is unlikely that they would choose a lie that could be easily falsified (e.g. if one of the many 'witnesses' were to let go of the hoax under persecution). If the disciples had 'noble' motives, they would have refrained from lying, especially so given that the 'Jesus tradition' condemned lying

(Matt. 5:37). While loyalty to one another may have been their consideration, the more basic question they would have asked one another must have been, ‘Why are we continuing to tell this lie together anyway?’

Moreover, lying about such a fundamental matter concerning their faith would be inconsistent with their devotion to the God of Israel. For according to their beliefs, to make up Jesus’ resurrection would be judged guilty as false witnesses and condemned by the God of Israel (1 Cor. 15:15: ‘We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised’; see also Lev. 19:11, Prov. 19:5, 21:28). While religious suicide bombers believed that their sacrifice would be rewarded by God after death, the disciples believed that sacrificing for being false witnesses would be condemned by God after death. While many people throughout history would be willing to sacrifice everything (including their own lives) for what they believe to be true (even though it may not actually be true), no large group of people would be willing to sacrifice everything for what they do not believe to be true and be condemned by God after death for being false witnesses. The earliest Christians’ devotion to the God of Israel can be seen from their condemnation of idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14–22) and their affirmation that the wrath of God is against those who worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18–25). Hurtado observes that, although letters such as 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians are letters sent to Gentile churches, the religious standpoint is ‘mainly shaped by biblical/Jewish tradition. . . . So, e.g., the rhetoric of 1 Thess. 1:9–10, about forsaking “idols” (a Jewish word for the gods!) to serve “a true and living God” (note the combativeness of this phrase); and the hostile and disdainful treatment of pagan religion (in 1 Cor. 8 and 10)’ (Hurtado 2014). Other texts in the New Testament likewise indicate that the early Christians held the attitude that worship should be exclusively directed to the one Creator God. For example, Acts 14:8–18 portrays the people at Lystra wanting to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods after Paul had done a miracle, but Barnabas and Paul refused, urging them instead to worship ‘the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them’ (v. 15). It is evident that the earliest Christians held to the commandment: ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (Exodus 20:3). They refused to honour the pagan gods and refused to call the Roman emperor ‘Lord,’ even in the face of persecution. If their devotion to YHWH were fake, during times of severe persecution they would not have evinced genuine piety consistently in the presence of other Christians and of their persecutors, without letting out the hoax. Their devotion to God could have been perceived by others in many ways; for example, it could have been perceived through their worship and their prayers during times of suffering or the letters they wrote to others during persecution. If their devotion was not genuine, others who had come to believe in Jesus based on their testimonies and who were also undergoing suffering at the same time would have noticed it, and their hypocrisy would

have been exposed. David Strauss' sarcastic remarks concerning the hoax hypothesis remains pertinent:

The apostles are supposed to have known best that there was not one single word of truth in the news of their master's resurrection . . . yet regardless of this, they are supposed to have spread the same story with a fire of conviction that sufficed to give the world a different form.

(Strauss 1862, pp. 276–277)

Moreover, if the disciples lied about Jesus' resurrection, it is hard to believe that during times of severe persecution they would have evinced genuine conviction that Jesus was resurrected in the presence of other Christians and of their persecutors, without letting out the hoax. As Pascal observes,

The hypothesis that the Apostles were knaves is quite absurd. Follow it out to the end, and imagine these twelve men meeting after Jesus' death and conspiring to say that he had risen from the dead. This means attacking all the powers that be. The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery. One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more because of possible imprisonment, tortures and death, and they would all have been lost. Follow that out.

(*Pensées*, 310; in Pascal 1670/1995, p. 97)

It might be asked, 'How do we know that none of these disciples recanted when they were tortured?' To this question it can be replied that if any of these crucial 'eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus' recanted when they were tortured, their persecutors and other opponents of the early Christians would have made it widely known given that they were evidently motivated to destroy the Christian movement (Habermas and Licona 2004, pp. 278–279, n. 63–64; Licona 2010, p. 371). This would have shown the Christian faith to be 'in vain' (1 Cor. 15:17), and it probably would not have survived beyond the first century. Licona (2010, p. 371) argues,

We may also expect that a recantation by any of the disciples would have provided ammunition for Christian opponents like Celsus and Lucian in the third quarter of the second century, the former of which wrote against the church while the latter wrote of the Christian movement in a pejorative manner.

Carrier (2005a, pp. 179, 227, n. 333) objects that not a single attack of Christianity was known until the second century. Parson claims that ancient secular people of the first century were generally not interested in Christianity, and thus most people would not have bothered to refute it even if it were false (Parsons 2005, p. 439). He argues that there would have been a

further time lapse before anyone is sufficiently irritated by their preaching to go and check. The Romans did not care what is preached so long it did not disturb the peace, while the Jews would have ignored them until they had a sufficient number of people. Then, instead of scoring debate points, they would simply persecute the believers (Parsons 2005, pp. 448, 451, n. 43). Lowder argues that first-century non-Christians had about as little interest in refuting Christian claims as twentieth-century sceptics had in refuting the misguided claims of the Heaven's Gate cult. He notes that Jewish sources do not even mention the resurrection, much less attempt to refute it, and cites Martin who says, 'This hardly suggests that Jewish leaders were actively engaged in attempting to refute the Resurrection story but failing in their efforts' (Lowder 2005, p. 288).

In response, one can agree that the birth of Christianity occurred in a backwater region of the Roman Empire, and that many Roman historians would not have bothered much to record down details concerning Jesus' resurrection, since they dismissed Christianity as a superstition (e.g. Tacitus calls Christianity 'a most mischievous superstition,' *Annals* 15.44). However, the non-Christian Jews would have been concerned about refuting the Christians right at the beginning; given that they bothered to get Jesus crucified, they would be interested to refute a sect that proclaims his resurrection, carries on his teachings, and wins converts. Many hostile eyewitnesses of Jesus (e.g. the Jewish religious leaders) who were strongly opposed to the Christian movement would still have been alive and active in mid-first century. As noted previously, varied evidence indicates that persecutions were indeed meted out by the Jews against the earliest Christians. Concerning Carrier's claims that not a single attack of Christianity was known until the second century and Parson's claim that the Jews would not be interested in scoring debate points, the polemic in Matthew 28 indicates that the Jews were claiming that the disciples stole Jesus' body in the first century. (There are additional reasons for thinking that this polemic started right from the beginning at around AD 30; see the discussion of the guards at the tomb in Chapter 6).

Sceptics seem to envision Christianity spreading secretly in some quiet and unknown neighbourhoods like many cults do. This is contrary to Luke-Acts portrayal that Christianity was preached openly right at its beginning at public centres such as the Temple and synagogues (the headquarters of their enemies!) in big cities where Jews from all walks of life gathered, that the claims concerning Jesus were openly debated (Acts 3:1–4:4, 13:14–48, 17:2–4, 18:28, etc.), and that the things concerning Christianity that Paul mentions had not been 'done in a corner' (26:26). Sceptics would doubt the historicity of this portrayal. However, Keener (2012, p. 208) observes,

Luke's narrative arena in Acts contains real geography (often known to his audience, especially in the Aegean region) in quite recent history, in contrast to novels. Such settings demanded more accuracy than the

distant times or exotic locations sometimes featured in other kinds of works. When Luke speaks of Paul's conflicts in synagogues of specific locales, or the behavior of local authorities, or the founding of local churches, he reports matters that may well be preserved in local memories at the time of his writing. Local churches could dispute his assertions; synagogues could treat what they heard of his reports in the way they responded to and generated other polemic. Luke could not afford to get his basic facts wrong if he wished a wide readership, especially in the regions on which his narrative focuses. And it seems likely that just as Luke is disposed to quote biblical texts accurately, he would also wish to communicate accurately the history of his community. Although the former belonged to the community's common repository of information, it appears that some of the latter did as well (Luke 1:4).<sup>4</sup>

That the use of synagogues was Paul's missionary strategy for a long time is confirmed by Paul's own recollection of how often he suffered under Jewish discipline (five times he had received 39 lashes [2 Cor. 11:24]), for it is difficult to imagine that Paul would have been punished and persecuted if he avoided synagogue communities and lived solely as a gentile among gentile populations (Dunn 2008, pp. 421, 677). That the earliest Christians were punished by the Jews in public places, as inferred from passages such as 2 Corinthians 11:24, also implies that the message that they believed and preached would have been known to the Jews publicly, as these would have been the cause of their punishment. Citing Horbury's (2006, pp. 43–66) study on the disciplinary and expulsion practices of Second Temple Judaism, Kankaanniemi (2010, p. 234) argues that 'Paul's punishments in the synagogues (2. Cor. 11:24) indicate that some sort of official judgement had been given and thus verbal accusations presented. The Jews hardly whipped people haphazardly without providing a proper rationalization for the punishment.' Moreover, it should also be noted that the Jewish community in a major city was not a small, despised group but of sufficient social status to attract significant numbers of Gentile adherents (*ibid.*, p. 677). It is unreasonable to think that the people could have heard the proclamation of the resurrection at the synagogues without having the basic curiosity to ask about the details ('what did the disciples see?' etc.), especially when what was being proclaimed is so extraordinary and significant. The Jewish opponents who bothered to get Jesus crucified and punish early Christians such as Paul would have been interested to investigate the details and refute the claims of a sect that proclaims his resurrection and carried on his teachings, especially when this sect was winning over their people in their places of worship! The silence of the early written Jewish sources in refuting the

4 Keener (2012) also replied to other objections against the historical reliability of Acts, for example its apparent inconsistency with Paul's epistles; cf. Carrier (2009).

resurrection can therefore be explained by the fact that they thought they could not refute it convincingly (it is interesting to note that Jewish polemic that the disciples stole the body is reflected in Christian sources).

In summary, even if many people in the first-century Roman Empire were not interested about Christianity, there were certainly a significant group of people (viz. the religious leaders of the Jews) who were actively trying to demolish Christianity right from the beginning.

Even if (against the odds) the persecutors had not made any recantation by the crucial ‘eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus’ widely known (if there were any such recantation), given that the early Christian movement was a network of close communication and personal contacts with the ‘eyewitnesses’ (see Chapter 2), the news of their recantation would have been widely known among the Christians anyway. This would have caused them to suspect that their faith was worthless (cf. 1 Cor. 15:17) and thus to leave the faith, and Christianity would not have survived further persecutions.

At this point, it might be objected that these disciples’ willingness to suffer for their religion does not necessarily imply their willingness to suffer for Jesus’ resurrection. Indeed, it might not have been the case that in all cases of persecution the persecutors persecuted the earliest Christians because they disliked their doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection, and not for other reasons. The context of persecution in specific times and places differed from one another. Many Jews viewed them as posing a threat to the Temple (Regev 2009), while many Romans were disgusted by the early Christians’ refusal to pay homage to the Roman gods by offering sacrifices, which was seen as threatening the stability of the state (McDowell 2015, pp. 51–52).

In reply, it should be noted that the doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection was fundamental to the earliest Christians’ confession of Jesus as Lord (Hurtado 2005, pp. 192–194) and thus to their behaviour as Christians which resulted in their persecution.

Against this, some sceptics have claimed that the Gnostic Gospels and/or the Gospel of Thomas<sup>5</sup> reflect a diversity of views concerning Christ among the early Christians. Since Walter Bauer’s influential work on ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ (1934/1971), many scholars have emphasized the element of diversity in early Christianity. For example, building on the earlier work by Bauer, Robinson and Koester (1971) have proposed a ‘trajectories’ model of early Christian developments, according to which there were multiple versions of the Christian movement right from the outset. On the basis that the hypothetical Q saying source and the Gospel of Thomas are not preoccupied with the resurrection of Jesus, it has been claimed that there were early Christian communities for which the resurrection of Jesus was not the

5 While some scholars classify the Gospel of Thomas as Gnostic, others object (e.g. it lacks the distinction between the ‘true God’ and ‘the demiurge’); it is probably best to classify it as elitist and ascetic (Gathercole 2015).

central confession (Mack 1988, 1996, 2003; Crossan 1991; Cameron and Miller 2004, 2011; Kloppenborg Verbin 2000, pp. 363–364; Smith 2010). To their arguments it might be added that, after all, the Roman centurion was said to have been convinced that Jesus was the Son of God on the basis of witnessing Jesus' crucifixion and death (Mark 15:39; Matthew 27:54 adds that those with him were convinced too); this implies that the belief that Jesus resurrected was not necessary for that conviction.

However, other scholars have observed that there are reasons for thinking that the Gnostic Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas were written after the time of the earliest Christians (i.e. later than the mid-first century) and that they are inferior to the canonical Gospels as historical sources for Jesus (Jenkins 2001; Hill 2010). Concerning the Gospel of Thomas in particular, there is evidence that it is dependent on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and Paul's Epistle to the Romans, that it reflects a certain chronological and cultural distance from the historical Jesus of first-century Palestine, and that it was probably composed in the mid-second century (Gathercole 2012, 2015). The argument from Q is invalid, for even if there is such a source (the existence of which remains controversial; see Goodacre and Perrin 2004), there is no adequate reason to think that the Christian communities that used Q did not use other documents that emphasized the resurrection (Dunn 2003, pp. 149–152; Jenkins 2001, pp. 73–78). It has also been observed that the picture of Jesus which Mack and others have constructed based on Q is so unpolemical and inoffensive that one wonders why such a Jesus would have aroused sufficient hatred among the Jews that they got him crucified (Tuckett 2011, p. 1873). The work by Bauer has been credited for highlighting the element of diversity in early Christianity. Nevertheless, various scholars have pointed out that his arguments for how 'orthodoxy' triumphed are fundamentally flawed. For example, Bauer's claim that in several geographical areas theologies later labelled 'heresy' were earlier than 'orthodox' teaching has been shown to be inconsistent with archaeological and literary evidence (Robinson 1988; Harrington 1980). Others have demonstrated that Bauer did not pay sufficient attention to the first-century New Testament evidence while anachronistically using second-century data to describe the nature of earliest (first-century) Christianity (Köstenberger and Kruger 2010, p. 33). Likewise, the multiple trajectories model of early Christian developments proposed by Robinson and Koester (1971) has also been rejected by many scholars for its problematic analysis of the data (see Köstenberger and Kruger 2010; Hurtado 2013; Hartog 2015).

While there were elements of diversity in earliest Christianity, there are also good reasons to think that the gospel Paul preached concerning Jesus' resurrection was the common message of the earliest Christians. Hurtado observes that Paul's letters (written before the Gnostic Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas) were addressed to Christian circles already established in the AD 50s, they incorporated Christian traditions of belief and practices from still earlier years, Paul's associations with Christian circles included

important Jewish Christian figures such as Peter, James, and Barnabas, and his acquaintance with beliefs and practices of Christian circles was both wide and extremely early (Hurtado 2003, pp. 85–86). Hurtado also points out that, although Paul evinced concern in his epistles to maintain links with the Jerusalem church, he did not hesitate to disagree with these Christians in important matters, such as that concerning the terms of conversion of Gentile Christians and Paul's own apostolic legitimacy and authority (Hurtado 2003, pp. 97, 112, 166). Varied evidence indicates that the earliest Christians did not shy away from disagreements with one another (including disagreements with influential leaders) in matters of theological importance. For example, even an apostle as highly respected as Peter was questioned by those who were circumcised (as portrayed in Acts 11:2) and challenged by Paul (Gal. 2:11–14) concerning issues related to the acceptance of the Gentiles. Other forms of 'gospel' were condemned (Gal. 1:6–10), and traces of disagreements and discussions concerning diverse issues like circumcision, the propriety and rules governing Jew and Gentile eating together, works of the law, and so on can be found in the earliest Christian documents (Hengel et al. 1999, pp. 59–62; Dunn 2008, pp. 416–494; Wright 1992, pp. 453–455). Thus, we have good reason to expect Paul to have responded in his epistles to any serious challenges to what he would regard as fundamentally important Christological matters concerning the person of Jesus and his resurrection, which he advocated in his churches. Yet, it is extremely significant that there is a conspicuous lack of evidence of such disagreements in his epistles (Hurtado 2003, pp. 112, 166). While Paul had to respond to sceptics of the resurrection in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 15:12, there is no indication that he had to respond to the Jerusalem Christian leaders concerning Jesus' resurrection.

On the contrary, Dunn observes that Paul's writings (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:3, 11) indicate that the gospel of 'first importance' concerning Jesus was the common message, belief, and identity marker of the earliest Christians (see Dunn 2008, pp. 213, 533, 657). Concerning 'first importance,' the fundamentality of Jesus' resurrection for the earliest Christians can be seen from Paul's emphatic statement: 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless' (1 Cor. 15:17). The relationship between their suffering and their belief in bodily resurrection, which was grounded in their belief that Jesus resurrected (1 Cor. 15:3–11), can be seen in verses 30–32:

And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'

In addition to 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, other extremely early creedal statements which circulated before their inclusion in various New Testament



books (e.g. in Rom. 1:3–4; 4:24b–25; 1 Thess. 4:14) also indicate the centrality of the resurrection in the earliest Christian kerygma (McDowell 2015, chapter 2). As Theissen and Merz remark, ‘In Paul’s view one’s attitude to Jesus’ resurrection is decisive for the meaning or meaninglessness of faith in Jesus’ (Theissen and Merz 1998, p. 474).

Concerning ‘the common message, belief and identity marker of the earliest Christians,’ Hill points out that Galatians 1:23 and 2:7–9 implies that they shared the same faith and proclaimed the same gospel; Paul’s epistles contained earlier Christian traditions that Paul himself received from ‘those who were in Christ before me’ (Rom. 16:7; e.g. in 1 Cor. 11:23–26 and 15:1–11, esp. 15:11 ‘Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe’); Paul recognized the authority of the Jerusalem church to validate—or even to invalidate—his gospel (Gal. 2:2), and assumed the legitimacy of Jerusalem leaders (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:22 and 9:5) (Hill 2007). Given the centrality of Jesus’ resurrection for Paul, all these would not have been the case if the Jerusalem saints, the ‘more than five hundred brethren,’ held to a view on Jesus’ resurrection that was contrary to Paul’s. Thus, the evidence for thinking that Paul proclaimed the same gospel concerning Jesus Christ (even though he voiced disagreements about other matters) implies that Paul’s view concerning the resurrection is also the view of the Jerusalem Christians led by members of the Twelve. This conclusion is consistent with other passages in the New Testament which portray the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus in the apostolic preaching (McDowell 2015, pp. 21–22).<sup>6</sup>

Hence, even though there was certain diversity among the earliest Christians concerning a number of other convictions, and even though it is possible that a few individuals (e.g. the Roman centurion) might have been convinced that Jesus was the Son of God prior to the belief that Jesus resurrected (Mark 15:39; Matt. 27:54), there are very good reasons for thinking that the Pauline letters reflect the widely shared convictions between Paul and other earliest Christians (including those ‘eyewitnesses’; see 1 Cor. 15:11) concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

This conclusion is consistent with the fact that there are different Christological emphases and approaches in the books of the New Testament (Cf. Neyrey 1985; Tuckett 2001). This conclusion is also consistent with different understandings of Paul by later Christians. Lehtipuu (2015) argues that among later Christians there was a diversity of views concerning the resurrection and how resurrection beliefs served as an important identity marker

6 Vinzent (2011) has made a creative attempt to question how central resurrection was for the early Christians, claiming that it was not central for the first 140 years of Christianity, except in Paul’s writings. However, his book is based on problematic assumptions and dating of the contents of the relevant texts including the Gospels and Acts (Drake Williams III, 2014) and ignores the evidence that the resurrection was ‘the common message, belief and identity marker of the earliest Christians’ noted earlier (e.g. Gal 1:23, 2:7–9; 1 Cor. 15:11).

and tool for group demarcation, claiming that ‘Paul’s legacy was ambivalent enough to allow for different hermeneutical solutions’ (p. 204) such as concerning the nature of the ‘spiritual body’ (ibid.; see also Nicklas et al. 2010). However, regardless of these differences in opinions among later Christians concerning what Paul meant by resurrection, Paul surely knew what he meant, and it has been argued previously that Paul affirms a ‘reanimation or revivification of the corpse’ (Ware 2014, p. 494) and that he implies that other earliest Christian leaders such as the Twelve affirm the same. Lehtipuu (2015) also argues, ‘there was a similar controversy about the gospel story of Jesus’ debate with the Sadducees over resurrection’ (p. 204), in particular over whether the comparison of those resurrected to ‘angels in heaven’ meant that there would be no sexual organs or whether these parts would have different functions in heaven’ (ibid.). Again, regardless of these differences in opinions concerning the body parts of the resurrected body, the Gospels clearly affirm a revivification of Jesus’ corpse by portraying an empty tomb.

In summary, I have shown the inadequacies of the objections against the conclusion (based on reasons given earlier) that the Pauline letters reflect the widespread and persistent conviction among the earliest Christians concerning Jesus’ resurrection. It should be noted that I am not claiming that there was no first-century person who called himself a Christian and who denied this view. What I have argued is that, regardless of whether every first-century person who called himself a Christian affirmed this view, there was widespread agreement among the leaders of the Jerusalem church and Paul and his co-workers concerning this view, and the origin of this widespread agreement demands an explanation.

Given their common understanding of the fundamentality of Jesus’ resurrection, the cases of persecutions for their religion were directly or indirectly the result of their doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection. It is therefore not incorrect to say that these disciples suffered (or were willing to suffer) persecution for Jesus’ resurrection, even if the resurrection was not explicitly the reason for which they chose to suffer or the charge directed against them in all cases.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to think that the belief that Jesus resurrected was the fundamental reason for which they were willing to suffer and die for their faith. It is true that adherents of almost all other religions have suffered persecution at some point in their history and that this has generally been held to forge a more resilient faith (Bowker 2007, p. 745). Nevertheless, their willingness to sacrifice for their religions only goes to show that many people are willing to sacrifice for what they think is true, even though it might not be true. Their willingness to sacrifice does not imply that they have been in a position to find out whether what they believe is true, or that other naturalistic hypothesis have been ruled out. For example, with regards to the Muslim terrorists who attacked the Twin Towers on September 11, McDowell (2015, p. 260) notes that they ‘were not eyewitnesses of any events of the life of Mohammed. Rather, they lived over thirteen

centuries later. No doubt the Muslim radicals acted out of sincere belief, but their convictions were received second hand, at best, from others.’ It might be objected that followers of cult leaders such as Jim Jones (1931–1978) and Marshall Applewhite (1931–1997) died for their faith by committing suicide, and they were eyewitnesses of their leaders. However, the reason the followers of Jones committed suicide was because they thought that they should commit ‘an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.’<sup>7</sup> They are plausible naturalistic explanations (e.g. their observations of instances of injustice) for why they thought that the conditions of the world was inhumane. Likewise, in many other cases of martyrdom, commitment to a moral cause or to their cultures and traditions may have resulted in the willingness of those martyrs to sacrifice, and these commitments can have plausible naturalistic explanations. The reason the followers of Applewhite committed suicide was because they thought that by killing themselves their souls would be taken to a higher level of existence associated with aliens<sup>8</sup>; they were not in a position to falsify this belief before they died. Some people may believe Jones, Applewhite, and other cult leaders because of the leaders’ persuasive speech which appealed to their beliefs and desires, but the apostles believed Jesus resurrected not because of persuasive speech but because they ‘saw’ something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, and they were in a position to falsify what they saw. If those who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus did not see anything but made up the claim that Jesus resurrected, then they knew that what they claimed was false (i.e. made up by them). It is not reasonable to think that groups of people would be willing to suffer and die for what they know is false, and as argued in the rest of this book there are good reasons to rule out other naturalistic hypotheses.

### **3.4 At least some (if not all) of them witnessed something which they thought was Jesus**

Concerning the disjunction (2.2.4.1) vs (2.2.4.2), it might be objected that the disciples’ belief that Jesus resurrected does not necessarily imply that they witnessed something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, because other factors could have caused their belief. Plantinga objects to the argument for the reliability of the apostles’ testimonies based on their willingness to die as martyrs by arguing that what counts most in such cases is the firmness of belief, not whether the belief in question constitutes knowledge or is true (Plantinga 2006, pp. 14–16). People sometimes do not wait for evidence before believing. It has been suggested in Rudolf Pesch’s (1973) earlier work that the disciples’ belief in Jesus as prophet and prophetic

7 [https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page\\_id=29084](https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29084)

8 [www.heavensgate.com/](http://www.heavensgate.com/)

Messiah prior to Jesus' crucifixion, together with Jesus' predictions of his own violent death, could have caused the disciples to continue believing in him after his crucifixion. Lindemann (2017, p. 579) claims,

Christian faith started with an interpretation of Jesus' death as a means for reconciling humanity with God. The empty tomb and the appearance narratives do not claim to be historical statements, but express the belief of Jesus' first disciples, and of later generations, that Jesus is Messiah and Lord, as he himself explained to his disciples in the Gospel of Luke.

As noted previously, Ehrman suggests that the earliest Christians' belief in Jesus' resurrection could have been caused by their rumination of his traumatic crucifixion and meditation of Old Testament passages and not because they witnessed what they thought was the resurrected Jesus.

Against Ehrman and others, it might be argued that the reason that Paul gives for believing that Jesus resurrected is that there were people who testified that they had witnessed the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3–11). It is true that Paul affirms that Jesus' resurrection fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament (1 Cor. 15:4: 'according to the Scriptures').<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the question 'how the disciples knew it was Jesus of Nazareth' and not another person who fulfilled the prophecies is answered by them based on what were claimed to be the experiences of the eyewitnesses (e.g. 'he appeared to me' [1 Cor. 15:8]). In other words, 'according to the Scriptures' in the present context means an *interpretation* of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection by the Scriptures (Theissen and Merz 1998, p. 489). This implies that the disciples were convinced on other grounds that the events occurred before they used the Scriptures to interpret them. The statement that Jesus 'appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now' (1 Cor. 15:6) is clearly intended as testimonial evidence that is verifiable by his audience so that they might also know that the resurrection appearance really occurred. Paul is saying in effect, 'a very large number of the eyewitnesses are still alive and can be seen and heard,' and this is provided to address the problem that the Corinthians found resurrection incredible (1 Cor. 15:12) (Bauckham 2006, p. 308). As Theissen and Merz observe, 'The references to appearances in chronological order and the accessibility in the present of many witnesses, only some of whom have died, supports the understanding of 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 as an attempt to

9 With regards to 1 Corinthians 15:4, Licona (2010, p. 319) notes that a plausible case can be made that the early Christians had specific scriptural texts in mind, observing that 'in Acts, Luke also claims that Christ died and rose from the dead in accordance with the Scriptures (Acts 3:18; 17:2–3; 26:22–23), and he cites a number of texts in support (Ps 16:8–11 in Acts 2:25–32; Ps 118:22 in Acts 4:10–11; Ps 2:1–2 in Acts 4:25–28; Is 53:7–8 in Acts 8:32–35; Is 55:3 and Ps 16:10 in Acts 13:33–37.'

prove the resurrection of Christ' (Theissen and Merz 1998, p. 489). While the Gospel of John portrays a disciple believed because of the empty tomb (John 20:8), the earlier tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 indicates that, for the majority of the earliest Christians, the proof of Jesus' resurrection lies in the experiences of the witnesses (see further, Hurtado 2005, pp. 192–193). The evidence of the resurrection appearance to Paul himself (1 Cor. 15:8) was, of course, his own reason for thinking that the resurrection occurred.

However, de Jonge (2002, p. 47) objects that while the claim of appearances of resurrected Jesus soon acquired the function of proof of Jesus' resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, this does not disprove the hypothesis that at the earliest stage the claim of the appearances was 'not the foundation of belief in Jesus' resurrection, but rather assumed that belief as its basis.' De Jonge claims that belief resulted from that 'which had begun before it in response to his person, preaching and actions. The history of the church began as a response on the part of the people whom Jesus won by his preaching during his activity on earth' (2002, pp. 48–49). De Jonge proposes, 'thanks to the boldness and authority with which Jesus spoke out against the religious authorities of his day, thanks to his attention to the humble and lowly, his healing of the sick and the exorcisms which accompanied his preaching' (p. 49), a group of people became convinced that God's rule was indeed at hand and that Jesus was the Messiah. This conviction

was so strongly held by some of Jesus' followers that they could not abandon it when he died, for the core of their conviction lay in their belief that God was causing his rule to dawn, and not in their view of the person or role of Jesus.

(ibid.)

They got over his death, adding the idea that salvation had become possible above all through the death of Jesus (p. 49), and believed in Jesus' resurrection as an expression of their faith that God had sanctioned the work of Jesus on earth and as a way of making it easier to imagine the role which Jesus still had to fulfil as judge and saviour in the coming definitive breakthrough of God's rule (pp. 50–51). De Jonge claims that the accounts of the disciples' despair and doubt after Jesus' crucifixion (e.g. Luke 24:11) were rhetorical devices used by the redactors to contrast the recognition of the risen Christ with the distrust that preceded it, such that Christ's appearances would carry greater conviction for the readers. He concludes, 'in historical terms we know nothing of any disillusion and disillusionment among Jesus' disciples just before and after his crucifixion' (ibid.). Against de Jonge, Wright (2003, p. 700) argues that 'nobody, after all, believed that the Messiah would be raised from the dead; nobody was expecting any such thing' and that there was no Jewish precedent for the expectation of the resurrection of one man prior to the general resurrection. However, sceptics might object that Jesus' 'prediction' of his resurrection could have caused

the expectation (Whittenberger 2011), fuelled by their ‘intensified eschatological expectation’ that Jesus had stoked (Novakovic 2016, p. 153), and they might argue that the Gospels’ portrayal of the disciples’ initial failure to understand these predictions are ‘rhetorical devices used by the redactors’ (to use de Jonge’s phrase).

Nevertheless, several problems remain.

First, not all the ‘eyewitnesses’ started off as believers. James and Paul, for example, were sceptics before they ‘witnessed’ the resurrected Jesus (see further, Chapter 4).

Second, concerning the Twelve, de Jonge’s claim that the accounts of the disciples’ despair were rhetorical devices used by the redactors ignores the context of persecution. It is more likely that, having known how horribly Jesus had died, at least some (if not all) of these disciples were greatly fearful of ever mentioning Jesus again, lest they be crucified also.

Moreover, given the fact that the idea that ‘it was failed Messiahs who end up on crosses’ was so deeply etched in their Jewish consciousness (Wright 1999, p. 276; see next chapter), it is likely that a certain degree of cynicism concerning Jesus (‘he was just an imposter!’) would have been present in the minds of at least some of these disciples. While the fact that the disciples had indeed invested much in the cause of Jesus might have made it difficult for them to discard their beliefs quickly, it would have been more difficult to fearlessly proclaim something as difficult for other Jews to believe as a crucified Messiah and having to face persecution for it.

Furthermore, the idea of someone being bodily alive and well again in a short time after crucifixion<sup>10</sup> is truly an extraordinary one; it is not something that someone expects to see every day. As noted in Chapter 2, scepticism about people rising from the dead was clearly present among first-century people. Contrary to de Jonge, Matthew 28:17 could hardly be explained away as a ‘rhetorical devices used by the redactors,’ for the context of Matthew 28:17 does not say that the doubt was overcome by Christ’s appearances. It is true (as argued earlier) that based on other historical considerations, it can be inferred that if their doubts remained, they would not have been willing to continue the Christian movement and suffer and die for it. Nevertheless, the Gospel of Matthew does not say so, and thus it is difficult to regard Matthew 28:17 as a rhetorical device. The historicity of the disciples doubting Jesus’ resurrection (regardless of whether Jesus had predicted it), well attested in all the Gospels (Matt. 28:17, Ps.-Mark 16:14, Luke 24:36–41, John 20:24–29), is most plausible given that ‘the disciples were not hopelessly and insensibly alienated from the solid world’ to find out from experience that corpses do not naturally exit tombs

10 As against the swoon hypothesis (see Chapter 5), a half-dead Jesus still suffering from the wounds of the crucifixion would not have convinced the disciples that he was the risen Lord of life.

(Allison 2005a, pp. 246, 305). Parsons (2005, p. 443) expresses incredulity that the disciples would still be so doubtful after they had seen so many ‘miracles’ which Jesus had done previously. In response, this is not so surprising, considering that seeing someone alive and well again in a glorious body after the crucifixion was truly an extraordinary event. Moreover, as Atkins (2019) has argued, doubt and disbelief are consistently condemned by a wide variety of early Christian authors, ancient Christian texts explicitly indicate that doubt/unbelief is a source of shame, and it made the apostles look stubborn or foolish in their disbelief. Thus the doubt of the apostles would have been embarrassing in an ancient Christian context; this fits the criterion of embarrassment and is therefore most likely authentic.

Pesch himself later rejected his earlier view, recognizing that the disciples’ belief in Jesus as prophet and prophetic Messiah prior to Jesus’ crucifixion would have been insufficient to overcome the crisis of the disciples’ faith and explain the origination and persistence of their claim that Jesus was truly divine.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, Jesus’ predictions of his own violent death would hardly have been sufficient; it would not have been difficult to think of how someone could cause such a prophecy to be fulfilled upon himself by doing the kind of thing Jesus did at the Temple. On the other hand, the crisis of the disciples’ faith is only to be expected, for the crucifixion was the ultimate form of punishment during Roman times, reserved mainly for slaves and rebellious subjects (Hengel 1977).

It is true that prior to the rise of Christianity some Jews had already interpreted passages such as Isaiah 53 as indicating that the Messiah would suffer (Boyarin 2012, pp. 129–156), and that a few individuals (the *pagan* Roman centurion and those with him) were said to have been convinced that Jesus was the Son of God based on witnessing Jesus’ crucifixion and death (Matthew 27:54). However, as indicated by the Jewish Trypho in Justin’s *Dialogue*, it is dubious that the view of a Messiah suffering the worst form of punishment in the hands of their enemies, instead of delivering them from their enemies, was what the Jews (including Jesus’ disciples) would easily accept during Roman times. More importantly, there is no indication that passages such as Isaiah 53 was interpreted as saying that *God the Creator* would suffer in the hands of his enemies. It is noteworthy that, although there were a number of messianic movements between 150 BC and AD 150, these movements did not survive the violent death of their founders (e.g. Theudas, Bar Kokhba) in the hands of their enemies (Wright 2003, p. 699). None of their followers applied Isaiah 53 on them and continued the movement, nor was there any evidence that any of them were worshipped and regarded as truly divine after their deaths. The doctrine of a ‘crucified God’ would have been regarded by many in antiquity—both Jews and Gentiles—as ‘a shameless impertinence and absurdity’ (Hengel

11 Pesch holds to objective visions theory; see Pesch (1983); Galvin (1988, pp. 27–35).

1995, p. 383). However, Jesus was regarded by the earliest Christian leaders to be on the Creator side of the Creator–creature divide (1 Cor. 8:6) and worshipped by these ancient monotheistic Jews (see Loke 2017a). While 1 Corinthians portrays Christ crucified (‘a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles’—1 Cor. 1:23) as ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1:24), the same letter nevertheless emphasizes the verifiability of the ‘eyewitnesses’ of the post-mortem appearances of Jesus (15:6) and that ‘if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile’ (15:17). Without people experiencing what they thought was the resurrected Jesus after his shameful death, Christianity would not have begun the way it did and won converts.

Third, the earliest Christians were able to distinguish faith and fact: they regarded faith as worthless if the resurrection of Jesus is not a fact, as implied by 1 Corinthians 15:17, and they understood Jesus’ resurrection as ‘reanimation or revivification of the corpse’ (Ware 2014, p. 494)—a factual statement about observable physical reality. While the disciples did not observe this event at the very moment it occurred, they could hardly have come to the widespread agreement that it had occurred if the corpse was still in the tomb and no one subsequently observed what he/she thought was the resurrected Jesus. As argued in Chapter 2, 1 Corinthians 15 was written when many of those who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus—including prominent leaders of the Jerusalem Christians—were still alive and could be checked by the readers. One still needs to explain the claims of Jesus’ post-mortem appearances (and also the facticity of the empty tomb; see Chapter 6): how does one get ‘more than five hundred brethren,’ the ‘other apostles,’ and sceptics like James and Paul to claim to have seen the resurrected Jesus (as established in Chapter 2) if in fact they did not see anything like that, and to be willing to suffer and die for this religion? Moreover, as argued earlier, if they did not see anything which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, during times of intense persecution they would not have been able to appear genuine and consistent in testifying that they had such experiences without anyone letting it out that they did not witness anything like that. It is more reasonable to think that they experienced something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, such that they courageously proclaimed that Jesus resurrected and be willing to sacrifice everything and to die for it, without fear that they would be judged guilty as false witnesses (1 Cor. 15:15) and condemned by the God of Israel.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the conclusion that (2.2) at least some (if not all) of those people in mid-first-century Palestine who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus did experience something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus.

The alternative hypothesis (2.1.1) ‘these people did not experience anything which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, and they did not believe



that Jesus resurrected' is contradicted by the consideration that to claim to have seen the resurrected Jesus risked suffering and death. While many people throughout history would be willing to sacrifice everything (including their own lives) for what they believe to be true (even though it may not actually be true), no large group of people would be willing to sacrifice everything for what they do not believe to be true and be condemned by God after death for being false witnesses (cf. 1 Cor. 15:15). I have explained that the disciples devoutly believed that such a God exists and that the disciples' willingness to die for their religion can be inferred from the fact that they knew that their leader (i.e. Jesus) was already crucified and yet they chose to proclaim him knowing that a similar fate could befall them, that persecutions were indeed meted out against the earliest Christians (as Paul admitted in his epistles), and that a number of them were killed (e.g. Acts 12:2, Josephus *Antiquities* 20:9). I have also argued that the doctrine of Jesus' resurrection was fundamental to the earliest Christians' confession of Jesus as Lord and thus to their behaviour as Christians which resulted in their persecution. Moreover, if the disciples lied about the resurrection, it is hard to believe that during times of severe persecution they would have evinced genuine conviction that Jesus resurrected in the presence of other Christians and of their persecutors, without letting out the hoax.

What about the alternative hypothesis (2.1.2) these people did not experience anything which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, and they had other reasons for why they believed Jesus resurrected? This is ad hoc because it requires speculations about how former sceptics such as Paul and James the brother of Jesus came to believe that Jesus resurrected without witnessing what they thought was the resurrected Jesus. Additionally, I have argued that, if these disciples did not experience anything which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, during times of persecution they would not have appeared genuine and consistent in testifying that they had such experiences. The alternative hypothesis (2.1.2) is also contradicted by considerations concerning the difficulties of accepting and proclaiming a crucified Messiah, popular scepticism about bodily resurrection, the risks of persecution, and their reverent fear of being judged by YHWH for being false witnesses. Given these considerations, it is unreasonable to think that 'more than five hundred brethren,' the 'other apostles,' and sceptics like James and Paul as well as 'the Twelve' could have falsely claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus without having seen anything like that and be willing to be persecuted. It can therefore be concluded that they did experience something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus.

## 4 The earliest Christians witnessed an extramental entity

### 4.1 Introduction

The intramental hypothesis is the most popular hypothesis among recent sceptics. Back in the nineteenth century, David Strauss argued that Jesus was buried in an unknown grave and that the disciples, who found it difficult to think of Jesus as dead, had hallucinations of Jesus and added in various details into their accounts of their experiences (Strauss 1994, pp. 742–744). Strauss concluded, ‘thus the faith in Jesus as the Messiah, which by his violent death had received a fatal shock, was subjectively restored, by the instrumentality of the mind, the power of imagination, and nervous excitement’ (Strauss 1879, p. 440).

Since then, many have argued that what the disciples experienced can be explained by hallucinations. For example, Albert Schweitzer argued that the impact of Jesus—who had declared himself to be the Messiah, had instructed strict secrecy, had demanded their total dedication, and had promised that some of them would not taste death before they saw the kingdom of God coming with power—would have predisposed a group of Galilean fishermen to experience hallucinations. The experiences of their highly excited minds became amplified in the process of word-of-mouth retelling down the years before they were written in the Gospels (Brabazon 2000, p. 119). Lüdemann (2004, pp. 173–175) argues that Peter first had hallucinations of Jesus due to severe grief, and these spread ‘infectiously’ to the rest of the apostles and to the ‘more than five hundred brethren.’ Vermès (2008) denies the extramental reality of the resurrection appearances by arguing that these appearances to individuals or groups of individuals do not differ from the visions of mystics throughout the centuries (p. 147). He further suggests,

The tale of the empty tomb and the apparitions of the lost Lord momentarily illuminated their dark despair with a ray of hope. Doubts nevertheless lingered on. However, when under the influence of the Spirit their self-confidence revived, prompting them to resume their apostolic mission, and they felt increasingly sure that they were not acting alone, but that Jesus was with them.

(pp. 150–151)

Carrier (2005b, p. 387) argues that Jesus' predictions of his death and resurrection could have primed the disciples' expectations and resulted in them having hallucinations of the resurrected Jesus. The Scriptures were then searched for confirmation, and subsequently their fervour inspired others to have similar experiences (Carrier 2005a, p. 193). While Wright (2008, p. 60) had argued that as Second Temple Jews 'The disciples were emphatically not expecting Jesus to be raised from the dead, all by himself in the middle of history,' Carrier's argument implies that Jesus' prediction could have caused the expectation and primed them subconsciously. (As noted in Chapter 3, sceptics might object that the Gospels' portrayal of the disciples' initial failure to understand these predictions are 'rhetorical devices used by the redactors'; to use de Jonge's phrase.) Psychologists have noted how expectations can lead to hallucinations. For example, Aleman and Larøi (2008, p. 102) note that the expectation that one is about to see or hear something primes the perceptual system and lowers the thresholds for perception. They cite a study by Barber and Calverley (1964) who instructed 78 females individually to close their eyes and hear a recording of *White Christmas* when no recording was actually played. As many as 49% of them had individual hallucinations (i.e. they subsequently affirmed that they had heard the recording clearly), and 5% stated that they also believed that the recording had actually been played.

Moreover, Allison (2005a) argues that many studies in psychology have shown that those characteristics which we would normally associate with phenomena caused by extramental entities can be present in hallucinations as well. For example, many would regard a phenomenon that is perceived by more than one person as something that is caused by an extramental entity. However, Allison claims, based on cases in the literature, that group hallucination (i.e. a hallucination shared by more than one person) does happen across cultures, and that the appearances of 'Jesus' could have been one of these (Allison 2005a, pp. 205, 242–243, n. 175, 269–299). There are various types of group hallucinations: collective hallucination denotes hallucination that is shared by a limited number of individuals (typically two or three) (Blom 2009, pp. 109–110), whereas mass hallucination or epidemic hallucination denote a hallucination shared by a relatively large number of people (Blom 2009, p. 176). As an example of mass hallucination, Blom (*ibid.*) cites the French chronicler and physician Rigord (c. 1150—c. 1209), who claims,

On the day Saladin entered the Holy City, says Rigord, the monks of Argenteuil saw the moon descend from heaven upon earth, and then re-ascend to heaven. In many churches the crucifixes and images of the saints shed tears of blood in the presence of the faithful.

Psychiatrist Louis West (2017) writes,

If some external object is present but inadequately recognized, an incorrect perceptual engram [i.e. a stored perceptual expectation] may be

activated to be experienced as an illusion; in the absence of an external stimulus, such an engram is perceived as a hallucination. This may account for the specificity of collective visions (i.e., those shared by more than one person). Among lifeboat survivors at sea, for example, several people who share similar expectancies (mental sets) may see a non-existent ship projected against the blank screen of empty sea and sky. Such an experience may persist in some of the people even after a logical belief in its impossibility has been communicated to all.

Various psychological factors have been suggested as triggers for hallucinations, such as guilt for abandoning Jesus, accumulation of pressures and anxieties, recent bereavement, psychological contagion, and excitement from initial reports of empty tomb (e.g. John 20:8) and (non-veridical) sightings (e.g. by the women or Peter) (Goulder 1996, pp. 48–61; Allison 2005a, pp. 269–299; Carrier 2005a; Lüdemann 1994; cf. Aleman and Larøi 2008, pp. 66, 102).

In a similar vein, Carrier argues that hallucinations have been fairly common. Many have been thought to be real, and many have not been influenced by drugs. Also, hallucinations have been more common in developing countries, which have more in common with the ancient world than with developed countries, and they have been more common in times of bereavement (Carrier 2005a, p. 185, n. 351). He notes that, even today, many people have reported full-body manifestations of Jesus that involve conversations, physical contact, as well as physical changes to the environment, and almost all of these experiences were sudden and unexpected. He suggests that the original ‘resurrection appearances’ to the apostles may have been something like these, ‘just as unexpected, just as moving, just as convincing.’ Furthermore, he argues that, in the ancient world, spiritual experiences were encouraged, and hallucinations thus occurred more frequently (*ibid.*, p. 184).

## **4.2 Distinguishing hallucination, illusion, delusion, and vision**

Before I address the intramental hypothesis in detail, I shall first discuss the definition of hallucination and differentiate it from other terms. This is important, for as Habermas points out, Allison did not make clear distinctions between hallucinations, illusions, and delusions, and on more than one occasion Allison illegitimately moves between these phenomena as if they confirm each other. In cases where a real person is taken to be a different person, these experiences ought to be characterized as misidentifications, but not as hallucinations (Habermas 2008, pp. 303–313). A number of cases which may have been labelled as ‘group hallucinations’ (e.g. apparitions of Mary) may well be cases of illusions, which is a case of misidentification.

To be in line with the intramental hypothesis discussed in this chapter (misidentifications are discussed in the next chapter), a hallucination should be understood in the present context as ‘a sensory experience which occurs *in the absence of corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ*, has a sufficient sense of reality to resemble a veridical perception, over which the subject does not feel s/he has direct and voluntary control, and which occurs in the awake state’ (David 2004, p. 108).<sup>1</sup> Teeple (2009) notes that hallucinations can be classified in three types of aetiology: psychophysiologic (arising from alteration of brain structure and function), psychobiochemical (due to neurotransmitter disturbances), and psychodynamic (arising from intrusion of the unconscious into the conscious mind).

An illusion, however, is defined as perceiving an external entity with the normal processes of sensory perception, but not as what it is (i.e. there are other causal factors which distort the perception of the properties of this entity). A form of illusion is mirage. Blom (2009, pp. 329–330) explains that a mirage is defined by the American Meteorological Society (AMS) as ‘a refraction phenomenon wherein an image of some distant object is made to appear displaced from its true position because of large vertical density variations near the surface; the image may appear distorted, inverted, or wavering.’ Especially in calm weather, the interface between warm and cold air near the surface of the ground or water may act as a refracting lens, bending light rays from the sky and thus producing an image of a distant object or group of objects.

A delusion is a false belief, while a mass hysteria is a collective delusion. There have been documented cases of mass hysteria. However, as argued in Chapter 3, in the case of Jesus’ resurrection there were groups of people who not only believed that Jesus resurrected but also saw something which they thought was the resurrected Jesus, and we need to explain what it is they saw, not merely what they believed. We also need to distinguish between delusions of Jesus’ presence (believing that Jesus was present) versus seeing that Jesus was (trans-) physically present. Thus mass hysteria by itself is inadequate for explaining away the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection which involves what those groups of people saw (see the paragraphs below). (Carnley’s [1987, p. 71] suggestion that the disciples might have had hallucinations caused by mass hysteria is contradicted by the considerations against hallucinations which I explain in the following sections of this chapter and in Chapter 7)

1 Emphasis mine. Aleman and Larøi explain that David’s definition is to be preferred to Vandenbos’ widely cited definition of hallucination as ‘a false sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality despite the absence of an external stimulus’ (Vandenbos ed. 2007, p. 427), because ‘some hallucinations are triggered by (irrelevant) external stimuli—for example, patients who start hearing voices when the vacuum cleaner is switched on’ (Aleman and Larøi 2008, p. 15).

A 'vision' may be veridical or non-veridical. A veridical vision is defined as having an experience of perception of an external entity in the presence of external causal relation by which that entity is causing that experience of perception, without utilizing the normal processes of sensory perception (Copan and Tacelli eds. 200 p. 197). This is a supernatural vision hypothesis, which is discussed in Chapter 8. A non-veridical vision is defined as having an experience of perception of an external entity in the absence of external causal relation by which that entity is causing that experience of perception. Examples would be hallucination and illusion.

Craig (1989, pp. 68–69) argues that the New Testament authors consistently refer to resurrection appearances as involving an extramental appearing in the real, objective world. They distinguish this understanding of 'resurrection appearance' from that of 'vision,' a term which they refer for subjective mental phenomenon. For example, Luke's comment that Peter 'did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision' (Acts 12:9) illustrates this understanding of vision as being subjective in nature (Wiebe 1998, p. 146). With regards to Acts 26:19, which refers to Paul's experience on the road to Damascus as 'heavenly vision' rather than resurrection appearance, Craig replies this is because Paul's experience involved subjective elements, such that his other companions did not perceive the appearance of Jesus (Craig 1989, p. 75)<sup>2</sup> and that he alone was converted that day (Chilton 2019, p. 83). Nevertheless, the experience was portrayed in Acts as involving extramental events as well; for example, even though his companions did not perceive the appearance of Jesus, they were portrayed as seeing an appearance of the light and fell to the ground as a result (Acts 26:13). Therefore, Paul's experience can also be deemed as a resurrection appearance, as other parts of the New Testament affirm (see further the response to Carnley in Section 4.6).

By saying that Jesus appeared to the apostles 'over a period of forty days' (Acts 1:3), Luke probably intends to demarcate resurrection appearances from subjective visions recorded later (e.g. that of Stephen in Acts 7:56 and Ananias in 9:10). According to the New Testament accounts, only Paul saw a resurrection appearance after that 40-day period. Paul uses the phrase 'untimely born' in 1 Corinthians 15:8, which implies that there must have been a cessation of the resurrection appearances, and the appearance to Paul was the exception (Allison 2005a, p. 260). Paul also restricts the period of resurrection appearances by the phrase 'last of all' (1 Cor. 15:8).

2 Because of this, some scholars, for example Keim, Grass, Fuller, and Pannenberg, would use the word visions to label Jesus' resurrection appearances. It should be noted that while Pannenberg (1968, pp. 88–106) uses the word 'vision' for Paul's experiences, he argues that it has extramental reality and is not imaginary; moreover, contrary to Keim and others, Pannenberg argues for the empty tomb and Jesus' bodily resurrection.

Lüdemann (1994) claims that Paul could not distinguish his visual perception from an inner (psychological) versus an external stimulus (physiologic sight), and that Paul used the same Greek word for ‘seeing,’ *ōphthē* (*horaō*), in referring to his own encounter with Jesus, as he did in describing all the persons mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:58. Lüdemann generalizes that Paul and Jesus’ disciples all had similar hallucinatory experiences. Carrier (2005a, pp. 151–153; see also Gant 2019, pp. 198–200) likewise argues that what Paul meant to convey in 1 Corinthians 15 is that Jesus’ epiphany to him was normative of the experiences of the other witnesses mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11. He notes that the only first-hand account of Paul’s encounter is in Galatians 1:15–16, which says that he received from Jesus by revelation (*apokalypsis*). He argues that *apokalypsis* usually refers to a subjective spiritual encounter (e.g. in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4), which we now know can be purely psychological, even though the person who encountered it thought it to be real. And since the epiphany to Paul was normative, what the others experienced could also have been nonphysical. Ehrman (2014, pp. 207–208) claims that the earliest accounts in Paul portray Jesus resurrected and ascended quickly and appearing from heaven to people on earth, rather than eating fish on earth as Luke portrayed.

In reply, Licona (2010, pp. 329–333, 400–437) has surveyed more than a thousand occurrences of *ōphthē* (*horaō*) and similar terms in both Paul and other writers from about the same time and concluded that, while these terms can indicate nonphysical sight or understanding, it far more commonly signifies normal physiologic sight (cf. Paul’s defence of his apostleship in 1 Cor. 9:1: ‘Have I not seen Jesus?’). Contrary to Carrier, Craig (1989, p. 81) notes that to argue from *apokalypsis* would ‘at the most indicate that the appearance had subjective elements, not that it was wholly subjective.’ Thus, the fact that Paul thought that the revelation of Jesus to him had personal and interior consequences for himself (‘that is the source of his reference to the Anointed “living in” him [see Gal 2:20]: the Son was revealed “in me” [*en emoi*; Gal 1:16] so that he lived “in me” [*en emoi*; Gal 2:20],’ Chilton 2019, pp. 83–84) does not imply that it was wholly interior without an objective external cause. On the other hand, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul refers to the appearance of Jesus to the five hundred *at once* (v. 6), by which he clearly intends to convey an objective appearance as evidence for Jesus’ bodily resurrection in response to sceptics of bodily resurrection (see Chapter 2). The word *apokalypsis* means an unveiling of the things of God; it does not imply that the *mode* of unveiling is restricted to non-physical encounters. Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul’s use of the words *soma* and *anastasis* (‘resurrection’) in this passage implies that *ōphthē* is referring to the appearance of a physically resurrected body (Gundry 2000, pp. 116–117). Finally, as noted in Chapter 1, the affirmation that Jesus ‘has been raised’ (1 Cor. 15.4) provides decisive confirmation that the earliest Christians believed and proclaimed that Jesus was *bodily* resurrected (Ware

2014). It is clear, therefore, that Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 15, as well as the accounts in the Gospels and Acts, claim that objective bodily entity were witnessed rather than merely subjective visions. Wright (2008, p. 156) observes,

while Paul declares that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit God's kingdom,' (1 Cor. 15:50), he doesn't mean that physicality will be abolished. 'Flesh and blood' is a technical term for that which is corruptible, transient, heading for death. 'The contrast, again, is not between what we call physical and what we call nonphysical but between corruptible physicality, on the one hand, and incorruptible physicality, on the other.

Wright also suggests the following interesting thought experiment against the attempts to explain away Jesus' resurrection by appealing to delusion, subjective vision, or bereavement experience:

In A.D. 70 the Romans conquered Jerusalem, and they led back to Rome thousands of captive Jews, including the man they regarded as the leader of the Jewish revolt, 'the king of the Jews,' a man called Simon bar Giora. He was led into Rome at the back of the triumphal procession, and the end of the spectacle was Simon being flogged and then killed. Now, suppose we imagine a few Jewish revolutionaries, three days or three weeks later. The first one says, 'You know, I think Simon really was the Messiah—and he still is!' The others would be puzzled. Of course he isn't; the Romans got him, as they always do. If you want a Messiah, you'd better find another one. 'Ah,' says the first, 'but I believe he's been raised from the dead.' 'What d'you mean?' his friends ask. 'He's dead and buried.' 'Oh, no,' replies the first, 'I believe he's been exalted to heaven.' The others look puzzled. All the righteous martyrs are with God, everybody knows that; their souls are in God's hand; that doesn't mean they've already been raised from the dead. Anyway, the resurrection will happen to us all at the end of time, not to one person in the middle of continuing history. 'No,' replies the first, 'you don't understand. I've had a strong sense of God's love surrounding me. I have felt God forgiving me—forgiving us all. I've had my heart strangely warmed. What's more, last night I saw Simon; he was there with me. . . .' The others interrupt, now angry. We can all have visions. Plenty of people dream about recently dead friends. Sometimes it's very vivid. That doesn't mean they've been raised from the dead. It certainly doesn't mean that one of them is the Messiah. And if your heart has been warmed, then sing a psalm, don't make wild claims about Simon.

(Wright 2008, pp. 49–50)



Wright concludes,

That is what they would have said to anyone offering the kind of statement that, according to the revisionists, someone must have come up with as the beginning of the idea of Jesus's resurrection. But this solution isn't just incredible, it's impossible. Had anyone said what the revisionists suggest, some such conversation as the above would have ensued.  
(Wright 2008, p. 50)

### 4.3 Prior mental states of disciples

Given that hallucinations are caused intramentally, expectation is evidently a relevant factor. Blom (2009, pp. 109–110) notes that, for mass hallucination to occur, having common triggers (e.g. a shared environment suggesting a shared idea-pattern or percept) is not enough; each of the percipients must be prone to hallucinatory activity as well. In what follows, I shall argue that it is unlikely that these conditions are fulfilled in the case of the resurrection appearances.

One issue is whether all the 'eyewitnesses' already had prior belief that Jesus would rise from the dead. The historical evidence indicates otherwise. The resurrection appearances occurred to Paul and James, both of whom were unbelievers; moreover, even among the Twelve there were those who were initially doubtful, and the likelihood that there might have been those among the 'more than five hundred brethren' who were initially doubtful cannot be excluded as well. These points shall be elaborated in what follows.

First, it is clear from Paul's own testimony, as well as the testimony of others, that he was an enemy of the Christian movement prior to his conversion (Phil. 3:4–6, Acts 9:1–2). The New Testament also records that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him prior to his crucifixion (John 7:1–5). Nevertheless, the New Testament claims that both Paul and James witnessed the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7–8), and that they subsequently became prominent leaders of the Christian movement (Acts 15:1–21).

Paul's experience is also portrayed in Acts. Carrier (2005a, pp. 154, 217, n. 250) dismisses the three accounts in Acts (9:1–9, 22:6–11, and 26:12–18) concerning Jesus' appearance to Paul as historically worthless because he thinks that they are contradictory. In reply, the historical value of the presence of apparent contradictions and the procedure of harmonization has already been argued for in Chapter 2. The fact that the accounts are apparently contradictory indicates that Luke did not carefully make them up (Craig 1989, pp. 74–82).<sup>3</sup> As Licona (2010, p. 220) observes, 'if Luke were

<sup>3</sup> Carrier (2005a, p. 154) argues further that Acts contradicts Galatians 1:12–2:1 which does not mention attendants, denies meeting anyone (Ananias), and places his return to Jerusalem

to set out to compose on his own multiple accounts of Saul's conversion, we would have expected the narratives to be somewhat more similar than they are.' Moreover, the accounts in Acts can be harmonized as follows: Saul saw Jesus and heard distinct words, while his companions saw the light accompanying the appearance of Jesus but not Jesus himself, and they heard the noise of the voice (Acts 9:7)<sup>4</sup> but did not hear the distinct words Jesus spoke to Saul (Acts 22:9)<sup>5</sup> (Witherington 1997, pp. 307–313).

Sceptics have claimed that what Paul and James experienced were hallucinations and that they could have had hidden motives or other psychological reasons that caused them to hallucinate. Price (2005, p. 83) suggests that James may have had the motive of wanting the honourable leadership role in the church as the eldest brother of King Messiah. As for Paul, Carrier (2005a, p. 187) suggests that factors such as guilt in persecuting a people he came to admire, subsequent disgust with fellow persecuting Pharisees, concern for his own salvation, desire for real purpose in life, physical conditions such as dehydration and fatigue on the road to Damascus, and underlying 'happy schizotype' personality could have predisposed him towards having hallucination.

In response, it is unlikely that James, who distrusted Jesus even prior to his crucifixion, would have had secret motives of wanting to lead a group that follows a crucified Jesus. This is especially so considering that James would easily have known that he could well be killed also for doing that. As noted in Chapter 3, the historical evidence indicates that James was indeed eventually martyred.

Concerning Paul, Habermas observes that it is clear from his own testimony in Galatians 1:13–14 and Philippians 3:4–6 that he was neither guilty nor fearful of persecuting Christians prior to becoming a Christian himself.

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with Barnabas much later and with no suggestion of danger. However, the fact that Gal. 1 does not mention the attendants does not imply that the attendants were not there. 'I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood' (Gal. 1:16) does not mean he did not meet anyone later, and 'to reveal His Son' (v. 16) could have referred to the entire process of seeing Jesus, set free by Ananias, and baptism, after which he immediately went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus (Acts 9:19; the 'Damascus–Arabia–Damascus' duration could have been considered under the phrase 'spend several days with the disciples at Damascus'), where he started preaching the gospel. His going to Jerusalem three years later as indicated in Galatians does not contradict Acts, for 'after many days' in verse 23 could have meant three years; there was no indication that Acts 9:26 follows verse 25 immediately. Finally, the fact that Galatians 1 does not mention his escape from danger does not mean that he did not actually face it. For the compatibility between Acts and Paul's letters, see further, Keener (2012, ch. 7), who explains that we should not expect either Acts or Paul's letters to contain complete information and that we need to consider the possibility that they offer different perspectives and emphases which complement each other.

4 Acts 9:7: 'The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.'

5 Acts 22:9 'Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.'

Rather, he was proud of it, being motivated by religious zeal with no misgivings in his efforts to persecute Christians. Other suggestions that Paul had physical or psychological comorbidities or predispositions towards hallucinations are without any positive evidence (Bergeron and Habermas 2015). Even if Paul were affected by physical conditions such as dehydration and fatigue or by an underlying ‘happy schizotype’ personality, this would not explain why he hallucinated a resurrected Jesus rather than something else. Lüdemann (2004, p. 172) proposes that Paul had subconscious motivations to assume an exalted position in early Christian leadership which resulted in his hallucinations of Jesus. Bergeron and Habermas (2015) object that there is no record to suggest this, and note that, given the persecution of early Christians, ‘positions in first century Christian leadership would not be thought of as means to advance one’s religious career or social standing.’

Second, it is true that guilt, bereavement, pressures and anxieties, religious enthusiasm, excitement over initial reports of empty tomb and sightings, ‘influence of the Holy Spirit’ (Vermès 2008, pp. 150–151) and so on may have been present in various degrees among some members of each group. Nevertheless, hallucinations involving all the members is still unlikely given the evidence of the disciples doubting the resurrection, the difficulties of accepting and proclaiming a crucified Messiah, the risks of persecution, their reverent fear of being judged by YHWH for acting as false witnesses, and popular scepticism about bodily resurrection (concerning these considerations, see Chapter 3). It is far more probable that, given the likelihood of their varying mental states, something extramental and independent of their mental states removed all the residual doubts from among all of them, such that hundreds of people were willing to boldly serve as eyewitnesses in the context of frightening persecution and be willing to suffer shame and even death as a result.

Sceptics might object that according to Luke the disciples said, ‘The Lord has really risen’ after the appearance to Peter and before the appearance to them as a group (Luke 24:34), and this suggests faith in the resurrection after an initial report. In response (assuming the historicity of this passage for the sake of the objector’s argument), while this text can be taken to imply the presence of belief among members in the group, it does not imply that all lingering doubts had been erased from all members in the group after an initial report. The presence of lingering doubts is indicated by the context, which states that when Jesus subsequently appeared, doubts were still present in their hearts (Luke 24:38, 41).

#### **4.4 Argument against group hallucination**

It has been explained earlier that a hallucination is understood in the present context as involving a sensory experience which occurs in the absence of corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ (David

2004, p. 108). It is unreasonable to think that a group of people perceived the same thing together at the same time when there is nothing there extramentally corresponding to their experiences. For without a corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, the mental states internal to each person within the group would not agree on various details concerning their experience of the external world.

Cases which have been labelled as ‘group hallucinations’ (such as ancient and modern reports of ‘visions’ or seeing things in the sky) may have been cases of illusions, which is a case of misidentification (see next chapter). Some may also be cases of physical manifestations of real extramental ‘spiritual powers’ (Blom 2009, pp. 109–110), and one must be careful not to exclude this possibility on the basis of unwarranted anti-supernaturalistic presupposition (see Chapter 8). Experiences involving more than one sensory organ have occasionally been labelled as hallucinatory (multimodal hallucinations; these however tend to involve simultaneous auditory and visual hallucinations, Goodwin et al. 1971). Blom (2009, pp. 33–35) observes,

While biomedical models tend to use the terms complex visual hallucination, compound hallucination to denote apparitions, explaining their mediation by reference to aberrant neurophysiological activity in cerebral areas and/or the temporo-parieto-occipital junction, parapsychological models tend to combine such biomedical explanations with hypotheses related to a metaphysical origin of the perceived apparitions, such as the telepathic powers of dead or living agents.

Christians believe that spiritual entities (angels, demons, etc.) exist, and some of those reports may well be evidence for it. For example, they may be the result of physical manifestations of evil spirits who masquerade as the dead. To insist that these are hallucinations rather than physical manifestations of spiritual entities begs the question against the existence of such entities. Blom (2009, pp. 33–35) notes, ‘To suspend judgement on the issue of whether apparitions exist or not, it has been proposed to use the neutral term *idionecrophany* to denote any sensory experience that involves an alleged contact with the dead.’

Carrier (1999) objects that to assume that these are real is also ‘begging the question.’ In reply, the argument for extramental reality is not merely based on assuming this conclusion (if it were so, it would be begging the question). Rather it is based on epistemological principles: a reflection of the causal pathways that are required to produce perceptions would reveal that a consistent unity of perceptions over time concerning a single entity that involves different people in a group would indicate that such an entity exists outside of their minds. The conclusion is likewise if multiple sensory routes (seeing, hearing, touching) are involved, or if that entity is perceived to have left behind causal effects that persist over time (e.g. the eating of fish by that entity resulting in the permanent disappearance of the fish). The

reason is that, since intramental processes by definition occur in the absence of external causal relations to the putative entity, it is unreasonable to think that causal mechanisms internal to each person in a group simultaneously generated similar experiences involving visual, auditory, and tactile senses that are consistent with those of the others, and remain persistently so over time in relation to the causal effects that are left behind (a similar point is made in Wiebe 1998, pp. 209–211).<sup>6</sup>

A recent study by Bergeron and Habermas (2015) conclude that collective hallucinations are not found in peer-reviewed medical literature,<sup>7</sup> and ‘collective hallucination as an explanation for the disciples’ post-crucifixion group experiences of Jesus is indefensible.’

It is therefore highly remarkable that in the case of Jesus’ resurrection we have appearances to three different groups of people (the Twelve, the five hundred, and the other apostles besides the Twelve) in different circumstances over a short period. Given the argument against group hallucination, it is unreasonable to think that all of these events occurred in the absence of a corresponding external stimulus that resembled Jesus.

#### 4.5 Contextual considerations and fact checking

Novakovic (2016, p. 142) cites Kalish and Reynolds’ (1973) cross-cultural psychological study of bereavement and ‘post death’ contact and states that in some cases the interviewees claim that more than one person see the apparition simultaneously. It should be noted, however, that Kalish and Reynolds (p. 219) state that only slightly over 2% of the entire study population claimed a post-death encounter that was part of the reality of another person present at the time. Moreover, with regards to these claims, the study by Kalish and Reynolds does not provide details concerning how many other persons were present and shared in those encounters in each instance (e.g. were there up to eleven people or five hundred people having an encounter together at any one time, or were there only one another person?). Neither does it provide details concerning whether those other persons who were

6 Concerning Carrier’s suggestion that the disciples may have thought they saw the same thing even if their experiences were inconsistent, see Chapter 7.

7 This is based on Bergeron’s comprehensive data base search of the PubMed and American Psychological Association websites. Citing Nickell (1998, p. 174), retired psychologist Whittenberger (2011) claims that there were cases of group hallucinations, but his article is marred by faulty analysis. For example, he writes, ‘Eugene Barbadette, his brother Joseph, and others saw the Virgin Mary at Pontmain, France, on January 17, 1971.’ Aside from getting the date wrong (Nickell states the year as 1871), Whittenberger fails to note that Nickell goes on to say, ‘But there is a clue to the selective nature of the vision. Eugene pointedly identified three stars in the sky and explained to the adults how the stars delineated the Blessed Virgin’s figure. At least according to some of the accounts of the “miracle,” the adults were indeed able to see the triangle of bright stars; they just could not see anything else of significance.’ This is a case of misidentification, not hallucination.

claimed to be present and shared in those encounters were convinced and were willing to testify that it was a resurrected body (rather than a ghost or spirit) that they saw, or was it (say) just a vague sense of ‘feeling the spiritual presence’ of the deceased person. Without these details, Novakovic has failed to rebut Craig’s objection that there is no single instance which exhibits the diversity and multitude of the resurrection appearances over a short period. It is only by compiling unrelated cases that anything analogous to the resurrection of Jesus may be constructed by sceptics (Craig 2000, pp. 190–192).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, there are reasons to be sceptical about these reports as well as the accounts noted in Section 4.1 (e.g. the account by Rigord). For unlike the case for Jesus’ resurrection, these cases do not

- a occur in the context of persecution by authorities who would have challenged their claims (see Chapters 2 and 3) and in which the witnesses were willing to lose everything and die for what they saw, and
- b serve as foundational proof of the veracity of a religion, where crucial fundamental beliefs held by a large number of people concerning eternal salvation is dependent on the testimonies of available witnesses.

Since there was no fear of persecution and the beliefs were not of crucial importance, the motivation to carefully countercheck the details over a period of time by other people who were deeply concerned about them would be lacking. Hence, these cases are more likely to be frauds, or sensationalized or careless reports of vague or unconvincing perceptions made by impulsive or excitable ‘witnesses’ (including those who were encouraged by others to have ‘spiritual experiences’) (cf. Carrier 2005a). Allison himself acknowledges that much of the large amount of literature which he cited are from popular writings rather than critical investigations. He also notes that there are numerous examples of collective hallucinations and illusions (i.e. misidentifications rather than hallucinations) in which people claimed to have seen the same thing but, when closely interviewed, disagreed on the crucial details (Allison 2005a, pp. 278, n. 297, 318). It is instructive to note Whittenberger’s (2011) mentioning of a supposed case of group hallucination,

Maria Cruz Gonzalez and her three companions also saw the mother of Jesus in the little village of San Sebastian de Garabandal, Spain, on July 2, 1961; citing Nickell (1998, pp. 181–182). Whittenberger fails to

8 cf. Allison’s personal anecdote of the ‘appearances’ of his father after his death to his family members one individual after another (Kris, Andrew, Emily, etc.), which he compares with 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 (Allison 2005, p. 277). However, what is significantly different from 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 (other than the lack of empty tomb, context of persecution, etc.) is that there is no appearance to *groups* of people one after another).

note Nickell's observation that one of the companions later confessed that their claims of experiences was not authentic, stating that 'she and her companions had used the trances and apparition claims as a means to get away from the village and play!

(p. 184)

In contrast with the aforementioned cases (and this important factor is somewhat neglected by sceptics in recent discussions), the claims concerning post-mortem appearances of Jesus occurred in the context of severe persecution as foundational events proving the veracity of crucial fundamental beliefs (see Chapter 3). Sceptics object that the New Testament does not explicitly describe the use of the methodology of modern critical investigations that includes cross-examination and interviewing in isolation of the witnesses listed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 (Allison 2005a, p. 278, n. 297, 318). Nevertheless, it has been shown in Chapter 3 that these witnesses testified in the context of persecutions and challenges from their opponents that happened over a number of years, and they as well as their converts who believed on the basis of their testimonies were willing to lose everything, die, and stake their eternal salvation on the truth of what they saw. In such circumstances, in the cases of the appearances to the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:5), the five hundred (1 Cor. 15:6), and the other apostles besides the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:7), at least some of the witnesses would have observed closely, spoken to one another, and counterchecked with each other afterwards about the details of what they saw together as a group (e.g. 'Was that really Jesus?' 'What did he look like?').

Sceptics might ask how we know whether the apostles saw the same thing and agreed on the details (Allison 2005a, p. 297), and if there had been disagreement, why would we expect the New Testament to record it? Whittenberger (2011) agrees that in cases of group hallucinations there would be variations in details, such as 'what Jesus was wearing, how injured he looked, what gestures he used, and what he said and did,' but he claims that members in the group never compared their individual experiences in any detail. He argues that there were indeed differences in details of the resurrection appearances when we compare the Gospels' portrayals. Other sceptics have claimed that there are contradictions between the Gospels' portrayals concerning Jesus' resurrection which indicate that they did not see the same thing and thus it was hallucinatory (Carnley 1987, p. 244). Sceptics might complain that the notion of counterchecking with one another is just an appeal to what a twenty-first-century author thinks reasonable; it may not be applicable to first-century men and women.

In reply, it has been shown in Chapter 2 that the claim concerning contradiction is unproven; in particular, it has been explained that differences are not the same as contradictions. Thus, the differences in details of the Gospels' portrayals of the resurrection appearances do not imply that the disciples did not countercheck with each other, for as explained in Chapter 2

the differences can be understood as complementary rather than contradictory. On the other hand, although the worldviews of first-century men and women were different from our own (Barclay 1996, p. 26), it has been shown in Chapter 3 that scepticism about people rising from the dead was clearly present among first-century people, and the evidence indicates that the disciples doubted the resurrection initially. Furthermore, the speaking of their experiences of the ‘resurrected Jesus’ to one another—including among those who were initially sceptical and who would have ‘fact-checked’ with one another—is most plausible psychologically given the nature and significance of such experiences, and it has multiple attestation (Luke 24:32–35, John 20:25). Moreover, the ‘commonsensical’ practice of questioning the identity of the person witnessed when something apparently miraculous has happened to him or her is evidently present among first-century people (e.g. John 9:9).<sup>9</sup> So too is the ‘basic common sense’ of checking the evidence of an event that one is sceptical about. This is shown by 1 Corinthians 15:6, where Paul is saying in effect to the Corinthians who were sceptical of the resurrection to check out the witnesses for themselves rather than merely trust what he says, as well as by John 20:25, where Thomas is portrayed to have wanted to check Jesus’ nail marks and his side.<sup>10</sup> Also, the witnesses listed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 would have been asked concerning their experiences by many other people who lived closely with them over a period of time, as these people would have been very interested in what they saw (Habermas 2008, p. 307). Additionally, the polemic reflected in Matthew 28:11–15 indicates that the non-Christian Jews did challenge the disciples’ claim (see Chapter 3), and these opponents would also have been interested in what they saw and to explain away their experiences if they could.

Moreover, it has been argued in Chapter 2 that various considerations that would lead to checking with witnesses were present among the earliest Christians. Given that Paul was writing to an audience sceptical of bodily resurrection and that such people were present in the early church (1 Cor. 15:12), and given that scepticism and the basic common sense of checking the evidence of an event that one is sceptical about were present, the earliest disciples would not have been able to satisfy the demand for evidence from their immediate audience if these disciples themselves had not checked the evidence. Additionally, given the fundamental importance of Jesus’ resurrection (1 Cor. 15:17), the fundamental importance of the experiences of the witnesses listed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11, and the context of persecution (see Chapter 3), it is unreasonable to think that more than one group of people would have wanted to serve as witnesses and to proclaim something so incredible as the resurrection prior to the writing of the New

9 Whether this passage is historical or created by first-century Christians, it shows that this ‘common sense’ was present in the first century.

10 See note 9.



Testament and to maintain that during times of severe persecution, if it were not evident to the witnesses themselves that members of their group had indeed seen the ‘same thing’ (i.e. ‘Jesus’) together in the first place. After all, people at that time were aware of hallucinations, such as ‘seeing things’ after drinking too much wine (see Section 4.6). Contrary to Vermès (2008, pp. 150–151), the disciples would not have risked the lives and eternal salvation of themselves and others and started to proclaim something as unbelievable as a bodily resurrection publicly if, as Vermès thinks, they still had lingering doubts and were not absolutely sure that Jesus was resurrected (see Chapter 3). It is also unreasonable to think that Paul would have referred the sceptics of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12) to these disciples as eyewitnesses (1 Cor. 15:3–7; see Chapter 2) if they still had doubts about what they witnessed.

In summary, the process of counterchecking by the groups of ‘eyewitnesses’ among themselves and by their audiences would have falsified intramental hypotheses such as hallucinations. With regards to hallucinations, among ‘the five hundred,’ for example, there would be people seeing vastly contradictory details of ‘Jesus’ due to the intramental nature of hallucinations (e.g. some may ‘see’ Jesus flying up to the sky, others may at the same time ‘see’ Jesus flying down; some may ‘see’ Jesus wearing white, others may at the same time see him wearing ‘not-white’). Moreover, the contradictions in crucial details would be revealed when they reported it to or counterchecked with one another and would indicate to them that they had not seen the same thing.

It might be objected that the portrayal of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to Saul in Acts indicates that people did not in fact see the same thing. According to Witherington’s (1997, pp. 307–313) explanation of the accounts in Acts, while Saul and his companions saw the light accompanying the appearance of Jesus and fell to the ground, only Saul saw Jesus and heard distinct words while his companions did not see Jesus himself; moreover, they heard the noise of the voice (Acts 9:7) but did not hear the distinct words Jesus spoke to Saul (Acts 22:9).

In reply, there is no indication that Jesus was said to have appeared to Saul’s companions. They only experienced the effects of Jesus’ appearance to Saul and fell to the ground, which indicates the objectivity of this appearance, but they did not see the appearance itself. There is also no indication that they were converted and became Christians who served as eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection and were willing to stake their lives and eternal salvation on it and to suffer persecution for it. However, Jesus was said to have appeared to the Twelve, the more than five hundred brethren, and the other apostles (1 Cor. 15:1–11), and it has been argued previously that these earliest Christians served as eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection and were willing to stake their lives and eternal salvation on it and to suffer persecution for it, and that this would not have been the case if they did not in fact see the same thing.

Finally, it is noteworthy that scientific studies have indicated that among those who had hallucinations, many do subsequently achieve insight that their experience is hallucinatory after the experience has ended. For example, in the study by Barber and Calverly (1964) noted earlier, among the 49% who had individual hallucinations that the recording of White Christmas was played, the vast majority (44%) were aware that the recording was not played. Thus, if the ‘eyewitnesses’ had hallucinations of the resurrected Jesus and the majority of them achieved insight that their experience was hallucinatory after the experience ended, they would hardly have been able to persuade themselves and their audiences to accept and proclaim the difficult belief that they had really seen Jesus’ resurrected body, and be persecuted for it (see further the discussion of combination hypotheses in Chapter 7).

#### 4.6 ‘Solid’ evidence would have been required

In addition to the general scepticism about people rising from the dead, Wright points out that people at that time ‘knew about hallucinations and ghosts and visions. Ancient literature—Jewish and pagan alike—is full of such things. It goes back to Homer; it’s in Virgil, it’s all over the place’ (Wright 2007, pp. 210–211, see, e.g. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.60). Wright (2008, p. 58) explains,

If the disciples simply saw, or thought they saw, someone they took to be Jesus, that would not by itself have generated the stories we have. Everyone in the ancient world took it for granted that people sometimes had strange experiences involving encounters with the dead, particularly the recently dead. They knew at least as much as we do about such visions, about ghosts and dreams—and the fact that such things often occurred within the context of bereavement or grief. They had language for this, and it wasn’t resurrection.

While Renan had suggested that ‘The little Christian society . . . resuscitated Jesus in their hearts by the intense love which they bore toward him’ (Renan 1869, p. 45; see also Renan 1864, p. 296), Wright (2008, p. 62) notes that the earliest Christians knew that

Lots of people have visions of someone they love who has just died . . . and they had language for it; they would say, ‘It’s his angel’ or ‘It’s his spirit’ or ‘his ghost.’ They wouldn’t say, ‘He’s been raised from the dead.’

In reply to Lüdemann’s intramental hypothesis and Sawicki’s (1994) suggestion that after Jesus’ death his followers could comfort one another with the thought that Jesus’ *halakhah* would survive him, Bryan (2011,

pp. 162–164) argues that neither in antiquity nor in the present are such visions or thoughts normally regarded as evidence of resurrection. On the contrary,

They are taken to be at worst (I suppose) hallucinations, and at best (as I have taken them to be) genuine communications of comfort about the departed from beyond the grave. But in neither case are they considered to be declarations that the departed one has risen from the dead. That, however, is what the texts claim about Jesus. That is what Peter and Paul actually say. Why do they do that? Lüdemann's hypothesis leaves that question unanswered. Hence, it does not explain what Lüdemann himself says needs to be explained.

(ibid., p. 164)

Bryan (2011) continues,

If the experience of the first Christians was the kind of experience that Bultmann, Borg, Sawicki, and Crossan suggest—visionary and internal, simply the conversion of their hearts to God's truth and the real meaning of Jesus life and death—then why on earth did they not say so? The language to describe such experiences was clearly available, so why did the first Christians not use it? Why did they choose instead to use the language of resurrection, words such as *egeirō* and *anistēmi*, words which, as we have noted, were normally used in quite different connections, and whose use here was therefore inviting misunderstanding of experiences that would, in fact, have been perfectly acceptable to many in the ancient world who found 'resurrection' ridiculous?

(ibid., p. 169)

While it has been suggested (e.g. Marcus 2001, p. 397) that the use of resurrection language represents a deliberate choice to exploit a term with an apocalyptic background (cf. Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37; Dan. 12:2), the disciples would still have required pretty 'solid' evidence to persuade themselves and convince their audience that what they saw was a bodily resurrected Jesus and not a hallucination, a ghost, or a vision and come to agreement among themselves that this was the case. Given this, and given the likelihood that the apostles were indeed highly sceptical of Jesus' resurrection (Matt. 28:17, Luke 24:37–38, see Chapter 3), a few vague or transient sightings of Jesus or 'subjective' individual experiences which did not agree with one another would not have resulted in a widely held conviction among the earliest Christians that Jesus was bodily resurrected. (It is noteworthy that the motif that there were doubts among the apostles even after *seeing* 'Jesus' has multiple attestation in Matt. 28:17 and Luke 24:37–38). What would have been required were some sort of powerful, multi-sensorial, and repeated experiences of 'Jesus' that convinced them and provided them the

courage to proclaim the resurrection in the face of powerful opposition which had crucified their leader.

Such experiences of the physicality of Jesus' resurrected body are indeed multiply attested in first-century documents (Luke 24:30–31, Luke 24:36–43, Acts 1:4, 10:41, John 20:20, 27, 21:12–13, Ignatius *Smyrn.* 3:3). In spite of the diversity of the details of the resurrection narratives in the Gospels, there are common elements that are readily discernible in the appearance traditions which span a considerable portion of their diversity. One of these is an appearance involving a meal (Dunn 2003, pp. 858–860). The portrayal of Jesus' being involved in meals with causal effects left behind and witnessed by two or more disciples is attested in Luke 24:30–31, 35 (causal effect left behind: the broken bread, witnessed by two disciples), Luke 24:39–43 (the eaten fish, witnessed by 'The Eleven' and those with them), Acts 1:4, 10:41, and Ignatius *Smyrn.* 3:3<sup>11</sup> (the food and liquid eaten and drunk, witnessed by a group of disciples), and John 21:12–13 (the bread and fish given, witnessed by seven disciples). Likewise, the portrayal of 'Jesus' showing the disciples his hands has multiple attestations (Luke 24:39–40,<sup>12</sup> John 20:20, 27). Ignatius' *Letter to the Smyrneans* 3.1–2 claims that the reason why the apostles were willing to die for their faith is that they have physically touched the resurrected Jesus:

For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection. And when he came to those who were with Peter, he said to them, 'Reach out, touch me and see that I am not a bodiless daimon.' And immediately they touched him and believed, having been intermixed with his flesh and spirit. For this reason they also despised death, for they were found to be beyond death.

Sceptics object by claiming that Luke and John invented the details concerning the physicality of Jesus' resurrected body because they wanted to combat Docetism. Wright (2008, p. 56) replies that this suggestion is contradicted by Luke and John also speaking of the risen Jesus appearing through locked doors, disappearing again, sometimes being recognized, sometimes not, and finally ascending into heaven. Some scholars object by stating that according to the Bible even angels eat as well (Gen. 19:1–3) (Allison 2005a, pp. 289–290). However, as Craig (1989, pp. 269–270) notes, Genesis 19 is actually describing a *bodily* manifestation of angels, and what Luke intends to convey here is that what the apostles were experiencing was not something *purely* immaterial but a physical body as shown by the real intake of food.

11 'After his resurrection he ate and drank with them, as being possessed of flesh, although spiritually He was united to the Father.'

12 The sentence on the display of hands and feet in v. 40 is a 'Western non-interpolation'; it is omitted in some manuscripts, but the wider attestation favours authenticity, as most scholars now recognized (Dunn 2003, p. 849, n. 98; Bock 2002, p. 400, n. 123).

Sceptics object by claiming that these accounts in Luke are legendary embellishments or exaggerated details of rumours. Eisenberg (2016) and Komarnitsky (2013) cites the case of Alexander the Great and notes that despite voluminous contemporary recording of his life and deeds, he still attracted supernatural embellishments during his own lifetime. They claim that Jesus on the other hand was not a person of significant public interest, there are no contemporary accounts of his life, and therefore constraints on embellishments to the historical record about Jesus would have been far less. Psychological studies indicate that the content of rumours are partly shaped by group biases, and information is invented, distorted, or ignored to fit the main theme of the rumour or to convince sceptics (Shibutani 1966, p. 85).

However, Eisenberg (2016) and Komarnitsky (2013) neglect the fact that, in the case of Alexander, those who embellished accounts of his life did not have to suffer persecutions for their belief in Alexander, and the details of these supernatural embellishments were not of foundational importance. The opposite is the case for Jesus' resurrection. In addition, while we do not have contemporary accounts of Jesus' life, we have accounts of his resurrection written while the 'eyewitnesses' were still alive and can be checked. While the public interest in Jesus was not as great as that of Alexander, there were nevertheless hostile people who knew about him and bothered to get him crucified, and who challenged the claims of the earliest Christians (see previous chapters). Eisenberg (2016) and Komarnitsky (2013) also neglect the ancient Jewish monotheistic context of the earliest Christians. While sceptics claim that the embellishments of Jesus were due to the early Christians being biased towards affirming a divine view of Jesus, the question is what could have caused the early Christians to be biased towards affirming a divine view of Jesus in the first place. As I argued in Loke (2017a), given the ancient Jewish monotheistic context of the earliest Christians, arriving at a divine view of Jesus (one that regards Jesus to be on the Creator side of the Creator-creature divide) would have been extremely difficult unless there was overwhelming powerful evidence of his divinity and resurrection in the first place, such as those noted in the accounts which the sceptics claim were embellishment. Concerning rumours, as noted in Chapter 2, psychological studies have also indicated that people are careful to form conclusions based on valid evidence when the topic is important, when the costs of false confirmation are greater, and when people are held personally responsible for what they say and care about their reputation among sustained relationships with known audiences (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007, p. 166). Groups characterized by scepticism tend to arrive at more accurate conclusions, and false rumours are quickly discarded in groups that possess the ability and motivation to achieve accuracy (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007, pp. 173-174). It has already been argued in Chapter 2 that these considerations were present in earliest Christianity.

Moreover, it has been noted that experiences of the physicality of Jesus' resurrected body are multiply attested in first-century documents. Allison argues for the importance of observing repeated patterns across various characteristics and sources as well as focusing on the overall impression the sources give in making historical claims about Jesus (Allison 2010, pp. 14–16). As explained earlier, the experiences of the physicality of Jesus' resurrected body is a repeated pattern. In the midst of diverse details, the commonality of the detail of Jesus being involved in a meal leaving behind causal effects further strengthens its authenticity. Such 'solid' evidence of the physicality of Jesus' body together with evidence of it being able to come and go through locked doors and so on (see the discussion on transphysicality in Chapter 5) answers Carnley's question, 'how it was that the Easter visions could be understood as signs of the objective but heavenly existence of Jesus rather than as mere dreams and psychogenic delusions' (Carnley 1987, p. 244). Allison also notes elsewhere that many scholars regard the Gospels as a subspecies of Greco-Roman biography (Burridge 2004). He observes that ancient Jewish readers found their past in the so-called historical books of their Scriptures which were understood as relating what really happened, and that there is evidence that the early readers of the Gospels understood them in that way as well (Allison 2010, pp. 443–445). One might object that conventions of ancient historiography allows for certain flexibility of transmission and a *limited* inclusion of non-historical details (e.g. authors creating details of what they think should have happened) for rhetorical effect, to convey ethical truths, and so on. I have already replied to this objection in Chapter 1 (see my engagement with Litwa 2019 there). In addition to what I argued there, it should be also noted that, in the case of details concerning the resurrected Jesus, Wright argues that these must have been told since the earliest days of the church as people would surely have asked, and 'stories as community forming as this, once told, are not easily modified. Too much depends on them' (Wright 2003, p. 611; the issue concerning the apparent discrepancies of the details among the Gospels has already been addressed in Chapter 2).

More importantly, as argued previously, without the earliest Christians having such experiences of the physicality of Jesus' resurrected body, a widely held conviction among the earliest Christians that Jesus was resurrected *bodily* could not have started in the first place. Sceptics might object that some Messianist Chabads came to believe that the rabbi ('Rebbe') Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1902–1994) resurrected without 'solid evidence' (see Marcus 2001); indeed, there was no tradition of resurrection appearances, and they believed his resurrection even though his body is in the tomb. However, unlike the case concerning the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of the Rebbe has not been a widely held conviction among his followers, many of whom agree that he did not resurrect and are still

awaiting his resurrection from his tomb<sup>13</sup> (for further analysis of this case, see Chapter 7).

#### 4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the conclusion that (3.2) ‘At least some (if not all) of these ‘experiences of Jesus’ were caused by an extramental entity.’ This is warranted by the conclusion (established in previous chapters) that there were ‘appearances’ to three different groups of people (the Twelve, the five hundred, and the other apostles besides the Twelve) in different circumstances over a short period.

The alternative (3.1) ‘All of these ‘experiences of Jesus’ were caused intramentally’ is contradicted by multiple historical considerations:

First, their psychological states were varied. While guilt, bereavement, pressures and anxieties, religious enthusiasm, excitement over initial reports, and so on may have been present in various degrees among some members of each group, there was evidence of doubts and fears of persecution. Moreover, (3.1) is ad hoc because it requires nonevidenced assumptions such as former sceptic James having the motive of wanting the honourable leadership role in the church (Price 2005, p. 83) and Paul having predisposing psychological factors such as guilt in persecuting a people he came to admire and subsequent disgust with fellow persecuting Pharisees (Carrier 2005a, p. 187), which as explained earlier are inconsistent with the evidence.

Second, without a corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, the mental states internal to each person within a group of people would not agree on various details concerning their experience of the external world. Indeed, collective hallucinations are not found in peer-reviewed medical literature (Bergeron and Habermas 2015). A number of cases which have been labelled as ‘group hallucinations’ (e.g. apparitions of Mary) may well be cases of illusions, which is a case of misidentification (see next chapter).

Third, scientific studies have indicated that many cases of hallucination do subsequently achieve insight that their experience is hallucinatory after the experience has ended. Therefore, if the apostles, the five hundred etc. had hallucinations of the resurrected Jesus, many of them would have achieved insight or suspect that their experience was hallucinatory after the experience ended. In that case they would hardly have been able to persuade themselves and their audiences to accept and proclaim the difficult belief that they had really seen Jesus’ resurrected body and be persecuted for it.

Fourth, a number of important recent studies have shown that a *bodily* resurrected Jesus was what the earliest Christians claimed to have witnessed

13 [www.nytimes.com/1998/06/29/nyregion/messiah-fervor-for-late-rabbi-divides-many-lubavitchers.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/29/nyregion/messiah-fervor-for-late-rabbi-divides-many-lubavitchers.html)

(Ware 2014; Cook 2017). ‘Solid evidence’ of the physicality of Jesus’ resurrected body—such as experiences of Jesus being involved in meals with causal effects left behind and witnessed by multiple disciples—were multiply attested in first-century documents and would have been required to convince the earliest Christians that that was what they witnessed rather than Jesus’ angel, spirit, etc.

In conclusion, there are good reasons for thinking that (3.2) ‘At least some (if not all) of these ‘experiences of Jesus’ were caused by an extramental entity.’ (To address the problems with the intramental hypothesis, some scholars such as Ehrman and Carrier have tried to combine it with other hypotheses; their proposals are discussed in Chapter 7. I shall also explain other considerations against the intramental hypothesis such as the evidence of suspicion of visions within early Christian sources [Rowland 2002, pp. 272–275] and Keim’s arguments in Chapter 7).



# 5 The extramental entity was Jesus who died on the cross

## 5.1 Introduction

In previous chapters I have shown that there were people in mid-first century CE who claimed that they had seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion, they truly saw something, and what they saw was not caused intramentally but extramentally. In this chapter, I shall demonstrate that (4.2) For at least some (if not all) of these experiences, the extramental entity was Jesus, and (5.2) Jesus died on the cross.

## 5.2 Addressing the mistaken identity hypothesis

Cases of misidentifications have been claimed by sceptics to be parallel to Jesus' 'resurrection appearances.' Examples include stories of sightings of UFOs, cattle mutilations (Martin 1991, pp. 92–95), and Bigfoot (Goulder 1996, pp. 52–55). Psychologists have noted that what people expect to see or hear can affect the way they perceive an event (Redman 2010, p. 181), and factors such as the wording of questions and the suggestibility of the witness can influence the accuracy of identification (Kassin et al. 2001). For example, Wells and Bradfield (1999) asked students to observe a video recording of a robbery, and they were told that the purpose of the study was to identify the gunman. They were then presented with a five-person photo spread that did not contain the actual gunman. However, because the instruction implied that the gunman was in the photo spread, all students selected one photo as the gunman. Perhaps Jesus' predictions served an analogous role to the 'instruction' in this case to cause the disciples to misidentify someone else as Jesus.

However, the aforementioned cases are disanalogous to the claims concerning Jesus' 'post-mortem appearances' in a number of important ways. In particular, these cases, as well as tricks used by illusionists such as Derren Brown and Uri Geller do not

- a occur in the context of persecution where the people involved were willing to lose everything and die for what the witnesses saw, and

- b serve as foundational proof of the veracity of a religion, where crucial fundamental beliefs held by a large number of people concerning eternal salvation is dependent on the testimonies of available witnesses.

Since there is no fear of persecution and the beliefs are not of crucial importance, the motivation to carefully countercheck the details over a period of time by other people who were deeply concerned about them would be lacking. Hence, these cases are more likely to be sensationalized or careless reports or frauds. Allison notes that there are numerous examples of illusions (i.e. misidentifications) in which people claimed to have seen the same thing but, when closely interviewed, disagreed on the crucial details (Allison 2005a, p. 278, n. 297, 318).

In contrast with the aforementioned cases (and this important factor is somewhat neglected by sceptics in recent discussions), the claims concerning Jesus' 'post-mortem appearances' occurred in the context of persecution as foundational events proving the veracity of crucial fundamental beliefs (see Chapter 3).

Furthermore, unlike the gunman case in which the gunman was a stranger, it is unreasonable to think that the disciples who had been with Jesus for a while (as well as James, his physical brother) and who were therefore very familiar with his behaviour could have mistaken another person for him *in a variety of circumstances*. Shapiro's (2016, p. 135) suggestion that maybe the disciples 'had drunk too much wine and simply confused a Jesus look-alike for the real deal' ignores the fact that there were *repeated* appearances to *different* groups in a *variety* of circumstances. It is unreasonable to think that all three groups of people, including the 'more than five hundred,' mistook another person for Jesus as a result of drinking too much wine. Moreover, ancient people were well aware that getting drunk would cause people to be confused and 'see things,' in which case they would easily have suspected whether they truly saw Jesus. If these people did not identify carefully and make sure before the meetings were over that it was Jesus whom they saw, they would not have proclaimed the resurrection and be willing to give up everything for it (which they did, see Chapter 3). Therefore, it is unreasonable to think that three different groups of people (the Twelve, the five hundred, and the other apostles besides the Twelve) mistook someone else for Jesus in different circumstances.

Sceptics question why the Gospels narrate instances of the disciples failing initially to recognize Jesus (disciples at Emmaus in Luke 24:16, Mary in John 20:14–15, and the disciples in John 21:4) (Allison 2005a, pp. 227–228). If they could fail to recognize him on certain occasions, could they also have failed to recognize an impostor?

In reply, assuming the historicity of these narratives for the sake of the sceptic's argument, the problem of failure of recognition is limited to only a few cases and is not a universal feature of all their encounters. More importantly, these are all instances of mistaking 'Jesus' to be someone else, not

mistaking someone else to be Jesus (as affirmed by the mistaken identity hypothesis). The latter would be an indication of how easy it was for the disciples to falsely believe that what they saw was Jesus, the former is not. Thus these narratives cannot be used by the sceptic to support the hypothesis that the disciples would have easily mistaken someone else for Jesus.

In accordance with these narratives (the historicity of which is assumed for the sake of the sceptics' argument), the temporary failures to recognize Jesus can be explained by

- 1 the fact that the witnesses were overwhelmed with sorrow and disappointment and did not expect to see Jesus,
- 2 Jesus/God temporarily keeping them from recognizing him ('But their eyes were prevented (ἐκρατοῦντο) from recognizing Him,' Luke 24:16; see Bock 1996, pp. 1908–1909;<sup>1</sup> to assume that such a concealment is not possible would be to beg the question against these narratives), or
- 3 a combination of these explanations.

It should be emphasized that in these passages the failures of recognition were only temporary, before the appearance was over they were absolutely convinced that it was Jesus whom they saw, such that 'they went out fearless facing death because they had not the slightest doubt that He had conquered death' (Geisler and Howe 1997, p. 397). Hence, these passages cannot be used as counter-evidence to my arguments against the mistaken identity hypothesis.

Sceptics might ask, 'if Herod and some of his contemporaries could have mistaken Jesus to be the resurrected John the Baptist as portrayed by Mark 6:14–29, why couldn't the disciples of Jesus have mistaken someone else to be the resurrected Jesus?'

In reply, as noted in Chapter 1, those who said that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mark 6:14) and Herod who thought the same (v. 16) might not have known that Jesus was a contemporary of John (Lane 1974), for there is no indication that these people had seen Jesus before or that they had thoroughly researched Jesus' background. There is also no indication that Herod and those contemporaries had seen Jesus directly; all that is stated is that they had heard that there was a person known as Jesus who had done some remarkable things (v. 14). However, the disciples of Jesus were familiar with Jesus, and as argued in previous chapters they claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus and indeed had

1 One might ask whether Luke 24:36–39 implies that the two disciples yet again failed to recognize Jesus (I thank Hong Liang for raising this question). In reply, Luke 24:36–39 does not portray only the two disciples at the scene; there were other disciples as well, among whom some may have doubted whether it was Jesus or (if it was) whether it was his spirit, hence Jesus went on to convince them that it was him and that he was physically present.

direct experiences of an extramental entity whom they thought was the resurrected Jesus.

A particular form of mistaken identity hypothesis, the twin brother hypothesis, has been proposed by some sceptics. For example, Ehrman mentions that the Syrian tradition and Acts of Thomas record that Jesus had a twin brother and claims that the disciples could have mistaken him for Jesus (Craig and Ehrman 2006, p. 25). Robert Greg Cavin (1995, pp. 361–379) suggests that the twin brother removed the body of Jesus and faked the resurrected Jesus to the disciples. This hypothesis has also been proposed by Shapiro (2016, pp. 133–134) and bestselling author Philip Pullman (2010).

The historical value of the sources Ehrman cites, however, is extremely dubious (they are dated from the second and third centuries, as Ehrman observes).<sup>2</sup> Hence, there is no good evidence at all to think that such a twin brother existed. On the other hand, if there were a twin brother, Jesus' family members (especially his mother Mary!) would have known about his existence. In that case, they would have suspected (or been warned by other family members to suspect) that the 'resurrection appearances' were sightings of this twin brother, and it would have been implausible that they would join the early church (1 Cor. 9:5, Acts 1:14) and suffer persecution. This is especially so given the unbelief of Jesus' family members prior to his 'post-mortem appearances' (see Chapter 4). One might suggest that it was a hoax involving these family members (i.e. they knew about this twin brother, and he was presented to other unsuspecting disciples after Jesus' crucifixion). However, it is hard to believe that they would be willing to die for what they knew was false, or that during times of intense persecution they would have evinced genuine faith in Jesus' resurrection consistently without letting out the hoax (see Chapter 3). Cavin (1995) speculates that the twin was switched with another baby when he was very young such that, unknown to Jesus' family, there was another person who looked identical to Jesus. However, in the absence of any evidence that Jesus had a twin and that such a switch occurred, this is *ad hoc*.

Moreover, even if (against the odds) there were such a twin brother, he must somehow have managed to avoid any contact with other people prior to Jesus' crucifixion such that others including the disciples would not have suspected that it was the twin whom they saw, and somehow be willing to engage in such an extremely dangerous and stupid hoax of pretending to be Jesus after knowing the horror of his crucifixion and risk suffering the same fate as his brother (instead of fleeing far away immediately, which would be a much safer option). Furthermore, twins may look alike but

2 Ehrman himself thinks that this hypothesis is unlikely (Craig and Ehrman 2006, p. 25). He is right about this, of course; he is wrong in thinking that any hypothesis (however unlikely) is more likely than the resurrection, as Craig demonstrates in the debate (pp. 14–17; see further, Chapter 8).

behave differently. A twin brother (or anyone else) would not have been able to behave consistently like Jesus over a period of time in a variety of circumstances, to the extent that he could persuade those who had lived with Jesus for years, including the doubting disciples and Jesus' family members (e.g. James) who were cynical towards Jesus even prior to his disgraceful crucifixion,<sup>3</sup> to accept and be willing to die for the very difficult belief that Jesus resurrected.

Finally, it is most plausible that Paul's theology in 1 Corinthians 15 concerning the resurrected body as '*spiritual* body' comes from the fact that the body of 'Jesus' was not experienced by the witnesses listed in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 as merely 'naturally physical' but rather evinced 'transphysicality' (to use Wright's terminology) (Wright 2003, pp. 608–615), and a twin brother (nor anyone else) would not have been able to fake that naturalistically.

In relation to 'transphysicality,' Bryan (2011, pp. 37–39) notes that the earliest New Testament witnesses already speak of the Risen Jesus to be in a different category of life: he is 'in power' (Rom. 1:4 19) and 'we know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Rom. 6:9–10). This is the 'better resurrection' (Hebrews 11:35) already explained in Chapter 2. Bauckham (2011, pp. 107–108) observes that the early Christians

did not think that Jesus had been resuscitated, like the dead people Jesus himself was reported to have brought back to life. Those people, such as the son of the widow of Nain, simply returned to this mortal life, very much like people resuscitated after 'clinical death' in modern hospitals.

Bauckham goes on to explain,

But Jesus was not like that. He appeared to people at will, and they do not seem to have wondered where he was when he was not making one of these relatively few appearances. While he took part, fleetingly, in ordinary human situations, he was evidently different. They believed he was raised to a new sort of bodily life, eternal life. Such a notion of transformed bodily existence was certainly not unknown to Jews of the time, who called it resurrection. God, it was widely believed, was going to raise all the dead to new life at the end of history, when God abolishes evil and death and renews his whole creation. The first Christians thought that was what had happened to Jesus—but with the extraordinary qualification that it had happened to Jesus already, ahead

3 The prior unbelief of Jesus' family members fits the criteria of embarrassment and multiple attestation (Mark 3:21, 31–35, John 7:1–10) and thus it is most likely authentic (Licona 2010, pp. 440–455).

of everyone else. There was no precedent in the Jewish tradition for claiming that this had happened to anyone else.

(*ibid.*)

Given the lack of precedent in the Jewish tradition, and given the likelihood that the apostles were indeed highly sceptical of Jesus' resurrection (see Chapters 3–4), a few vague or transient sightings of Jesus would not have resulted in a widely held conviction among the earliest Christians that Jesus was bodily resurrected in such a transphysical way, a conviction which was of fundamental importance for a faith for which they were prepared to give up everything. Rather, it must have been some sort of repeated experiences of the transphysical powers of Jesus' resurrected body that convinced them.

Such experiences are indeed multiply attested in first-century documents. While the Gospels and Acts portray Jesus' resurrected body as physical (see Chapter 4), it also 'comes and goes through locked doors; it is not always recognized; and in the end it disappears into God's space, that is, "heaven," through the thin curtain that in much Jewish thought separates God's space from human space' (Wright 2008, p. 55; see Luke 24:31, 36; 50–53; John 20:19, 26; Acts 1:1–11). Sceptics would object by questioning the credibility of these details in the Gospels (e.g. by claiming that these were legendary embellishments). In reply, the reliability of the Gospels' portrayal of such details has already been defended in previous chapters. The main argument here is that, without such experiences of the powers of Jesus' resurrected body, a widely held conviction among the earliest Christians that Jesus was bodily resurrected in a transphysical way would not have started in the first place.

### 5.3 Addressing the swoon hypothesis

The swoon hypothesis (Jesus swooned on the cross, survived the crucifixion, exited the tomb, and showed himself to the disciples later) has been popularized among laypeople by novelist Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). However, it has been widely rejected by scholars since David Strauss refuted it in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it is mentioned by Barbara Thiering (1992), who speculates that Jesus merely passed out after being administered snake poison. Duncan Derrett (2005, pp. 397–400) argues that the disciples realized that the proclamation of the resurrection would help business and attract rich followers, and on the reappearance of the swooned Jesus after the crucifixion the question the disciples had would be 'how would this be of benefit to us?' He postulates that Jesus then conveniently died of gas gangrene, and the disciples cremated the corpse and later reported that he had ascended.

To evaluate the swoon hypothesis, consider first the brutality of Roman flogging and crucifixion. The Romans normally carried out brutal flogging

before crucifying a victim (Hengel 1977, p. 29). Ancient sources report of people whipped to the bone (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 6.304), whipped till their intestines were exposed (*ibid.*, 2.612), and whipped till their ‘veins and arteries’ became visible (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.2).

While the Romans did not invent crucifixion, they made it into one of the most barbarous forms of cruelty (Bauckham 2011, p. 95). Nailing was the preferred method of securing the victim on the cross (Hengel 1977, pp. 31–32, n. 25; several texts indicate that Jesus was nailed to the cross; John 20:25; Acts 2:23; Col. 2:14; Gos. Pet. 6:21; Justin Dial. 97), and while hanging there victims were tortured in various gruesome ways such that Josephus (*Jewish War* 7.203) would refer to crucifixion as ‘the most pitiful of deaths.’ The flogging, beatings, and nailing to the cross would have left Jesus suffering from severe blood loss, dehydration, inadequate respiration, and strenuous physical exertion, eventually resulting in cardiovascular collapse which was the probable cause of death in Jesus’ case (Edwards et al. 1986).

Sceptics might object that Josephus mentioned a case of survival after crucifixion. In his autobiography, he recalls successfully pleading with Titus to take down three of his crucified friends; they were treated by Roman physicians and one of them survived (Josephus, *Life*, 420).<sup>4</sup> Vermès (2008, p. 145) observes that according to Mark’s portrayal Jesus remained on the cross for such a short time that Pilate wondered whether he was truly dead when Joseph of Arimathea asked for his body (Mark 15:44), and Vermès speculates that the piercing of his side by one of the executioners was a later invention introduced by John (19:34) to dispel doubts as to whether Jesus was dead. It might be objected that in the case of Josephus’ report, his friends were taken down with the intention of sparing them, while in the case of Jesus’ crucifixion there was no intention of sparing him, and those who crucified him would have ensured that he was dead. However, sceptics might suggest the possibility that the Centurion and those with him who had earlier confessed ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’ (Matthew 27:54) might have wanted to save Jesus if they were to discover Jesus alive, and they might have conspired to keep silent about Jesus’ survival to protect him.

Nevertheless, in the case of Josephus’ report, it should be noted that even with treatment two out of three friends died. Moreover, even if Jesus did not die, he would have been half-dead. The swoon hypothesis does not explain how a half-dead Jesus still suffering from the wounds of whipping and crucifixion

4 ‘I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery; yet two of them died under the physician’s hands, while the third recovered.’

could have persuaded the ‘Twelve,’ the ‘more than five hundred brethren,’ and ‘the other apostles’ that he was the *risen* Lord of life (Strauss 1879, p. 412) and to testify that they had witnessed the resurrected Jesus, which is the fact established in previous chapters that required to be explained. Seeing a half-dead Jesus would not have convinced them to worship him as the divine Creator of the universe who has overcome death (which they did; Loke 2017a); it would only have convinced them that he needed urgent medical attention. Contrary to Derret’s suggestion, if the disciples were not convinced that Jesus resurrected, they would not have risked their lives proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection and be willing to sacrifice for it (see Chapter 3).

Moreover, the idea that Jesus would want to be involved in an easily refutable hoax about his resurrection and risk sacrificing the integrity of his teachings and his reputation is implausible. Finally, Jesus would not have been able to *naturalistically* cause his own body to manifest ‘transphysicality’ (see Section 5.2).

#### 5.4 Addressing the escape hypothesis

The escape hypothesis proposes that Jesus had secretly escaped prior to the crucifixion, somebody else (whom everyone else thought was Jesus) was crucified in his place, and Jesus showed himself to the disciples later and convinced them that he was resurrected. For Jesus’ substitute one might suggest a twin brother or a friend who was either persuaded to sacrifice for him or an imbecile who was manipulated by him to do so.<sup>5</sup>

Against the escape hypothesis, it is unlikely that all the onlookers failed to recognize that it was not Jesus who was crucified in public. The enemies of Jesus who bothered to crucify him would have bothered to identify him correctly. Those who had been involved in Jesus’ ministry and knew him intimately would not have failed to recognize that he was not crucified. The arguments against the twin brother hypothesis have been mentioned previously in Section 5.2. The idea that Jesus would want to be involved in an easily refutable hoax about his resurrection and risk sacrificing the integrity of his teachings and his reputation is implausible. Finally, Jesus would not have been able to *naturalistically* cause his own body to manifest ‘transphysicality’ (see Section 5.2).

#### 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the conclusion that (4.2) for at least some (if not all) of these experiences, the extramental entity was Jesus. For anyone

5 Gnostic and Islamic escape hypotheses, which propose that God did a miraculous act to cause someone to be crucified in Jesus’ place, are supernatural hypotheses discussed in Chapter 8.



else would have not have been able to behave consistently like Jesus over a period of time in a variety of circumstances, to the extent that he could persuade those who had lived with Jesus for years, including the doubting disciples and Jesus' family members (e.g. James) who were cynical towards Jesus even prior to his disgraceful crucifixion, to accept and be willing to die for the very difficult belief that Jesus resurrected.

While psychological studies have indicated that misidentifications can happen (e.g. Kassin et al. 2001; Wells and Bradfield 1999), I explain that these studies are disanalogous to Jesus' 'resurrection appearances' which occurred in the context of severe persecution as foundational events proving the veracity of crucial fundamental beliefs, and that (unlike the misidentification of [say] a gunman who was a stranger) the disciples had been with Jesus for a while. Given the context of persecution in which the enemies of Jesus wanted to kill him, it is implausible that anyone would want to pretend to be Jesus.

Sceptics often point to the Gospels' portrayal of a small proportion of instances in which the disciples failed to recognize Jesus initially (e.g. Luke 24:16, John 20:14–15, 21:4). Assuming the historicity of these narratives for the sake of the sceptic's argument, these can easily be explained (e.g. by Jesus temporarily keeping them from recognizing him); it should be noted that before the appearance was over they were absolutely convinced that it was Jesus.

In this chapter, I have also argued for the conclusion that (5.2) Jesus died on the cross.

Against the swoon hypothesis, it is unlikely that Jesus survived the crucifixion. Even if Jesus did not die, a half-dead Jesus still suffering from the wounds of the crucifixion would not have convinced the disciples that he was the risen Lord of life.

Against the naturalistic escape hypothesis, it is unlikely that all the onlookers failed to recognize that it was not Jesus who was crucified in public. The enemies of Jesus who bothered to crucify him would have bothered to identify him correctly. Those who had been involved in Jesus' ministry and knew him intimately would not have failed to recognize that he was not crucified. It is implausible that Jesus would want to start an easily refutable hoax about his resurrection.

Finally, against the mistaken identity hypothesis, the swoon hypothesis, and the naturalistic escape hypothesis, no mere human being would have been able to *naturalistically* cause his own body to manifest 'transphysicality' (see Section 5.2).

In conclusion, there are good reasons for thinking that (4.2) for at least some (if not all) of these experiences, the extramental entity was Jesus, and that (5.2) Jesus died on the cross.

# 6 What happened to Jesus' physical body?

## 6.1 Introduction

The historicity of Jesus' crucifixion under Pilate has already been established in previous chapters. The question is what happened to his body after the crucifixion. As noted in Chapter 1, these are the following possibilities:

- (7) Either (7.1), (7.2), or (7.3) is true:
  - (7.1) Jesus was not crucified (escape hypothesis).
  - (7.2) Jesus was crucified and he was not buried (unburied hypothesis).
  - (7.3) Jesus was crucified and he was buried, in which case either (8.1) or (8.2) is true:
    - (8.1) The body of Jesus remained buried (remain buried hypothesis).
    - (8.2) The body of Jesus did not remain buried, in which case either (9.1) or (9.2) is true:
      - (9.1) The body was removed by non-agent(s), e.g. earthquakes (Allison 2005a, p. 204), animals, etc. (removal by non-agent hypothesis)
      - (9.2) The body was removed by agent(s), in which case either (9.2.1) or (9.2.2) is true:
        - (9.2.1) Others removed the body, either
          - (9.2.1.1) Friends of Jesus (removal by friends hypothesis),
          - (9.2.1.2) Enemies of Jesus (removal by enemies hypothesis), or
          - (9.2.1.3) Neither friends nor enemies, e.g. tomb robbers (removal by neutral party hypothesis).
        - (9.2.2) Jesus himself removed his body, in which case either (9.2.2.1) or (9.2.2.2) is true:
          - (9.2.2.1) Jesus did not die on the cross: he swooned on the cross and exited the tomb later (swoon hypothesis), or
          - (9.2.2.2) Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead, and exited the tomb (resurrection).

The escape and swoon hypotheses have already been discussed in previous chapters, leaving the following alternatives to the Resurrection: unburied, remain buried, removal by non-agent, removal by friends, removal by enemies, and removal by neutral party.

## 6.2 Unburied hypothesis

Crossan (1991, pp. 392–394, 1994, pp. 152–158) proposes that Jesus' dead body was either left on the cross or thrown into a shallow grave and subsequently eaten by dogs.

Against this unburied hypothesis, Evans points out that the Jews would have wanted to take down the body of a hanged man and bury him on the same day of his death to prevent defiling the land in accordance to the Torah (Deut. 21:22–23; a crucified victim would have been considered a 'hanged man,' cf. Paul's reference in Gal. 3:13). While Ehrman (2014) objects by claiming that it is the common Roman practice not to allow someone crucified to be buried but to let the body rot on the cross, Evans argue that the probability that the Romans would allow a crucified victim to be buried during peace time is not unlikely (Evans 2005, 2014; Magness 2006). Summarizing the views of other scholars, Eisenberg (2016) notes that in 1968,

The remains of a crucified man from the first century were found in a cave northeast of Jerusalem, with a nail still embedded in the heel. The circumstances of this find suggest the man's body was taken down soon after death because of the wealth and influence of his family (Crossan and Reed 2001, pp. 3–4, 246–247; Lowder 2005, p. 264). The discovery of this man's remains, and the reported timing of Jesus' crucifixion and involvement of the high-status Joseph figure, make the story of Pilate's early release of the body plausible.

## 6.3 Remain buried hypothesis

In 2007 the controversial film *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* was produced claiming that the bones of Jesus, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and others were found in a tomb discovered in 1980 in Talpiot, Israel. However, this claim has been widely rejected by scholars. As Craig (2007b) explains, first, it's not even clear that the name on the ossuary is 'Jesus, son of Joseph' as claimed by the filmmakers. One only needs to look at the photo of the ossuary<sup>1</sup> to realize that the name 'is like a child's scrawl with a crayon on the wall' (ibid.). It is no wonder that other scholars have commented, 'I cannot be even 10 percent conclusive about anything else in this inscription other than the

1 See [www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/supposed-discovery-of-jesus-family-tomb](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/supposed-discovery-of-jesus-family-tomb)

name “Joseph” (Caruso); ‘It’s more likely the name ‘Hanun’ rather than Jesus’ (Pfann); and ‘the scribbling is not an inscription, it is sloppy graffiti’ (Charlesworth) (Habermas 2008, pp. 26–27). Second, even if the scribbling was not forged and even if it was an inscribed name that was truly ‘Jesus, son of Joseph’ and not (say) ‘Hanun, son of Joseph,’ it may not be referring to Jesus of Nazareth because Jesus and Joseph were very common names in Judea. Craig (2007b) observes, ‘It’s been reckoned that one out of every 79 males during that time was named Jesus, son of Joseph! Similarly, “Maria” was the most common Jewish name for women at the time; one out of every four women was named Maria.’ Craig goes on to note that ‘Third, Mary Magdalene was not called “Mariamne” or “Mariamenon” (the name on the ossuary); her name was Maria. Not until the forged apocryphal Acts of Philip 400 years after Christ is “Mariamne” possibly used of her’ (ibid.). Because of the above reasons, most scholars have concluded that the film-makers’ case is unconvincing.<sup>2</sup>

Other sceptics have argued that Jesus’ body was buried in a poorly identified place, such as a graveyard for multiple persons (Becker 2007, p. 248), and it remained undiscovered and buried there. Some supporters of this theory argue that Acts 13:29 portrays that the same people who ask Pilate to crucify Jesus were also the same people who buried Jesus, and since these were enemies of Jesus they would have buried Jesus shamefully in a public graveyard (Kirby 2005, pp. 247–248; Parson 2005, p. 445). They support this hypothesis by noting that according to the Secret Book of James (5), the Jews buried Jesus ‘in the sand.’

In response, the word ‘they’ in Acts could be referring to the Sanhedrin as a whole group; it does not necessarily imply that it was exactly the same members in that group that both crucified Jesus and buried him. Indeed, Luke, who wrote Acts 13:29 cited by sceptics, claims in his Gospel that Joseph, who was one of their members, did not consent to the crucifixion and that he buried Jesus (Luke 23:51) (Allison 2005a, p. 357). As for the Secret Book of James, it survives in only a single copy written in Coptic no earlier than the second century (Evans 2006, pp. 52–77) and its historical value is dubious.

Regarding the Gospels’ accounts that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, some sceptics claim that Joseph of Arimathea could be a fictional figure because the location of Arimathea has not been located, and that the name could be a pun on ‘best disciple’ *ari(stos)mathe(tes)* invented by the Gospels’ authors to highlight the fact that Joseph was acting as the best disciple of Jesus in burying him while the rest of the disciples fled (Kirby 2005, pp. 237–238). Parson (2005, p. 446) claims that Joseph’s role in the burial was represented in increasingly positive tone from Mark to Luke to John, which suggests legendary embellishment.

2 See [https://web.archive.org/web/20080127132945/http://www.ptsem.edu/NEWS/talpiot\\_tombsymposium.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20080127132945/http://www.ptsem.edu/NEWS/talpiot_tombsymposium.php)

However, the fact that an ancient city has not been located does not mean it did not exist, and the pun on *ari(stos)mathe(tes)* is just speculation. Contra Parsons, the inclusion of more details by later Gospels authors 'could simply be a matter of a later writer adding new and truthful traditions that were known to his own community, purposely filling in the gaps' (Habermas 2013, p. 477). On the other hand, it is implausible that the Gospels' authors would invent a figure who was supposed to be a member of a well-identified group of their opponents (the Sanhedrin) and who could therefore be easily falsified by their opponents and thus discredit their own writings. Craig argues that Jesus' burial is one of the best-attested events in Jesus' life, found in the extremely early tradition cited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 and also in all four Gospels and Acts. The differences between the Gospels indicate multiple independent sources; for example, Matthew and Luke's agreeing in their wording in contrast to Mark (e.g. Matt. 27.58 = Lk. 23.52 'This man went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus') indicate that they both probably had another source in addition to Mark. Craig adds that the writers would have little reason to invent the story that the tomb was owned by a member of the Sanhedrin. The aforementioned considerations imply that Jesus' burial place was known (Craig 2009). Thus, if the women had gone to the wrong tomb as suggested by Lake (1907), Jesus' opponents (e.g. members of the Sanhedrin) would have no problem going to the right one and bringing out the body when the disciples started proclaiming Jesus' resurrection. Moreover, the fact that the organizer of the burial was well known and could have easily been asked for strongly militates against the theory that the person in charge of the burial place moved the body of Jesus to another available tomb (Vermès 2008, pp. 142–144).

Other sceptics object that Joseph was not a sympathizer of Jesus but merely a pious Jew desiring to see God's law carried out, and therefore he would not have buried Jesus favourably but in a common grave reserved for condemned blasphemers (Lowder 2005). Carrier and Lowder suggest that Joseph buried him temporarily in his tomb and reburied him later in a common grave. Carrier (2005b, p. 382) notes that the Mishnah records that it was forbidden to bury on the first day of festival (Passover Friday) and on Sabbath, so Joseph probably took the body down and tucked it away as the law required to await burial at the earliest opportunity.

However, if Joseph was not a sympathizer, it is implausible that the Gospels' authors would portray him as such, because such a portrayal involving the prominent Sanhedrin could easily be falsified by their opponents if it were untrue. Given that Joseph was a sympathizer, he would have treated Jesus as a righteous man and buried him properly, and he would not have reburied him in a common grave later. Additionally, even though we now know that reburial was common in ancient Palestine, the typical practice of reburial is that the body was buried for a year until only bones remained, and then the bones are removed and placed in an ossuary (Davis 2006, p. 55); this is not a reburial in two days that Carrier and Lowder suggest.

Finally, Joseph could easily have enlisted the help of Gentile servants to bury Jesus and thus avoided desecrating himself on Passover Friday. Raymond Brown (1999, p. 1218) asks why the women did not cooperate with Joseph when he buried Jesus and why they came back on Sunday without him. In reply, the women could have been too overcome with grief, confused, and frightened to have offered help to Joseph in the burial and to ask him or others to help them move away the large stone on Sunday morning. Sceptics claim that the women going to the tomb to anoint the corpse presuppose that the body was not properly buried, which contradicted the account of Joseph and Nicodemus putting spices on the body (John 19:39) (Parsons 2005, p. 446). However, what the women may have intended was merely to use aromatic oils and perfumes that could be rubbed on or simply poured over the body as an act of devotion, and the practice of observing where the body was laid and coming back three days later to anoint and mark the body was in keeping with Jewish burial custom (Evans 2005, pp. 245–246; Craig 1989, pp. 201–205).<sup>3</sup>

Kirby (2005, pp. 244–246) argues that it is implausible that Pilate would agree to Joseph giving Jesus a burial, as this would be tantamount to admitting that Jesus was crucified without just cause. However, this objection begs the question against the narrative in Matthew which portrays that Pilate did in a sense admit that Jesus was crucified without just cause by his washing of hands before the crowd, which conveyed the message that the responsibility for Jesus' death rested on the Jews who wanted him dead (Matt. 27:11–26).<sup>4</sup> The Matthew narrative also portrays that the Jewish leaders did not oppose the burial of Jesus inside Joseph's tomb or insist that Jesus be buried in a common grave. Instead, they requested a guard (for this historicity of this account, see the next section). This is not difficult to understand, for their overriding concern was to falsify Jesus' messianic claim, and they thought that falsifying Jesus' prediction to rise from the dead would put an end to the 'Jesus movement' after his shameful crucifixion. Given this, the Jewish leaders would have desired to be able to locate Jesus' body after three days to falsify his predictions, and allowing the body to be placed

3 Craig (1989, pp. 184–185) also notes that when Gamaliel died in AD 50, his follower burned 80 pounds of spices and commented, 'Gamaliel was better than 100 kings' (*B Ebel Rabbathi* 8.6). Thus it is not implausible that Nicodemus used 75 pounds of spices for Jesus' burial as John stated, if he thought that Jesus had been unjustly condemned and crucified as King of the Jews.

4 Dunn (2003, pp. 775–777) argues that the depiction that Pilate was being bullied by the Jews into such an act was 'almost certainly' due to the Christians' political motivation to excuse the Romans. However, Dunn himself notes, 'Roman history shows from many examples that provincial governors were vulnerable to complaints of unjust government,' and HE cites Pilate's eventual disposal due to complaints from Samaritans (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18–89) as an example. It is likely that Pilate wanted to avoid a revolt, and therefore he acceded to the Jews' request.

inside Joseph's tomb would have made it easier to locate and identify the body compared to burial among other corpses in a common grave. Placing guards at the tomb would not only prevent theft, but it would also prevent veneration at the tomb.

#### 6.4 The guards at the tomb

Whether there were guards at the tomb is of significance because, as explained later, their presence would (together with other considerations) rule out all the naturalistic hypotheses concerning Jesus' body. There are reasons for accepting the historicity of Matthew's account.

First, in view of the circumstances leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, putting a guard would seem to be a natural precaution to prevent the body from being stolen (Swinburne 2003, pp. 178–179). Carson (1984, p. 586) notes, 'The chief priests and the Pharisees would not necessarily be defiling themselves by approaching Pilate on the Sabbath, provided they did not travel more than a Sabbath day's journey to get there and did not enter his residence (cf. John 18:28).' Given Pilate's agreement with the Jewish leaders to crucify Jesus, it is plausible that he would have agreed to the request to guard the tomb as well.

Second, if the story was invented by Christians, it is more likely that they would have said that the guards were placed on Friday rather than Saturday, which leaves a period between Friday night and Saturday morning during which the disciples could have stolen the body (Craig 1984, who compares the account in the Gospel of Peter which claims that the guards were placed on Friday). The author of Matthew does not explicitly say that the guards checked that the body was inside the tomb before sealing it, and although one may argue that it is reasonable to think that they did (see later), the point here is that it is likely that the author of Matthew would have made the story more fool proof, as did the author of the Gospel of Peter if he were freely creating apologetic stories.

Third, in Matthew 28:11–15, the author gives a piece of information which his intended readers—i.e. the Jews (it is widely agreed that Matthew is a very Jewish Gospel written for a Jewish Christian church)—could easily have falsified if it were not true. Lindemann (2017, p. 566) objects by claiming,

The background for it is probably not an otherwise 'unknown' polemical Jewish story against the message of Jesus' resurrection, but rather late Christian apologetics, perhaps stemming from the evangelist himself, to make the story and the message of Jesus' resurrection 'more plausible' for Christians themselves.

In reply, Matthew 28:15b, *Καὶ διεφημίσθη ὁ λόγος οὗτος παρὰ Ἰουδαίοις μέχρι τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας* (literally 'and widely spread this story among the Jews

until this day') implies a continuity. In particular, *μέχρι* ('until') implies a continuity from the past (from the time they reported to the chief priests, took the money, and did as instructed; according to Matthew, this happened very soon after Jesus' crucifixion; thus Matthew was referring to the period around AD 30) to the present (when Gospel of Matthew was written, say, around AD 70–100). Even though the Gospel of Matthew was written after AD 70 and probably not in Jerusalem or Judea, the Jews in the Jewish Christian church in AD 70–100 were descendants of the Jews in AD 30. Many of them would have already been born before AD 70, and they would either have been converted from non-Christian Jews or interacted with non-Christian Jews whom they tried to convert. This continuity with their past and interaction with others would have enabled them to know whether the story had been widely spread among the Jews from the past till AD 70–100, and thus to easily falsify it if such a story was not widely spread.

Now Matthew evidently had an apologetic purpose for writing this story; this purpose implies that the story was of significant interest to the Jewish Christian readers who, as explained earlier, would have been able to falsify it easily if the information were not true. The author of Matthew's Gospel would not have committed a 'credibility suicide' by inventing an easily falsifiable story for his apologetic purpose. The claim made by Matthew was easily open to refutation unless, as it must have been the case, he and his audience knew that it was correct. This implies that the story originated early at around AD 30, during the period when people could have easily known whether there were really guards at the tomb and whether the guards really did say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'<sup>5</sup> The strength of this argument is further enhanced by other considerations supporting the historical reliability of the Gospels which have been discussed in previous chapters, such as the considerations which imply that the first-century readers of the Gospels were concerned about truth and that this was known by the Gospels' authors (see my engagement with Litwa's argument in Chapter 1).

The presence of guards at the tomb is also mentioned in the Gospel of Peter (verses 30–33)<sup>6</sup> which probably dates from the second century. Whether the

5 A similar argument was used by Abaddie, who notes that Matthew reports it as an already public rumour and argues, 'the widespread story that the disciples stole the body while the guards slept cannot be accounted for if in point of fact the guard had never been set' (Craig 1985, pp. 215–218, citing Abaddie's *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrétienne*, volume 2).

6 Gospel of Peter 30–33: "Give over soldiers to us in order that we may safeguard his burial place for three days, lest, having come, his disciples steal him, and the people accept that he is risen from the death, and they do us wrong." But Pilate gave over to them Petronius the centurion with soldiers to safeguard the sepulcher. And with these the elders and scribes came to the burial place. And having rolled a large stone, all who were there, together with the centurion and the soldiers, placed it against the door of the burial place. And they marked it with seven wax seals; and having pitched a tent there, they safeguarded it.'



text is dependent on the canonical Gospels or on an older passion narrative which preceded the gospel is debated by scholars. One might ask whether the Gospel of Peter's (47–48) portrayal that Pilate ordered the guards to say nothing contradict Matthew's account that the guards were commanded to say something, that is, the disciples came and stole the body while they were sleeping. In reply, in the Gospel of Peter's account 'to say nothing' could be referring to 'to say nothing of what they have seen'; it does not imply they were forbidden to say something about what they did not see, that is, the disciples stealing the body.

Many critical scholars claim that the story of the guards at the tomb is a fiction invented by Matthew (Allison 2005a, p. 311). They argue it is unlikely that only Matthew would mention it if it is historical (Carrier 2005b, p. 358). Before Matthew 28 was written, there was no indication that anyone, Christian or non-Christian, was interested in the historical question of any guards watching the tomb; no one apparently has written anything about that.<sup>7</sup>

However, this is an invalid form of the argument from silence, and it fails for the following reasons. Craig (1984) notes that the evangelists often inexplicably omit what seem to be major incidents that must have been known to them (e.g. Luke's great omission of Mark 6:45–8:26) so that it is dangerous to use omission as a test for historicity. The author of Matthew's Gospel had reason to include this because his Gospel was written specifically to the Jews, among whom this rumour was widely spread, whereas such a need is not present among the audience of the other Gospels (Wilkins 2004, p. 943). As argued in Chapter 2, 1 Corinthians 15:3–8, which contains an early tradition, must have been a summary of traditional resurrection narratives which were told in fuller forms elsewhere (Allison 2005a, pp. 235–239). That is, Paul knew that these details were already in circulation in the form of various traditional narratives which were known to his audiences (e.g. the Corinthians), therefore he did not see the need to mention them. As I explained earlier, Matthew 28:11–15 implies that it contains one such tradition which was passed down from around AD 30 to AD 70–100. Against critical scholars who argue that the redactive words used in Matthew's account imply his free creativity, Kankaanniemi (2010, p. 94) argues that the actual number of Matthean words and expressions in the guard story has been overestimated; moreover, 'Matthean redactional expressions do not imply creativity, but are regularly added to a source which is otherwise followed rather conservatively.'

It might be objected that it is implausible that the guards, who supposedly saw the angel descended and who did not leave until after the women left (Matt. 28:11), did not challenge and oppose them when they arrived. In reply, there are two possibilities: (i) the guards were so frightened when

7 I thank Professor Andreas Lindemann for raising this objection.

the angel was there that they did not oppose the women or (ii) Matthew 28:4–11 did not say that the guards were still there while the angel spoke to the women, and it also did not say that the guards left the tomb only after the women left. The guards could have fled (between verses 4 and 5) and verse 11 continues their story.

It might be also objected that it is implausible that the guards should have told to others that they were asleep on duty, as they would have been punished if that were the case. In reply, on the one hand, Kankaanniemi (2010, p. 18) observes,

If the guards were given a task, defined by the priests to perform, and those same priests told the governor that the guards had done what was required of them, it is fully plausible that they were not punished by Pilate. It was the chief priests who decided whether the task was accomplished or not.

On the other hand, Craig (1984) notes that if the guard did not exist, the logical Jewish counterargument would be to retort that there were no guards rather than saying the guards slept.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Matthew's story has the Jewish side using the weak 'but the guards were asleep when the theft occurred' argument, suggesting the Jews of the time knew guards had been placed.<sup>9</sup> Against Craig's argument, Carrier (2005b, p. 359) objects that most Jews (by then) would be in no position to know whether there were guards, so a denial would be risky; rather 'they stole the body' is a safe response, far more typical of a polemical sceptic, since this would throw the resurrection story in doubt. However, I have argued earlier that most Jews by then would still have known whether the story have been widely spread among them from earlier days as claimed by Matthew, so Carrier's objection does not work.<sup>10</sup>

8 Kankaanniemi (2010, pp. 240–242) argues that the story was not invented by Christians but by non-Christian Jews to posit witnesses that the disciples had actually stolen the body. Kankaanniemi thinks this explains why the guards were said to be posted only on Saturday instead of Friday (the Jewish inventors wanted to avoid the plausible falsification of the rumour by those watching Jesus' burial on Friday). In reply, the guards were not said to have witnessed it but were said to be sleeping, and the posting of guards on Saturday can be explained by the Jewish leaders coming to know about Jesus' prediction only on Saturday.

9 If the guards were to be asked 'how do you know the disciples stole the body since you were sleeping', the guards might have replied 'We were asleep, the body was stolen, who else could have been but the disciples?' (Kankaanniemi 2010, p. 15). However, naming the exact disciples responsible for the accused theft would still have been difficult if none were actually witnessed to have stolen the body; this might explain why there was no record that the disciples were punished for tomb raiding (*ibid.*, p. 19).

10 There is dispute concerning whether the guards were Roman or Jewish. For discussion see Kankaanniemi (2010, pp. 10–11, favouring Roman guards).

Lowder suspects Matthew's story because he thinks it involves reporting secret conversations between the priests and the guards which no Christian source would likely be privy to (Lowder 2005, p. 284). In reply to this, Davis (2006, p. 56) cheekily asks how Lowder learned that. There are several possible ways by which Christians could have discovered what had been said. For example, one of the guards may have repented years later as he reflected on the incident of seeing the angel—such a repentance would not have been implausible given such an experience! He could then have told this to one of the disciples in contact with Matthew, who would plausibly have refrained from revealing this source of information in his Gospel in order to protect him. (This could also have been a possible source for the account concerning the appearance of the angel to the guards who 'became like dead men'). Lowder (2005, p. 291) asks why the polemic is not recorded in any contemporary non-Christian Jewish documents. In response, it has already been noted in Chapter 2 that 'Jewish writers were in the main unwilling to engage polemically with Christianity in their extant writings' (Paget 2001, p. 615) and that their silence could have been illustrative of their embarrassment about Christianity (e.g. they thought they could not refute them convincingly).

One might ask why the guards did not repent immediately. In reply, it could be that they accommodated what they had seen to their own religious framework rather than associating it to any 'christological system' (Kankaanniemi 2010, p. 17, commenting, 'in their mindset what happened at the tomb would probably have been only one manifestation of the same unexplainable world of magic as exorcisms and healings'). Kankaanniemi also notes that some Jews interpreted Jesus' miracles as being done by someone empowered by Beelzebub; this can explain why the Jewish leaders did not repent but explain the 'evidence for Jesus' resurrection' as 'a continuation of the magical tricks of the crucified impostor. Knowing the appeal this kind of phenomenon would have had on the crowds, the attempt to silence any possible report of it sounds very credible' (ibid.).

Against Matthew's account, Vermès (2008, p. 143) objects, 'if the closest associates of Jesus did not expect him to rise, it is hard to imagine that outsiders were aware of a prediction, uttered by Old Testament prophets or by Jesus, about his resurrection shortly after his death.' In reply, this objection begs the question against the narrative in Matthew which portrays that both Jesus' disciples and outsiders came to know about Jesus' prediction, the disciples did not believe and did not expect him to rise, while the outsiders took the necessary precautions anyway.

Against the reliability of Matthew, Crossley (2013) claims that Matthew 27:52–53 'The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many' is fictional, arguing it is unlikely that contemporary non-Christian figures such as Josephus would not have recorded such a spectacular event. In reply, Josephus also

did not mention that there were people who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus, a fact which is well established by the evidence (see Chapter 2). As explained in Chapter 2, the silence of non-Christian authors could have been illustrative of their embarrassment about Christianity (e.g. they thought they could not explain away the events convincingly), and thus they chose not to write about them. Thus the silence in this case is not a valid argument against historicity.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, it has been suggested that Matthew 27:52–53 can be interpreted non-literally as the ‘special effects’ of an apocalyptic symbolic imagery typical of Jewish apocalyptic writings to convey how ‘earth shattering’ a literal event (in this case, Jesus’ death) was (Licona 2010, pp. 548–553, 2016, p. 252, n. 120). Even if the details in Matthew 27:52–53 are intended to be taken literally and are inaccurate, this does not imply that all the details in all the Gospels are inaccurate; we would need to assess case by case and consider the reasons given for each case, and I have already explained that there are good reasons to think that there were guards at the tomb (see earlier).

## 6.5 The empty tomb

Since the tomb was guarded, it must have been empty soon after, for the earliest Christians would not have come to the widespread agreement that Jesus resurrected and be willing to suffer persecution for proclaiming this if the guards were still guarding the body inside the tomb. Moreover, if that were the case, the opponents of Jesus who bothered to crucify him would surely say, ‘Jesus’ body is still in the tomb’ when the earliest Christians started proclaiming his resurrection, and the Christians would hardly have been able to win converts given this and the context of persecution. Habermas (2013, p. 478) notes the location of the empty tomb proclamation as Jerusalem, and observes, ‘this was absolutely the last place for this message unless the tomb was indeed unoccupied, for an occupied sepulcher would completely refute the message.’

Furthermore, many scholars have argued that if the Gospels’ authors invented the empty tomb and its witnesses, it is unlikely that they would choose women to be first witnesses. The reason is that in ancient Jewish society, women’s testimonies were regarded as virtually worthless (Lapide 1984, pp. 95–97 cf. Josephus ‘From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex’ *Ant.* 4.219). Thus the only plausible reason why this is stated in the Gospels (Mark 16:1–8, Matthew 28:1–7, Luke 24:1–8, John 20:1–2) is that it did happen (Craig 2008).

11 Crossley (2013) also asks why only Matthew’s Gospel mentions it, and Crossley also argues from the apparent contradictions and ‘legendary embellishments’ in the Gospels accounts of Jesus’ resurrection; these issues have already been addressed in Chapter 2 and elsewhere in this book.

Against the argument based on women's testimonies, Crossley (2013) objects that the argument is not as strong as it seems because we are not dealing with a court of law in Mark 16:1–8. Moreover, the Gospels indicate the prominent role of women in the ministry of Jesus, which suggests women could play a significant role for certain Christians at least, just as Esther and Judith were remembered as significant figures in Jewish tradition. 'All it takes is for one section of earliest Christianity to have had an interest in the prominence of women for this story to have been generated.' In any case, in narrative terms, the first known witness in Mark is not the women but the man dressed in white who may have provided all the authority Mark's audience required.

In reply, the man dressed in white is irrelevant because he was not the one who testified about the empty tomb to those who were not at the scene. Even though the Gospel of Mark does not portray a court of law, it is evidently written with an evangelistic purpose to persuade people to believe. While among Christian circles there might be some who recognize the significance of women, Habermas (2013, p. 479) notes that Crossley misses the main point here that the message was being taught to a larger Mediterranean world, many of whom did not share this perspective. The early Christians recognize this such that they did not mention women in the official lists of 'resurrection appearances' in 1 Corinthians 15 and the Acts sermons. Vermès (2008, p. 144) likewise notes the attitude of male superiority adopted by the apostles on hearing the report of female witnesses about the empty tomb (Luke 24:11: 'But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them'). The reason why they did not also remove the women from the Gospels is that 'the memory of their role was so persistent that it could not be removed' (Osiek 1993, p. 106).

Additionally, Habermas (2013) notes that the empty tomb of Jesus enjoyed multiple, early, independent attestation:

Scholars find that, including Mark, there are either three or four independent accounts here. Many scholars recognize that Mark utilized an earlier passion tradition that included the empty tomb account. The last two reasons especially show that Mark did not invent this story.

(p. 478)

Many scholars date the earlier passion tradition no later than the AD 40s (Bauckham 2006, p. 243). The early pre-Pauline creed in 1 Corinthians 15:4 also implies an empty tomb (Habermas 2013; Ware 2014).

Finally, the early Jewish opponents of Christians admitted that the tomb was empty; they only offered an alternative explanation for the empty tomb by claiming that the disciples stole the body (The opponents' explanation is reflected in Matthew 28:11–15; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 108,

'His disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven'; Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 30). As O'Collins (2011, p. 148) observes, no one disputed that the tomb was empty; the only dispute was why it was empty.

Sceptics question how we know that accounts concerning the resurrection have multiple attestations, claiming that the different authors of these accounts could have copied from different parts of the account of one faulty 'witness.' It has been claimed that Mark's empty tomb account was influenced by Hellenistic stories in which the bodies of heroes were often removed (Yarbro Collins 1992, 1995). It has also been claimed that different accounts of the empty tomb all depend on Mark's, who made up the empty tomb (see also Crossan 1994; Kirby 2005, p. 300). Vermès (2008, pp. 105–106) complains that while Mark 16:8 states that the women said nothing to anyone, Matthew 28:8 says that the women ran to bring his disciples word. Sceptics argue that, since it is inconceivable that Mark could have believed the silence of the women to be temporary without continuing the narrative from 16:8, the women must have been silent for a long time and thus the empty tomb story was probably of recent origin in AD 70 (Goulder 2005, p. 192; Kirby 2005, pp. 239–240). Kirby also claims that the round stone covering Jesus' tomb as portrayed by Mark was common after AD 70 but rare in Jesus' day, and suggests that the story is retrojected from AD 70 into Jesus' day (Kirby 2005, pp. 242–243, 258, n. 27).

In response, alleged parallels with Hellenistic stories have been debunked for ignoring significant differences. In particular, in the Hellenistic stories the 'empty tomb' merely serves as a focal point for the hero's cult while the hero's *un-resurrected body* is at some other known physical location, while those who were believed to be immortalized (e.g. Romulus, Apollonius) usually did not die (hence no tomb) but ascended straight to heaven (Bolt 1996; he notes two exceptions in which heroes were apparently translated into heaven after they died: (1) the version of Achilles' end in the *Aithiopsis* and (2) the story of Herakles in Diodorus Siculus, and he points out that in these cases the body never made it to the grave and the translation happens at the moment of the funeral).

Craig argues that different strands of narratives can be seen in the resurrection accounts in different Gospels by noting the 'sporadic and uneven agreement' among them. This indicates that there is more than one source, and he cites Borg who argues, 'if the tradition appears in an early source and in another independent source, then not only is it early, but it is also unlikely to have been made up' (Copan and Tacelli 2000, p. 167). In particular, he notes that John's account of the empty tomb is so different from Mark's that it is most likely that John's account is independent from Mark's (*ibid.*, p. 167, n. 5). In addition, it is implausible that for 30 years no one at the

Jerusalem church inquired about the tomb if the women had kept silent all the while (ibid., p. 177). Hurtado argues,

Mark 16:8 does not depict the women as disobeying and failing to do what they were told to do—to go to Peter and the Twelve with news of Jesus' resurrection. Instead, 'they said nothing to anyone' should be read as meaning that they said nothing to anyone else on their way back to the disciples, 'for they were afraid.'

(Hurtado 2016b)

Bryan (2011, p. 79) compares this passage from elsewhere in Mark's narrative. Mark 1:40–45 portrays Jesus healing a leper and instructing him, 'Say nothing to anyone, but go your way, show yourself to the priests, and offer for your cleansing the things which Moses commanded, for a testimony to them' (1:44). Bryan notes, 'in this case Mark's understanding of "say nothing to anyone" is clearly not exclusive of communication with anybody at all but rather implies a preparation for, or concentration on, communication with the right people—in this case, "the priests."' Although a round stone for a tomb was scarce in Jesus' day, it was available for the rich, such as members of the Sanhedrin (Copan and Tacelli ed., p. 169n9); this is consistent with the Gospels' accounts that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the Sanhedrin. Even if the stone was the more common square 'cork-shaped' stone, Von Wahlde points out,

it may very well be that people rolled the 'cork-shaped' stones away from the tomb. Once you see the size of a 'stopper' stone, it is easy to see that, however one gets the stone out of the doorway, chances are you are going to roll it the rest of the way.<sup>12</sup>

Carrier (2005a, pp. 105–232) objects by claiming that what the earliest Christians believed about the resurrection of Jesus was that he was given a new body while the old body remained in the tomb. It has been noted in Chapter 1 that this two body view has been refuted by Ware (2014), who has shown that *when used with reference to the physically dead (as in Jesus' case)*, the term *egeirō* refers unambiguously to the reanimation or revivification of the corpse. I shall now reply to other arguments Carrier offers for his position.

Carrier argues that the analogy from the sowing of seed (v. 36–37) implied discontinuity of body as the shell is cast away as the plant grows up (Carrier 2005a, p. 146), and he claims that in verses 44–54 Paul avoids saying one body becomes another, but emphasizes their distinctness instead (ibid.,

12 [www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/jerusalem/how-was-jesus-tomb-sealed/](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/jerusalem/how-was-jesus-tomb-sealed/)

p. 132). However, it should be noted that in sowing the seed, the same dormant plant inside the seed that *goes into the soil* comes out of it (Geisler 2006, p. 60). Although the seed and the plant are qualitatively different, they are numerically the same because there is continuity between them: the dormant plant that goes into the soil grows by incremental measurable and observable steps into the plant; the second is a new stage of the first (Davis 2006, p. 57). In other words, what comes out from the soil is continuous with what goes into it, i.e. the dormant plant. Paul does not describe resurrection as an event in which  $x$  (the present body) is sown, but  $y$  (a body discontinuous with the present body) is raised, but in which 'a single  $x$  (the present body) is sown a perishable  $x$ , but raised an imperishable  $x$ ' (Ware 2014, p. 486; Ware responds to other objections in his article). The distinctness emphasized in verses 44–54 concerns the different characteristics of the two stages of the one continuous thing and does not imply their discontinuity. Concerning 1 Corinthians 15:44, 'It is sown a natural (*psychikon*) body. It is raised a spiritual (*pneumatikon*) body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual [body],' Wedderburn (1999, p. 66) had claimed that Paul is contrasting between our present material bodies with the future resurrected immaterial bodies, and that this implies that Jesus' resurrected body was immaterial. However, Licona (2010, pp. 407–408) has surveyed the use of *psychikon* and *pneumatikon* in all of the extant literature from the eighth century BC through the third century AD, and concluded that *psychikon* never referred to something as material. Thus this verse does not justify the view that a Christian's material body is buried but an immaterial body is raised.

Carrier (2005a, p. 134) argues from Paul's statement, 'Christ is a life-giving spirit' (v. 45), and citing verse 47, he claims that while Adam's body is made of earth, Christ's body is not; it comes from heaven. In reply, verse 45 can be understood as emphasizing the spiritual aspect of the resurrected Jesus, but this does not deny that the resurrected Jesus had a physical body. On the contrary, the view that Jesus' resurrected body had both spiritual and physical properties is already affirmed by other texts, as noted in the discussion on transphysicality in Chapter 5. By 'life-giving spirit' Paul could also be identifying Jesus with the Spirit on the level of Christian experience (2 Cor. 3:17) and/or Paul might be comparing Jesus with God's life-giving breath in Genesis 2:7 (Wright 2003, p. 355). 'The second man from heaven' (v. 47) is referring to Jesus' second coming and not the discontinuity of his resurrected body with his old physical body (*ibid.*).

Carrier (2005a, p. 135) argues that 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (v. 50) contradicts Luke's Jesus' resurrected body having flesh and bones (Luke 24:39) and that 'Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them' (1 Cor. 6:13) contradicts Jesus eating fish (Luke 24:42–3) (*ibid.*, p. 210, n. 151). In response, it should be noted that the second half of verse 50 viz. 'nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable' explains, in Hebraic parallelism,



that 'flesh and blood' is a way of referring to ordinary, corruptible, decaying *present* human bodies (Wright 2003, p. 359). From the study of Luke's writings, it is evident that he is not wedded to the special Pauline terminology in which 'flesh' always designates that which is corruptible and often that which is rebellious. For Luke, flesh and bones is simply a way of saying 'physical' (*ibid.*, p. 658). As for 1 Corinthians 6:13, the food that had been eaten and the stomach will indeed be done away with through the decomposition of the present body after death (as decreed by God), and Paul mentions 'God will do away with both' to emphasize the transient nature of the present desires so that the reader may be exhorted to live for the Lord (v. 13b) in view of eternity (v. 14), but these verses do not imply that the resurrected body will not have the ability to eat.

Carrier (2005a, pp. 139–147) next argues for the two body doctrine from 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:8. He first claims that it is the future spiritual body that Paul is referring to in 4:18. While this is true, this does not imply that Paul means that it is discontinuous with the present body. The subsequent verses can be understood as follows: Verse 1: the body in its present state will be destroyed at death, but the supernatural, transformed body in the heavens will last forever. Craig (1989, pp. 150–151) argues that 'eternal in the heavens' does not imply that the new building is already waiting in heaven for Christians or that it has existed from eternity past, but it implies that Christians are certain to possess it and that it endures forever. Verses 2–4: Paul and others long to put on the supernatural body at the resurrection without the necessity of dying, so that there would be no interval of separation of soul from body, that is, no interval of nakedness (Craig 1989, pp. 152–157). Verse 5: God has given them assurance that he will give them the resurrection body by having given them the Holy Spirit. Verses 6–8: even though they desire to possess the resurrection body without the necessity of dying, yet dying and being with the Lord in the form of disembodied spirit is better than living in this present body (*ibid.*). They trust the Lord for the future which they do not see now. This exegesis shows that this passage is consistent with the view that, when the present body dies, the soul will leave behind the body and be ushered into the presence of the Lord, who at the Last Day will resurrect the body which had been left behind and transform it into a glorious body which will last forever.

Carrier notes the use of the word *skenos* instead of *soma* in 2 Corinthians 5:1, 4 and 2 Corinthians 4:7 and argues from Jeremiah 19: 11<sup>13</sup> that *ost-rakina skene* refer to clay pots which are beyond repair once broken (Carrier 2005a, pp. 142, 213). However, what Jeremiah 19:11 indicates is that the nation of Israel would be destroyed such that no human can have the power to put it back together again; it does not say that God does not have

13 Jeremiah 19:11a: 'and say to them, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Just so will I break this people and this city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel, which cannot again be repaired.'"

the power to repair it if he wants to. Similarly, what 2 Corinthians indicates is that the present body is destroyed at death and no humans nor any natural process can put it back together again, but that does not mean that God cannot resurrect the old body supernaturally.

Carrier (2005a, p. 126) claims that because of Paul's 'strange' two body doctrine in 1 Corinthians 15, later Christians had to invent a third letter to the Corinthians to give arguments which they thought Paul should have made. In response, it should be noted that this third letter has never been widely accepted by Christians. An over-zealous Christian may have forged this document in order to make what he personally thought was a stronger case against the Gnostics, but this does not imply that the doctrine of bodily continuity cannot be discerned by a careful study of 1 Corinthians 15, as shown earlier.

Carrier attempts to show that other passages in the New Testament contradict the body-continuity doctrine. He claims that Mark 14:58, 'I will destroy this holy residence made by hands, and in three days build another house not made by hands,' implies a two body doctrine (*ibid.*, p. 156). However, Mark portrays this statement as given by *false* witnesses whose testimonies do not agree. It is interesting to note that John 2:19 portrays that what Jesus really said was, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise *it* again in three days,' which implies the body-continuity doctrine. Carrier argues that while Peter of Acts says that the flesh of Jesus is immune to decay, Peter of the epistles says that all flesh is like grass and subjected to decay (1 Peter 1:24), and that Jesus was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18) (Carrier 2005a, p. 148). However, the context of 1 Peter 1:24 is referring to our *present* corruptible bodies. This does not include Jesus' resurrected body, which is the archetype of our future resurrected bodies. 1 Peter 3:18 does not imply that Jesus became a spirit at resurrection. Rather, it means that he was made alive *by* the Spirit (Wright 2003, p. 469).

Carrier (2005a, p. 126) argues that the post-apostolic father Clement asserts the two body doctrine in 1 Clement 25, where he uses the analogy of the resurrected phoenix which carried its own bones home. In response, one can argue that Clement's analogy is a poor one which is not analogous to what he explicitly affirms in 1 Clement 50: 'For it is written, "Enter into thy secret chambers for a little time, until My wrath and fury pass away; and I will remember a propitious day, and will *raise you up out of your graves,*"' which clearly implies the body-continuity doctrine.

Finally, Carrier (2005a, p. 179) asks, if there was an empty tomb, why is there no veneration of it? In reply, the Jewish authorities would not have allowed Christians to turn the tomb into a shrine (Hays 2006, p. 283).

In conclusion, Carrier's analysis of 1 Corinthians 15 and other texts is flawed and fails to refute the conclusion (established earlier) the earliest Christians affirmed a body-continuity understanding of the resurrection of Jesus, and hence the empty tomb.

## 6.6 Removal by friends hypothesis

The hypothesis that the friends of Jesus removed Jesus' body was part of the Jewish polemic reflected in Matthew 28:11–15. Stealing the body would have been risky, especially given the presence of guards at the tomb (see earlier). Why would anyone do it? Throughout the centuries various motives have been suggested by sceptics. Carrier argues that some friends or secret admirers could have stolen the body with the purpose of faking the resurrection to inspire faith in the good teachings of Jesus and to make people think that his good name has been vindicated by God (Carrier 2005b, pp. 351–352). The number of conspirators could be small; among the Seventy Disciples, for example, at least one or two of them might have been willing to undertake such a plot (Carrier 2005b, p. 352). Perhaps some among the numerous people whom Jesus had healed in his ministry may have attempted theft. The other disciples could have been ignorant of the theft and thought that Jesus really resurrected, thus they were willing to die for their belief (Kankaanniemi 2010, p. 244). Ehrman suggests that maybe Jesus' family members wanted the body buried in the family tomb (Craig and Ehrman 2006, p. 29). Carrier suggests that the guards could have taken a bribe from the thieves (Carrier 2005b, p. 358). Alternatively, an admirer such as Joseph of Arimathea could have set up a secret mechanism inside the tomb that removed the body. One might also suggest that perhaps the pagan Roman centurion, who was already convinced that Jesus was the Son of God on the basis of witnessing Jesus' crucifixion and death as portrayed by Mark (15:39), stole the body to fake the resurrection because he wanted more people to believe in Jesus. Perhaps the guards themselves were secret followers of Jesus and risked capital punishment by removing the body and then reported the resurrection.

However, the suggested motives would not work. If the friends had self-serving motives, they would not have been willing to risk their lives for what they knew was a lie (see Chapter 3). If the friends had 'noble' motives, they would have refrained from creating a lie concerning Jesus' resurrection, especially so given that the multiply attested 'good teachings' of the Jesus tradition condemned lying (Matt. 5:37, John 8:44). Creating a lie about such a fundamental matter concerning their faith would also be inconsistent with their devotion to the God of Israel which Jesus himself also affirmed, and against their belief that the God of Israel will punish liars (see Chapter 3). It is unlikely to find anyone willing to risk suffering and die for what he knows is a lie and to be punished by God for it in the afterlife. The friends would have tried other safer ways to promote Jesus' 'good teachings' and his 'good name.' If Jesus' family members stole Jesus' body to bury it in their family tomb, they would have known that Jesus did not resurrect, and given the prior unbelief of Jesus' family members (see Chapter 4), it would have been implausible that they would later join the early church (1 Cor. 9:5, Acts

1:14) that worshipped Jesus (Loke 2017a) and be willing to suffer for what they knew was untrue.

Moreover, regardless of the motives, removing the body without being caught by the guards or discovered by others would still have been a problem. As for the possibility that the Roman centurion and the guards were secret admirers, they would have known that the purpose of placing a guard in the first place was to falsify Jesus' prediction of resurrection. ('Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, "After three days I will rise again,"' Matthew 27:63—the historicity of this purpose is tied to the historicity of the guards at the tomb which I have defended previously.) Thus if he did not resurrect they would have known that he was indeed an imposter; in that case, it would have been unlikely that they would retain any secret admiration (if they had any) for such an imposter and risk capital punishment for his cause by removing the body.

## 6.7 Removal by enemies hypothesis

It is even more unreasonable to think that Jesus' enemies took the body, because they would have brought out Jesus' body and refuted his followers when they started proclaiming his resurrection. A Jewish work dating from the fifth century, the *Toledoth Yeshu*, claims that the Jewish leaders did drag Jesus' corpse through the streets of Jerusalem, but this account lacks historical credibility because of the late date of writing.

Allison suggests that perhaps Jewish authorities removed the body and quietly disposed of it because they did not want it to be venerated, and having dumped the body unceremoniously, they were then unable to reproduce it several weeks later when the disciples start proclaiming the resurrection. They then accused the disciples of stealing the body (Allison 2005a, p. 302). In response, in such a scenario it would have been much simpler and convincing to say 'we dumped the body,' even if they cannot reproduce it, than to ask some guards to say that they were guarding the tomb and that the body was stolen when they were sleeping.

Allison (2005a, p. 319) also suggests that, alternatively, perhaps the Jews knew that even if they could parade the rotting corpse of Jesus through the streets for all to see, it would not succeed in demolishing Christianity, as more than one explanation could be offered by Christians for whatever they found, so there is no point for doing it. But surely the Jews would recognize that refuting the resurrection (e.g. by parading the corpse) would shatter people's confidence in what the apostles' preached at their synagogues, and it would at least persuade those who were sitting on the fence. It would also have been more persuasive than to claim that the disciples stole the body. Since they had already gone through so much trouble to kill Jesus, why wouldn't they be willing to show that he remained dead if they could?

## 6.8 Removal by neutral party hypothesis

Sceptics note that tomb robbery was a problem in first-century Judea as indicated by the Nazarene inscription of an edict of Caesar that mandates capital punishment against this. The body parts/nails would have been considered as useful for necromancers, and the thieves had two nights to do it (Carrier 2005b, pp. 350–352). If Jesus was buried in an expensive tomb, the tombs of the rich were always prime targets for robbers (Gant 2019, p. 238). If there were guard, the guard was not placed until Saturday, and between Friday and Saturday there was time for the theft (Carrier 2005b, p. 353).<sup>14</sup> Other financial motivations have been suggested. For example, the *Toledoth Yeshu* claims that a gardener named Juda took Jesus' body and later sold the body to the Jewish leadership. Tertullian (*De Spectaculis*, 30) noted a suggestion that the gardener removed the body so that his lettuces might not be harmed by the crowds of visitants to the body.

In reply, it is unlikely that the guards did not check that the body was still inside before they sealed it. Hays (2006, p. 251) notes,

the reason that Pilate posted the guard was to prevent grave-robbery, so the soldiers would naturally check the tomb and report back to Pilate if it were already ransacked. Otherwise, they would be charged with dereliction of duty if it were found to be empty on their watch.

Considering the gravity of the situation concerning Jesus' crucifixion and the presence of guards, it is hardly likely that any neutral party would have adequate motivation (financial or otherwise) to risk getting caught for attempting to remove the body, let alone be successful at carrying it out. (As noted earlier, the *Toledoth Yeshu* lacks historical credibility because of the late date of writing.) Keener (1999, p. 713) writes, 'Graves . . . were often robbed . . . but not with guards posted (at least not without subduing the guards, normally fatally) . . . nor could they have rolled away the massive stone without waking the guards.'

## 6.9 Removal by non-agent hypothesis

Allison (2005a, p. 204) notes that some scholars have suggested that perhaps the earthquake mentioned in Matthew 28:2 swallowed Jesus' body and rolled back the stone. However, it is unreasonable to think that the Jewish authorities, on seeing the destruction of the tomb caused by the earthquake,

14 Concerning Craig's argument that acts like this usually brought to light, Carrier objects that there is rarely any difficulty for one or two persons to keep quiet, and it is possible that perhaps the thief died shortly after dumping the body in an unknown place. He notes that even nowadays with modern technology, detectives hot on trial must accept many crimes will never come to light.

would not have thought that the body was buried somewhere beneath the destruction.

## 6.10 Conclusion

Against the evidential value of the empty tomb, it has been asserted by Welker that 'the stories of the empty tomb alone are not sufficient to evoke belief in the resurrection' (Welker 2007, p. 467). Ehrman (2014, p. 185) likewise states, 'if someone was buried in a tomb and later the body was not there, this fact alone would not make anyone suspect that God had raised the person from the dead.' He claims,

our first Gospel is Mark; it records the 'fact' that the tomb was empty, but strikingly, no one is said to come to believe that Jesus was raised because of it. . . . The same view is advanced in the Gospel of John.

Ehrman, however, neglects John 20:8: 'Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.' While Welker dismisses John 20:8 as 'cryptic' (Welker 2007, p. 467), it is clear from the context of John 20 (see verses 25, 27, 29) that the 'believe' spoken of in verse 8 refers to believe that Jesus resurrected (Keener 2003, p. 1184, citing Hoskyns). While Carrier (2009, p. 350) objects that there is no mentioning of the checking of the empty tomb throughout Acts, he ignores that Luke-Acts were written by the same author who had already claimed that Peter checked the empty tomb in Luke 24:12. It is true that most of the earliest Christians believed based on the resurrection appearances as argued in previous chapters, but this does not deny the evidential value and the importance of the empty tomb.

In this chapter, I have evaluated the naturalistic hypotheses concerning the outcome of Jesus' body. In addition to mentioning various considerations against these naturalistic hypotheses, I have replied to various objections against the historicity of the guards, offered an argument for it, and explained that their presence would (together with other considerations) rule out all the naturalistic hypotheses concerning Jesus' body. In particular, the presence of guards at the tomb would imply that Jesus was buried in a well-identified place (contrary to unburied hypothesis). The early Christians would not have come to the widespread agreement that Jesus resurrected and be willing to suffer persecution for proclaiming this if the guards were still guarding the body inside the tomb (contrary to remain buried hypothesis). The presence of guards would also make it unreasonable to think that friends, enemies, or a neutral third party would risk getting caught stealing the body for any reason and did so successfully (contrary to removal by friends/enemies/neutral party hypotheses). Contrary to the removal by non-agent hypothesis, it would be unreasonable to think that animals or earthquakes removed Jesus' body without the guards preventing or suspecting it.

Contrary to the swoon hypothesis, a severely wounded Jesus would hardly have been able to overcome the guards and escape from the tomb, while the escape hypothesis has been refuted in the previous chapter. I conclude that no naturalistic hypothesis reasonably accounts for what happened to the body of Jesus on the first Easter morning.

## 7 Combination hypotheses

### 7.1 Introduction

It has been shown in previous chapters that all the naturalistic hypotheses concerning the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances, viz. legend hypothesis, no experience hypothesis, intramental hypothesis, mistaken identity hypothesis, swoon hypothesis, and escape hypothesis, fail the criteria for historicity. Likewise, in previous chapters I have ruled out all the naturalistic hypotheses for the empty tomb, viz. escape hypothesis, unburied hypothesis, remain buried hypothesis, removal by non-agent hypothesis, removal by friends hypothesis, removal by enemies hypothesis, removal by neutral party hypothesis, and swoon hypothesis. But could it be that each of these hypotheses is implausible only in isolation, and that a combination of a number of them, each covering the weaknesses of the other, would explain away the resurrection of Jesus?

In what follows, I shall summarize a number of such proposals in recent literature. I will then explain a number of considerations which render such proposals unreasonable.

### 7.2 Examples of combination hypotheses

Ehrman (2014) proposes a combination of unburied hypothesis, intramental hypothesis, and legend hypothesis. He argues that Jesus' body was unburied after the crucifixion, and suggests that perhaps only a few (three or four) disciples 'saw' (hallucinated?) Jesus and told others, some of whom did not believe (this accounts for the tradition of doubting which is found in the Gospels). Sceptic psychologist Whittenberger (2011) had previously argued that the tradition of doubting in Matthew 28:17 indicates that there probably was a mixture of opinion about the appearance of Jesus among the disciples, and it could be that some did not have the hallucination that others had, or they did have a hallucination but realized it was not Jesus. Whittenberger thinks,

if the resurrection hypothesis were true and Jesus was really standing among his disciples, it is very unlikely that some would doubt. On the



other hand, if one or two disciples experienced a hallucination of Jesus and the others did not, then it is very likely that some would doubt.

Likewise, Ehrman (2014, pp. 191–192) thinks that the doubt traditions and the failure of recognition traditions (e.g. Luke 24:13–31; John 20:14–16; John 21:4–8) might be evidence that others in fact did not see what some people saw and that only perhaps three or four people (e.g. Peter, Paul, Mary, James) saw something and most of their close associates believed them and came to think that Jesus was raised from the dead but some others did not. ‘As the stories of Jesus’s “appearances” were told and retold, of course, they were embellished, magnified, and even made up; so soon, probably within a few years, it was said that all of the disciples had seen Jesus, along with other people’ (p. 192).

Eisenberg (2016) has combined a variation of the swoon hypothesis and the remain buried hypothesis together with the intramental hypothesis and the mistaken identity hypothesis. The key question asked by Eisenberg is this: what would have happened if those who retrieved Jesus’ body found that he was still alive? Eisenberg suggests the following scenario: Jesus survived the crucifixion and was discovered to be barely alive by the few followers (e.g. Joseph) who retrieved him. Hoping that Jesus would survive, and fearful that the Romans would discover he had illegally rescued a condemned man, Joseph faked the burial of Jesus (by having his slaves go to an available tomb, carrying a corpse-shaped bundle of burial cloth, placed it inside, and then sealed the tomb) while trying to revive Jesus. However, Jesus expired soon after, and was buried quietly in an anonymous grave. Nevertheless, rumour of his survival reached his followers and the Romans, who opened the tomb and discovered the body missing. To sooth their grief the disciples seized on the rumour of Jesus’ survival and encouraged each other to hear the voice and see the image of Jesus in other people, which later became interpreted as a physical resurrection.

Eisenberg thinks that the earliest Christians including Paul hold to a Two Body doctrine, and that the one-body physical resurrection as claimed in the Gospels evolved later. Eisenberg interprets the account of initial misidentification and subsequent vanishing of Jesus in Luke 24:15–32 as seeing a hallucination of Jesus on others which subsequently vanished. Eisenberg thinks that his combination of intramental hypothesis and mistaken identity hypothesis fits the Gospel reports of misidentifications, and that reports of feeling the presence of a post-crucifixion Jesus in another person would have been readily accepted by disciples given the fact that people of the first century commonly believed in possession by demons or spirits, visitations by gods, and the transmigration of souls, and given that Jesus predicted his own resurrection. He adds ‘if modern believers can see an image of Jesus in a piece of toast, it isn’t hard to imagine that the first disciples believed they felt the person of their master in other people’ (p. 9).

Other sceptics have responded to the problems concerning the group hallucination hypothesis (see Chapter 4) by suggesting various combinations of no experience, intramental, and mistaken identity hypotheses which involve hallucinations, cognitive dissonance, memory distortion, and confirmation bias.

Komarnitsky (2009) suggests a combination of remain buried, intramental, and legend hypotheses using the idea of cognitive dissonance, which is a form of rationalization or believing in spite of evidence. Komarnitsky (2009, chapter 2) claims that Jesus' body was buried in a location unknown to his followers. The disciples believed Jesus' resurrection because of cognitive dissonance, and they searched the Hebrew Scriptures for confirmation of their beliefs (p. 80). This led to Peter having a hallucination of the resurrected Jesus (*ibid.*, chapter 4). He shared his experience with other disciples which may have strengthened their belief, and this triggered them to have individual hallucinations, followed by collective 'spiritual experience' of experiencing Jesus' presence. He writes,

Anticipating the yet to be realized return of Jesus and experiencing the normal feelings associated with the absence of a recently deceased loved one, Peter had a hallucination of Jesus that he interpreted as a visitation of Jesus from heaven. . . . Still others heard Jesus speak to them, felt his presence, and shared in group ecstatic experiences (perhaps like a spirited Pentecostal gathering today). Jesus' followers immediately turned to their Jewish scriptures to find scriptural confirmation for their beliefs. Interaction with their scriptures, most likely Psalm 16:10, led Jesus' followers to conclude that it was 'on the third day' that Jesus was raised from the dead. . . . As the years and decades passed, the above experiences, beliefs, and traditions gave birth to legends like Jesus' burial in a rock-hewn tomb, the tomb being discovered three days later, his corporeal post-mortem appearances to individuals and groups described in the Gospels, and his appearances to over five hundred in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Eventually Jesus was deified. . . . [T]here was a swirl of rationalizations, individual hallucinations, collective enthusiasm, designations of authority, and scriptural interpretations.'

Having already believed in Jesus' resurrection, the rest of the Twelve may have vested interests in claiming that they had seen Jesus so that they could be designated as authoritative leaders of the community. The 'Twelve' therefore did not visually see Jesus together at the same time, but for the earliest Christians such inaccuracies would have been inconsequential given that they genuinely believed Jesus was raised from the dead (p. 94). The so-called appearance to the 'more than five hundred brethren' may have been a 'spiritual experience' that was later interpreted or developed into an account of an appearance (p. 96). Alternatively, the appearance to the 'more than five hundred brethren' was a legend due to Paul's error. When the Corinthians

checked with other church leaders who knew Paul was passing false info, they may have just let it pass as a minor issue (given they knew the group was sceptical of resurrection).

Atheist philosopher Hermann Philipse also suggests the possibility of cognitive dissonance concerning the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances. He writes,

A habitual smoker will experience cognitive dissonance when hearing about the severe health risks of this habit . . . people often attempt to reduce this unpleasant tension by using or inventing stories that mask the incompatibility, by adapting their behavior, or by attempting to convince other people of their beliefs.

(Philipse 2012, pp. 178–179)

Philipse argues that since the disciples had invested so much in the cause of Jesus (e.g. quit their jobs and abandoned their possessions), they were so deeply committed to their beliefs that they could not discard them quickly, thus they engaged in the process of collaborative story telling (Philipse 2012, pp. 180–182). Philipse has suggested that the disciples could have thought that they did experience the 'resurrected Jesus' due to memory distortion. In this case they did not lie intentionally, neither did they need to have any such experiences of Jesus after his crucifixion (intramental or extramental, see later). Rather they could have interpreted their vivid memories of the pre-crucified Jesus as experiences of their resurrected leader and reinforced one another's ideas through the process of collective story telling. Philipse explains,

Since human memory functions as an updating machine, which often retains info without also retaining knowledge about its source, people may think that what they remember stems from their own experience, whereas in fact they rely on communication by others . . . in some cases the suspect of a murder may honestly confess under the influence of protracted and suggestive interrogations by the police, although in fact someone else committed the crime.

(Philipse 2012, pp. 178–179)

In an influential article on memory distortion, Schudson (1997) argues that, since memory is invariably and inevitably selective, distortion is inevitable. He suggests four factors that contribute to the distortion of memory and history: (1) distanciation: memories tend to become vaguer and details forgotten with the passage of time; (2) instrumentalization: memories tend to be reinterpreted to better serve present interests; (3) conventionalization: memories tend to conform to socio-typical experiences; and (4) narrativization: an effort not only to report the past but to make it interesting.

Ehrman claims that psychologists have discovered that ‘when a group “collectively remembers” something they have all heard or experienced, the “whole” is less than the sum of the “parts”’ (2016, p. 75). People can even erroneously believe they are *remembering* events that, in fact, they only *imagined* (p. 94). While it has been argued against the classic form-critical model that collective memories usually are resistant to outright fabrication (McIver 2011), Ehrman objects against the reliability of collective memory by arguing,

If one person—say, a dominant personality—injects into the conversation an incorrect recollection or ‘distorted memory’ that others in the group do not remember, they tend to take the other person’s word for it. As one recent study has shown, ‘The misinformation implanted by one person comes to be shared by the group as a whole. In other words, a collective memory could become formed around misinformation. Misinformation shared by one person may be adopted by the rest.’

(pp. 75–76)

Applying memory studies to the study of historical Jesus, some scholars (e.g. Crook (2013b, pp. 101–102) have argued that memory can be wildly creative and that it can be difficult for people to distinguish between a wildly creative and a factually reliable memory. Crook cites the case of the Luddites, various groups of nineteenth-century workers who protested against the use of machinery. While the ‘groups and sub-groups had a variety of grievances, disparate goals, different ideologies, and conflicting methods . . . they were united by one thing: they protested in the name of Ned Ludd, and thus became known collectively as Luddites’ (Crook 2013a, 67–68). He claims,

The collective memories about Ned Ludd were manufactured across several diverse strains of the movement, and have no grounding in the life of a real Ned Ludd. People believed and perpetuated these memories, such that a movement developed and cohered around a founder who never existed.

(Crook (2013b, 101–102)

In response to Le Donne (2013), who objects that such fabrications were eventually corrected by collective counter-memory and historians in social discourse, Crook (2013b, p. 102) replies that the fact that scholarship later came to the conclusion that the Luddite stories were fabrication

in no way negates the point that collective memories were manufactured, that they were maintained for a long time, nor the more troubling point that there is no qualitative difference between real and manufactured

memories. Scholarly debunking does not contradict people's willingness to hold and pass on manufactured memories.

Concerning confirmation bias, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007, p. 223) explain,

Confirmation bias is the tendency to conform incoming, contradictory data so that it does not challenge existing biases (Nisbett and Ross 1980). Confirmation bias in this case discounts evidence contradictory to the first impression. . . . Confirmation bias also acts here to selectively interpret concurrent information (reactions to false feedback) so as to bolster impressions (Ross et al. 1975). Once formed, impressions become relatively autonomous, that is, independent of the evidence on which they were founded. 'The attributor doesn't 'renegotiate' his interpretations of the relevance or validity of impression-relevant information' (Ross et al. 1975, p. 890). Thus, at least on paper, it is easy to see how impressions become immune to logical challenges. In addition . . . people are likely to engage in motivated reasoning to hold on to or legitimize cherished beliefs.

Utilizing the notion of confirmation bias and memory distortion together with hallucination, Carrier (2014, pp. 132–133) argues,

'Mass hallucination' occurs in various cults not in the sense that everyone objectively hallucinates exactly the same thing, but in the sense that everyone subjectively hallucinates what they believe is the same thing. And that can occur when a whole congregation simultaneously engages trance-inducing triggers and a common experience is sought—perhaps at the behest of a charismatic leader anchoring everyone to the same experience through the power of suggestion. They don't check every detail, because if they report the same things in rough outline, then the differences (if any are even reported) will be overlooked (as a result of our innate tendency toward verification bias) or even adopted by others through memory contamination, such that experiences are remembered as even more similar the more they are discussed. This contamination can occur even during the process of hallucination, as what one member, especially an anchoring leader, says then influences others to have the same experience.

### 7.3 Evaluation of previous proposals

First, the outcome of Jesus' body is not well accounted for. Ehrman's (2014) unburied hypothesis and Komarnitsky's (2009) remain buried hypothesis have already been refuted in Chapter 6. As for Eisenberg's (2016) suggestion that Joseph faked the burial of Jesus (by having his slaves go to an available

tomb carrying a corpse-shaped bundle of burial cloth, place it inside, and then seal the tomb), it is unlikely that the guards did not check carefully before sealing the tomb, and that after they opened the tomb and discovered the body missing from the same corpse-shaped bundle they did not suspect a ruse but risked their integrity by saying that they slept while the disciples stole the body.

Second, with respect to the doubt traditions noted by Ehrman and Whittenberger, as argued in previous chapters, the disciples did not start believing but doubting. On the one hand, Matthew 28:17 does not say the doubt was due to seeing different details; it is more likely that ‘the disciples were not hopelessly and insensibly alienated from the solid world’ to find out from experience that corpses do not naturally exit tombs (Allison 2005a, pp. 246, 305).<sup>1</sup> Initial doubts would have been natural even if Jesus were really standing there. On the other hand, while ‘Matthew does not say whether the doubts of some of the disciples were ever overcome’ (Lindemann 2017, p. 566), it can nevertheless be inferred that, if some members of the Twelve, the five hundred, and the other apostles did not ‘see’ anything or did not agree on the details of what they ‘saw’ and that their doubts remain, they would not have been willing to suffer and die for continuing the Christian movement, which they did (see Chapter 3).

Concerning the failure of recognition traditions, the relevant passages portray the failures of recognition as only temporary. ‘Before the appearance was over they were absolutely convinced that it was the same Jesus’ (Geisler and Howe 1997, p. 397). Likewise, if these portrayals were merely embellishments and those people and other members of the Twelve, the five hundred, and the other apostles did not ‘see’ anything or did not agree on the details of what they ‘saw,’ then as argued in Chapter 4 they would not have been willing to claim that they saw the *bodily* resurrected Jesus and be willing to suffer and die for continuing the Christian movement, which they did.

Third, Ehrman’s suggestion that the claim that all of the members of the Twelve had seen Jesus was an embellishment and Komarnitsky’s (2009) suggestion that the appearance to the ‘more than five hundred brethren’ was a legend due to Paul’s error ignores the fact (established in Chapter 2) that the early Christians were quite mobile, Jewish Christians would have travelled yearly to Jerusalem for festivals, and a well-attested ‘networking’ among early Christians existed. These considerations imply that verification with the members of the Twelve and with the ‘more than five hundred brethren’ and the falsification of embellishment or legend would have been easy. It is also unreasonable to think that when the Corinthians checked with other

1 It should be noted that the argument here does not depend on showing that all the witnesses referred to in 1 Cor. 15:3–11 were critically minded, but only on showing that ‘at least some of the disciples’ would have been critical.

church leaders (including members of the Twelve) who knew that Paul was passing false info, the church leaders would have let it pass, given that falsification would have been easy and the costs would have been high for them as well (for other criticisms of Ehrman's proposal, see below).

Komarnitsky (2009) offers an alternative suggestion that the church leaders may have corrected Paul's report and the legend died right there, which explains why it did not show up in other parts of the New Testament (p. 97).

In reply, on the one hand, as explained in Chapter 2, there are other explanations for why the 'more than five hundred brethren' did not show up in other parts of the New Testament. On the other hand, Komarnitsky's suggestion does not explain the lack of costly consequences that this would have on Paul. As argued in Chapter 2, knowing that the costs of falsification would be high, Paul would not have passed on information which he himself did not know was correct.

In sum, many members of the Twelve, the five hundred, and the other apostles were still around and can be verified when 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 was written. Additionally, if most of them did not actually 'see' the resurrected Jesus but made up the claim that they did, it is unreasonable to think that none of them leaked out the hoax when they were persecuted. Thus, as argued in Chapter 2, it is unreasonable to think that the account that all of them saw Jesus was the result of embellishment, magnification, or made-up stories (see further the refutation of Ehrman's telephone game analogy later).

Fourth, Komarnitsky's (2009) cognitive dissonance theory ignores the fact (established in Chapters 3 and 4) that many among the disciples were likely doubtful and fearful of persecution, and that James and Paul were sceptics. As argued in Chapter 4, individual hallucinations and spiritual experiences would not have convinced the Twelve or 'more than five hundred brethren' that Jesus was resurrected *bodily*, and neither would it have convinced their audience. It is also unreasonable to think that the distortions and inaccuracies remained unexposed and (if exposed) remained inconsequential when the disciples faced persecution.

Eisenberg claims that to soothe their grief the disciples seized on the rumour of Jesus' survival and encouraged each other to hear the voice and see the image of Jesus in other people, which later became interpreted as a physical resurrection. However, rumour of Jesus' survival is not the same as rumour of his resurrection; a Jesus who survived but who was still suffering from the wounds of the crucifixion would not have convinced the disciples that he was the risen Lord of life (Strauss 1879, p. 412). Moreover, Eisenberg's claim that the earliest Christians including Paul held to a two body doctrine has already been shown to be false in Chapter 6. Concerning Eisenberg's claims concerning feeling the presence of a post-crucifixion Jesus in another person, believing the possession by demons or spirits, visitations by gods, and the transmigration of souls, and modern believers seeing an image of Jesus in a piece of toast, these are all different from bodily resurrection.

The experiences suggested by Eisenberg would not have convinced the disciples of Jesus' bodily resurrection but (at most) a spiritual encounter with Jesus.

With regards to Philipse's theory, while in some cases an isolated suspect of a murder may suffer from faulty memory under the influence of protracted and suggestive interrogations by others, in the case of Jesus' resurrection the disciples could have checked with one another (and their listeners could also check with them too, see Chapter 4) whether they did see anything together and remembered correctly what they 'saw,' if someone among them were to enforce or reinforce any idea.

With regards to memory distortion, it should be noted that Schudson (p. 361) himself denies that this implies an agnosticism or relativism towards memory or history. On the contrary, he argues,

If interpretation were free-floating, entirely manipulable to serve present interests, altogether unanchored by a bedrock body of unshakable evidence, controversies over the past would ultimately be uninteresting. But in fact they are interesting. They are compelling. And they are gripping because people trust that a past we can to some extent know and can to some extent come to agreement about really happened.

(ibid.)

He notes that even the most ardently relativist scholars cry out 'distortion' at the fringe group of Holocaust revisionists (p. 361).

Ehrman's citations of psychologists are problematic. Reviewers of Ehrman's book have noted his misunderstanding of the scholars he cited.<sup>2</sup> For example, Rodríguez (2016) observes that Ehrman's understanding of the term 'distortion' does not reflect how the term is used in memory studies. He explains that while 'memory itself is subject to processes of selection, interpretation, communication, contestation, and evaluation,' 'these are also the forces that preserve and transmit memory across generations.' For example, 'the selection of Jesus' crucifixion as a meaningful event preserves traces of events that, otherwise, would be completely lost to us, as are, for example, any crucifixions that took place on the following Passover.' He notes that Le Donne has called these 'refractions' instead of 'distortions,' and for good reason. 'We read distortion pejoratively. . . . But in memory studies, *distort* doesn't necessarily have these negative connotations. Some distortions obscure, yes. But other distortions, like those perpetrated by the

2 See Rafael Rodríguez's (2016) review on Jesus blog which concludes after extensive documentation of Ehrman's misunderstandings, 'In the end, I cannot endorse or recommend this work as an engagement of memory scholarship for New Testament research. . . . I do not think he has accurately grasped even the current state of memory and the New Testament. . . . This book is flawed in its historical and exegetical judgments.'



lenses of a telescope, provide clarity and focus.’ Moreover, as Kirk (2017, pp. 91–92) observes,

‘Memory distortion’ research has come in for criticism from cognitive scientists, philosophers, and from experimental psychologists themselves, who have pointed out that distortion experiments typically are de-contextualized from the natural social environments in which actual remembering occurs. Most feature randomly selected, isolated subjects recollecting unrehearsed, non-salient information in lab environments. The focus of these experiments is usually quantitative—on how much is remembered rather than on the qualities of what is remembered. Collaborative remembering experiments similarly feature nominal groups constituted ad hoc of individuals with no social connection to each other and tasked with remembering materials of no salience to the group or its individual members. One might therefore question the extent to which research of this sort has any relevance for understanding the operations of memory in the formation and transmission of a foundational tradition. Furthermore, experiments studying memory distortion contrive to manufacture it, making use of deception, lures and misleading questions, false information introduced by the researcher, false accusations, false corroboration by confederates posing as members of the subject group, and the like. Of course there is nothing perverse about producing an effect in the lab in order to study it, but the effect is to blow memory’s proneness to distortion out of proportion.

Ehrman himself acknowledges, ‘I am decidedly *not* saying that all of our memories are faulty or wrong. Most of the time we remember pretty well’ (2016, p. 143).

With regards to the Luddite movement, it should be noted that, unlike the case of Jesus’ resurrection, the Luddite movement was not based on whether Ludd really existed or whether he did resurrect; the figure of Ludd is merely symbolic. Moreover, as argued in Loke (2017a), given the Jewish background of the earliest Christians, if Jesus was not perceived by a sizeable group of them to have claimed and shown himself to be truly divine (i.e. on the Creator side of the Creator-creature divide), the earliest Christians would not have come to the widespread conviction that he was, but they did.

Ehrman (2004, p. 115) has used the analogy of the telephone game, which illustrates how quickly messages can be distorted if they are passed on serially from one individual to another. He writes,

We all know from personal experience how much news stories get changed in the retelling (not to mention stories about us personally) just in a matter of hours, let alone days, weeks, months, years, and decades.

Were the stories about Jesus exempt from these processes of alteration and invention that we ourselves experience all the time?

(Ehrman 2016, p. 11)

Other scholars have pointed out that the ‘telephone game’ is an awful analogy either for oral or textual transmission of the early Christian proclamation. Unlike a telephone game, the latter case does not transmit in a linear fashion, rather there were multiple communities involved in remembering, hearing, telling, and retelling (Le Donne 2011, p. 70). Psychologist David Rubin (1995, pp. 129, 154, 228) notes that factors which have been experimentally shown to be important in improving long-term retention include communities in which transmissions do not occur down ‘chains’ of individuals but along complex ‘nets,’<sup>3</sup> and numerous intermittent repetitions by different members of the group and recitations in performance mode. In particular, ‘The main advantage of a net over a chain is that if the version transmitted by one singer omits parts or introduces changes that are outside the tradition, then other versions can be substituted for these lapses’ (ibid., p. 134).

Ehrman objects, ‘when testimonies are recited frequently, because of the vagaries inherent in the oral mode of transmission, they change more often than when recited only on occasion’ (2006, p. 191). Citing the noted oral historian Jan Vansina in support, Ehrman comments that the reciters of a tradition

are telling the stories for a particular reason to a particular audience and ‘the amount of interest [the reciter] can arouse . . . largely depends on the way he tells the story and on the twist he gives it.’ As a result, ‘the tradition inevitably becomes distorted.’ Moreover, since the story is told from one person to the next and then to the next and then to the next, ‘each informant who forms a link in the chain of transmission creates new variants, and changes are made every time the tale is told. It is therefore not surprising to find that very often the original testimony has disappeared altogether.’

(Ehrman 2016, pp. 191–192, citing from Vansina 1965, pp. 43, 109)

However, as Kirk (2017, pp. 94–95) observes, Ehrman omits Vansina’s very important qualification: ‘In fact the only kind of hearsay testimonies that lend themselves to distortions of this kind are personal recollections, tales of artistic merit, and certain kinds of didactic tales,’ whereas ‘in the

3 The difference between a chain and a net is as follows: ‘For a single individual, the chain [model of transmission] would have a single line leading in and a single line leading out. In contrast, for a single individual, the net would have an indefinite number of lines leading in and out’ (Rubin 1995, p. 134).

transmission of traditions, the main effort is to repeat exactly what has been heard' (Vansina 1965, p. 109).

While Ehrman often emphasizes the length of the transmission ('decades') from originating eyewitnesses to the writing of the Gospels, Vansina notes, 'with regard to reliability, there is no doubt that the method of transmission is of far greater importance than the length of time a tradition has lasted' (Vansina 1965, p. 53). Ehrman also ignores Vansina's observation that the transmission of culturally foundational traditions typically is subject to controls, and such tradition inheres, not in individuals, but in social structures (Vansina 1985, pp. 41, 47, 96–98, 116–119). Its mode of transmission is not individual-to-individual, but in performance to audiences (Vansina 1985, p. 149). Vansina writes,

This examination of the instruction given concerning oral traditions, of the controls exercised . . . brings out the fact that the traditions were often transmitted from one generation to the next by a method laid down for the purpose, and that in many societies without writing particular attention was paid to careful preservation and accurate transmission of these traditions.

(Vansina 1965, p. 36; see also pp. 28, 31, 36, 40)

Moreover, the message about Jesus coming to life again and that he was truly divine would have been utterly shocking to its initial audience (Jews living in the first century). Redman (2010, pp. 182–183) notes that psychological studies indicate that an event that a witness considers insignificant is often inaccurately and incompletely remembered compared to one to which a witness attaches significance and who would be motivated to bring the selective process of paying attention fully to bear on those events to remember the prominent or salient details. Redman also notes that events that are very surprising and have a high level of importance or emotional arousal (e.g. September 11) give rise to flashbulb memories—memories that are especially vivid and appear to be frozen in time, as though in a photograph, and that the experiences of those who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus would be expected to have formed flashbulb memories of these events.

While the greatest loss of memory usually occurs soon after an event, 'flashbulb' experiences are crucial in preventing early loss of detail (McIver 2011). Redman qualifies that research indicates that, like other memories, flashbulb memories deteriorate over time and may develop as one takes into consideration what is learned from discussion with others (Redman 2010, p. 184). However, as argued earlier, transmissions along complex 'nets' in communities with numerous intermittent repetitions by different members of the group would have helped to prevent deterioration of individual memories. Moreover, Stanton (2004, pp. 179–191) has argued that the earliest Christians used 'notebooks' to record the words and deeds of Jesus at an

early point and transmitted these alongside oral traditions, and these notebooks which aided the preservation of memory eventually contributed to the text of the New Testament.

Redman (2010, p. 186) likewise notes that psychological studies indicate that ‘if someone mentions some facet of an event to another witness, that facet is more likely to be remembered subsequently,’ and that ‘group memory appears to be more stable over time than individual memory.’ She nevertheless raises the concern that sometimes

things that did not happen may be incorporated because one person in a group made a mistake. If one eyewitness talks about the event in a confident way, this confidence can influence other witnesses to agree with her/him even if his/her perception is incorrect.

(*ibid.*)

Moreover,

in a situation where a witness feels pressured to produce a definitive answer, s/he may guess and then, over time the guess may be remembered more confidently as the witness remembers previous interpretations of the event rather than the event itself. This is likely to happen if the witness has not effectively encoded how certain s/he was about the answer first given.

(*ibid.*, p. 187)

Additionally, ‘in conversation, speakers may well wish to catch and maintain the interest of their audience or to justify their actions, and they will alter their accounts accordingly’ (*ibid.*, p. 188). Errors can subsequently become ‘frozen’ in the memory (*ibid.*, p. 187).

To address these concerns, I have argued that in the case concerning Jesus’ resurrection, the astonished ‘eyewitnesses’ would have repeatedly counter-checked with one another to make sure that they got the facts right (see Chapter 4); it is after all a message that meant life and death for the earliest Christians. Moreover, there were strong Jewish opposition with counter-memories if the disciples misremembered certain details (e.g. if they claimed that there was a guard at the tomb and there wasn’t). There were hostile and sceptical non-Christian Jewish witnesses who could (and did) challenge the Christian claims, for example by claiming that they stole the body (see Chapter 2), and who would challenge the distortions they hear if there were any. These factors would have served to correct misinterpretations of the events.

Additionally, in their society the ‘eyewitnesses’ of Jesus would have served as an authoritative control over the transmission of traditions, so it is unreasonable to think that the Gospels were a false representation of what the eyewitnesses really saw and heard (Bauckham 2006, pp. 290–318). There

would have been multiple lines of communications bringing the proclaimed message from and back to the initial proclaimers who could verify what was proclaimed originally. While non-eyewitnesses would also have shared stories about Jesus and they might have distorted them as they shared (Ehrman 2016, pp. 78–84), Kruger (2016) points out that the early Christians would have had a source (the initial proclaimers) to which they could turn to find reliable and authoritative versions of what Jesus said and did.

Ehrman (2016, chapter 2) claims that the eyewitnesses could not have controlled the transmission because they stayed in Jerusalem while other evangelists proclaimed the gospel elsewhere and the gospels were written elsewhere. However, Ehrman ignores the consideration (established in Chapter 2) that early Christians were quite mobile, Jewish Christians would have travelled yearly to Jerusalem for festivals, and a well-attested ‘networking’ among early Christians existed (Bauckham 2006; Hurtado 2013).

Ehrman (2016, pp. 78–84) also argues that, while eyewitnesses might hear a distorted version and correct it, there is no guarantee that everybody would have heard the correction and shared the corrected version from then on. Kruger (2016) notes that stories of ‘distorted memories’ of Jesus circulating in the early church alongside accurate memories may in fact explain why we have books like the Acts of Peter and the Gospel of Nicodemus, which are evidently historically unreliable. However, this does not imply that all the books about Jesus are unreliable.<sup>4</sup> As noted in other parts of this book, there are indications that the early Christians who authored the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ resurrection valued history far more than the Gnostics who authored books such as the Acts of Peter and the Gospel of Nicodemus.

To elaborate, ancient societies and traditions do make distinctions between tales and accounts, and history is valued more in some societies than in others (Bauckham 2006, pp. 273–274). That the early Christian societies (including those to which the Gospels’ authors belonged) valued history can be argued from the fact that they already had a written body of authoritative scripture which took history seriously. In the Old Testament, God’s faithfulness is manifested in historical events, and such historical events are used as the basis for encouraging faithfulness in believers (*ibid.*, pp. 274–275). Early Christians were concerned about salvation, Jesus was understood as the source of salvation, and this salvation was understood within the thoroughly Jewish context of Christian origins (*ibid.*, p. 277). It was the fulfilment of the promises made by the God of Israel, a new and decisive eschatological chapter in God’s history with his people and the

4 Ehrman has offered other arguments to try to show that the Gospels are historically unreliable, such as claiming that the Gospels contain contradictions. Other scholars have responded to these arguments, such as arguing that these contradictions are only apparent but not genuine contradictions. See, for example, [www.ehrmanproject.com/](http://www.ehrmanproject.com/).

world, and thus the events of Jesus' history were charged with all the history-making significance of the activity of Israel's God (*ibid.*). As Bauckham argues, 'At the deepest level, it was for profoundly theological reasons—their understanding of God and salvation—that early Christians were concerned with faithful memory of the real past story of Jesus' (*ibid.*). Since the early Christian societies valued history, they would have wanted to get closer to the eyewitness sources if possible, since such sources were widely regarded in the ancient world as the best (Eddy and Boyd 2007, p. 286; Keener 2003, p. 21).

It might be objected that, once the tradition diffused into the social framework of the early communities and became publicly available and authoritative, there would be little reason for the early Christians (e.g. the Gospels' authors) to search out individual eyewitness informants for their materials (Kirk 2017, p. 108). However, Paul's mentioning that most of the 'more than five hundred' witnesses of one of Jesus' resurrection appearances were still around (1 Cor. 15:6) shows that historical eyewitnesses continued to be valued even while the authority of the tradition is conveyed; he is saying in effect, 'If anyone wants to check this tradition, a very large number of the eyewitnesses are still alive and can be seen and heard' (Bauckham 2006, p. 308).

Therefore, the individuals (Cephas, James) and groups (the Twelve, 'more than five hundred brethren,' the apostles) who were said to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus by the very early tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 must have been very important to the early church. Since the early Christian societies were concerned to consult eyewitness sources if possible, they would have checked out these individuals and groups, as most of them were still alive when 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 was circulated. Additionally, Luke 1:1–4 indicates that 'eyewitnesses' of Jesus did not merely start traditions concerning Jesus and withdraw from view but remained for many years the known sources and guarantors of these traditions (Bauckham 2006, p. 30).<sup>5</sup>

Could the disciples have continued to believe that Jesus resurrected even when counterchecking with and among the 'eyewitnesses' failed, as a result of confirmation bias and/or self-deception? For example, some people might have wanted to believe so much in the afterlife that they ignored any logic or evidence to the contrary, and only 'cherry picked' that evidence which seems to support his preconceived conclusion.<sup>6</sup> A disciple's own subjective religious experiences might have strongly biased his assessment of the evidence for and against Jesus' resurrection. Whittenberger (2011) proposes that leaders of the group such as Peter or John had individual hallucinations, and 'most of the others would have gone along with them. Heightened emotion,

5 For further arguments, in particular rebuttals to arguments by form critics, see Bauckham (2006, pp. 240–357) and Eddy and Boyd (2007, esp. pp. 274–275).

6 I thank Harold Leong for raising this objection.

pressures to conform, group loyalty, and wishful thinking would have facilitated the adoption of the resurrection belief by most of the group.’

In reply, belief in the afterlife was already present among first-century people, and thus the earliest Christians would not have required the resurrection of Jesus to persuade them of this. On the other hand, as explained in Chapter 2, there were sceptics of bodily resurrection within the Christian communities (1 Cor. 15:12) and that the cost of falsification would have been high. Additionally, as argued in Chapters 3 and 4, the earliest Christians believed that if they were false witnesses they would misrepresent God and face judgment in the afterlife, their faith would be in vain and they would be ‘of all people most to be pitied’ (1 Cor. 15:17–19). Given this context, it would have been practically impossible to get three different groups of people involving hundreds of people to hallucinate and to deceive themselves in wishful thinking and yet being able to persist as ‘eyewitnesses’ for decades in the context of persecution without letting out the deception.

Concerning subjective experiences and group loyalty, as noted in Chapter 2, varied evidence indicates that the earliest Christians did not shy away from disagreements with influential leaders in matters of theological importance. Christopher Rowland observes that within Jewish and early Christian sources there was considerable suspicion of claims to authority via dreams, visions, or other charismatic experiences (Rowland 2002, pp. 272–275). It is true that some such experiences were seen as fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy and were expected as well as encouraged in Pauline congregations, but this does not imply that these experiences were to be accepted without challenge in those communities. On the other hand, there was evidence of warning against dreams (Sirach 34:1–8), the exhortation to judge the sayings of prophets (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:29) and to test everything (1 Thess. 5:19–22). While Paul frequently refers to his own revelations, this evidently did not secure the widespread agreement of other Christians concerning Paul’s views. On the contrary, there was evidence of discussions and disagreements concerning Paul’s views and interpretations of biblical texts related to diverse issues, such as the propriety and rules governing Jews and Gentiles eating together, dietary habits, circumcision, and works of the law. Given these considerations and the evidence of initial doubts among the earliest Christians concerning Jesus’ resurrection (see Chapter 3), if the experiences of the ‘eyewitnesses’ were hallucinatory experiences that involved only one or a small number of Christians at a time and/or if counterchecking failed, those who did not have such experiences would not have agreed to just go along and face persecution.

With regards to heightened emotion, one might object that psychological studies have indicated that collective excitement may increase suggestibility (distortion of perception) and diminish critical ability, causing people to set aside their critical set, their scrutiny of information, and their desire to verify, or enhance the development of less stringent norms of verification (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007, p. 170). Nevertheless, DiFonzo and Bordia

(2007, p. 175) go on to observe that distortion is reduced when people are allowed to verbally interact. The apostles were proclaiming the gospel to outsiders in open groups; they and their audiences had years to reflect on what they proclaimed, and their hearers heard them first-hand.

Moreover, the collective excitement scenario does not fit well with the full scope of historical evidence of earliest Christianity. While sceptics might claim that incidents such as that portrayed in Acts 2 indicate group ecstasy, Keim (1883, p. 352) observes, ‘there is still more of calm consideration and sober reflection to be seen in the action of all the Apostles, and most conspicuously in the friction between the Pauline and the Jewish-Christian missions.’ The defender of the intramental hypothesis would have difficulty explaining how (in the words of Keim)

the violent agitation of men’s minds—which discharged itself in visions, and by visions created for Christianity its first expression, its first confession—so very soon afterwards found its completion or indeed its termination in conditions marked by clearness and soberness of mind.  
(*ibid.*)

Keim sarcastically remarks,

Not one of the five hundred repeats the ecstasy, and all the cases of ecstasy irrevocably end with the fifth vision. What a contradiction of high-swollen enthusiasm and of sudden ebb even to the point of disappearance! Just when fervid minds are beginning to grow fanatical, the fanaticism absolutely and entirely ceases. It might be possible that a few less ardent natures, though perhaps not Peter, rather James, would quickly recover their mental equilibrium; but in the greater number of the twelve and of the five hundred a movement which had burst the dams would certainly not be stayed in an instant; and yet the narrative says nothing of a third vision to the twelve and nothing of a second to the five hundred.

(Keim 1883, p. 356)

Against apologists who have argued that hallucinations would not have inspired radical transformations of character in the apostles such that they were willing to die for their faith, Carrier (1999) objects that this is absurd since the nature of hallucination is such that the apostles most likely would not have been aware that they were hallucinating. However, as noted in Chapter 4, scientific studies have indicated that, among those who had hallucinations, many do subsequently achieve insight that their experience is hallucinatory after the experience has ended. For example, in the study by Barber and Calverly (1964) discussed in Chapter 4, it is noteworthy that among the 49% who had hallucinations that the recording of White Christmas was played, the vast majority (44%) were aware that the recording was



not played. The soberness of mind noted by Keim, the evidence of the disciples doubting Jesus' resurrection initially (see Chapter 2), and the failure of fact checking would have led to this insight.

Against fact checking, Carrier claims that early Christians were more concerned about other things than facts: joining Christian communities at that time provided various benefits, such as offering a company of morally sincere members which distributed material resources more fairly than most other social institutions of the day, yielding an immense, shared emotional satisfaction and sense of belonging. Other benefits included receiving aid in bad times and nursing when sick and dying, and enjoying a far more secure family life for women (Carrier 2009, pp. 142–143).

In reply, Hurtado points out that there were also strong reasons *not* to become a Christian in the early centuries. These include detrimental judicial, political, and social consequences. For example, one could become a Mithraist, an Isiac, and so on and continue to take part in the worship of one's inherited deities of household, city, and nation. However, if one became a Christian, one would be expected to desist from worship of all other deities. That would have made it difficult for one to function socially and politically given the ubiquitous place of the gods in all spheres of social and political activity (Hurtado 2016a). Thus, while different people may have converted for different reasons, it isn't the case that there were clear-cut social benefits which would have obliterated the motive for fact checking. On the contrary, the earliest Christians evidently thought that if Jesus did not resurrect, then Christianity would have been falsified and they would have suffered for nothing (1 Cor. 15:17f)—this shows that the earliest Christians were concerned about the factuality of Jesus' resurrection.

Carrier (2009, p. 201) claims that most people in the first century did in fact reject Christianity, and he contests the claim that the few who converted did so because they checked the facts. Carrier argues, 'None of that evidence, whatever it was, persuaded Paul at all. So it could not possibly have been "irrefutable." Paul had to see God himself to be convinced!' (ibid., p. 336).

In reply, there is no evidence that those who rejected Christianity in the first century did so because they falsified the claims of Jesus' resurrection. It is true that those who converted might have done so because of various reasons. However, my argument is that fact checking is highly plausible given the considerations I mentioned previously, and that if fact checking failed, those who had converted would have left the faith given that it would have been shown to be in vain (1 Cor. 15:17) and given the context of persecution. In Paul's case, there was no indication that prior to his conversion he was already aware of all the evidence for Jesus' resurrection (e.g. the appearance to 'more than five hundred brethren'). On the other hand, it is easy to explain their rejection—including the rejection by the pre-conversion Paul (= Saul)—as a result of the Christian doctrine of a 'crucified God,' which would have been regarded by many in antiquity as a shameless impertinence

and absurdity' (Hengel 1995, p. 383). Given the Jews' strongly held notion of divine transcendence and their widespread expectation of a Messiah who would deliver them from foreign powers, it is easy to explain why the claim that a person shamefully crucified by the Romans was the Messiah and was truly divine would have been extremely difficult for these Jewish opponents to accept. This is shown by the fact that, although there were a number of messianic movements between BC 150 and AD 150, these did not survive after the violent death of their founders in the hands of their enemies (Wright 2003, p. 699). Although the followers of these messianic figures had invested much in their cause, in none of these cases was there successful attempts to rationalize away their deaths. Additionally, in no other case is the Messianic figure worshipped as Creator, unlike the case of Jesus (Loke 2017a). Given this cultural context, in which the Jews would have been highly cynical of 'predictions' about the Messiah's death and resurrection, it would have been easier for the disciples to leave the group and find another job or another Messiah. As Wright (1993, p. 63) argues concerning the other messianic movements,

In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. Unless, of course, he was.

#### 7.4 Comparative case studies

Ehrman (2016, pp. 95–100) claims that the transmission of stories of Jesus is analogous to the transmission of stories of the Ba'al Shem Tov (the 'Besht'; c. AD 1700–1760), known as the founder of Hasidism, a Jewish mystical movement. Written accounts of his life claim access to eyewitness testimonies of his miracles including raising the dead. The earliest account of such stories was *Shivḥé ha-Beshṭ*, written by his disciple Dov Baer in 1814, 54 years after his death.

However, Kirk (2017, pp. 98–99) observes that unlike the case of Jesus, where there were communities passing on the traditions (including that of Jesus' own resurrection) right from the beginning, as attested by the letters of Paul written around 20–32 years after Jesus' death, in the case of Besht there was no such community with a distinct collective identity at the beginning. Hasidism coalesced as a distinct movement only two generations after the Besht (Rosman 2013, pp. xxx–xxxii, 121–126, 169–174). In this case, the transmission of traditions is not by communities but by individuals, which is susceptible to the kind of 'telephone game' distortion

that Ehrman described. Moreover, in the case of Jesus' resurrection, there were multiple early sources mentioning Jesus' resurrection as foundational for earliest Christianity and for which the followers stake their lives here and thereafter, and where multiple 'eyewitnesses' were known to the readers (e.g. the Corinthians) and can be checked by them because many were still alive (1 Cor. 15:6; see Chapter 2). Whereas in the case of Besht there is only one major source written 54 years after his death and there is no evidence that it was the 'miracles' (rather than, say, the mystical teachings) that was foundational for the movement from the beginning.

For an example of cognitive dissonance in new religious sects, Komarnitsky (2009, pp. 76, 80) cites the case concerning Sabbatai Zevi, a seventeenth-century Jewish teacher who claimed to be Messiah but who converted to Islam after he was captured by hostile Muslim forces. Instead of abandoning their beliefs, a number of Zevi's followers rationalized how he had only 'temporarily converted' or was 'destroying Islam from within.'

However, Habermas (1989) notes that most of his followers admitted that they had been mistaken. While for Sabbatai's death in 1676 there were some who claimed that he resurrected or did not die but only appeared to do so, there were apparently no claims that Sabbatai appeared alive afterwards. By contrast, there is no indication that the earliest Christians (e.g. the Twelve, James, or Paul) admitted that they had been mistaken. On the contrary, as argued in previous chapters there was evidence of widespread and persistent agreement among them that he was Messiah, truly divine, and resurrected, and that he appeared alive to various individuals and groups.

Komarnitsky (2014) also cites the case which has the most striking parallels with Jesus: the case of Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1902–1994), an outstanding rabbi ('Rebbe') and popular leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. A personality cult grew around him, and a proportion of his followers exalted him as the Messiah ('Moshiach') who would usher in the End Times apocalypse. His death in 1994 caused cognitive dissonance for the messianists. Instead of abandoning their beliefs, a number of followers sought to overcome this dissonance by denying that he is dead; some even rationalize and speak of his 'resurrection' in the context of religious ridicule and scepticism and think of him as even more powerfully at work than before (Marcus 2001, p. 396).

In reply, Marcus (2001, p. 397, n. 74) observes that 'there is not (yet?) in Chabad messianism a tradition about a well-defined series of resurrection appearances of the Rebbe, including collective appearances, comparable to the narratives at the ends of the Gospels or in 1 Cor 15.5–8.' This is dis-analogous to earliest Christianity, in which such resurrection appearances began soon after Jesus' death and generated belief in his resurrection (see Chapter 2). Moreover, the source of belief in the Rebbe's resurrection could have been influenced by Christianity. As Marcus (2001, p. 382) observes, 'it is possible that some of these parallels are not "pure", i.e. they may reflect not just a comparable messianic excitement reacting upon a similar base of

Jewish tradition, but rather the influence of Christianity on Chabad—even though Lubavitchers vociferously deny this possibility.<sup>7</sup> There was also no comparable persecution of the Chabad messianists either or expectation of similar persecution, for unlike the earliest Christian’s Messiah, the Chabad’s Messiah did not die in the context of persecution. More importantly, unlike Christianity, the belief that the Rebbe is the Messiah, resurrected or divine, is not widely held by the leaders of his followers after his death. On the contrary, many of them acknowledge that he did not resurrect and are still awaiting his resurrection from his tomb.<sup>8</sup> Schneersohn’s emissaries have fiercely defended the views of Schneersohn himself by criticizing those who exalted his status (Skolnik and Berenbaum 2007, Vol. 18, p. 149). In a statement issued by the Central Committee of Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbis in United States and Canada on February 19, 1998, the highest-ranked leaders of the movement condemned the deification of any human being as ‘contrary to the core and foundation of the Jewish faith,’ and they mentioned, ‘The preoccupation with identifying [the deceased] Rebbe as Moshiah is clearly contrary to the Rebbe’s wishes.’ By contrast, there is no indication that the strict monotheistic Jewish leaders of the earliest Christian movement (i.e. the Twelve, James, or Paul) condemned the deification of Jesus as ‘contrary to the core and foundation of the Jewish faith,’ and there is no indication that they mentioned that ‘the preoccupation with identifying the deceased Jesus as Messiah or as truly divine is clearly contrary to Jesus’ wishes.’ On the contrary, there was evidence of widespread agreement that he was Messiah, truly divine, and resurrected (Loke 2017a).

## 7.5 Other possible combination hypotheses

It has been shown that the aforementioned combination hypotheses do not work. Could there be other combinations of hypotheses which may work?

To evaluate this possibility, it should first be noted that a number of naturalistic hypotheses are so unworkable, as have been shown in previous chapters of this book, that they will not be able to contribute anything in

7 Marcus nevertheless goes on to insist, ‘But even if the possibility of Christian influence on Chabad messianism cannot be totally discounted, it is still instructive to see the ways in which messianism can express itself in a Jewish arena that in some ways parallels that in which Christianity arose. Such a study does not definitely show us what *did* occur in the first century, but it does open our eyes to what *might have* happened—and warns us against overconfident assertions about what is and is not possible within a Jewish environment.’ In reply, Marcus’ arguments for what might have happened on the basis of the Chabad movement is contaminated by possible Christian influence on the movement, whereas there was no such genuine analogies or precedents to the worship of Jesus (Hurtado 2003; Loke 2017a) or to the resurrection of Jesus (Wright 2003) that could have influenced the origin of Christianity’s doctrines concerning these.

8 [www.nytimes.com/1998/06/29/nyregion/messiah-fervor-for-late-rabbi-divides-many-lubavitchers.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/29/nyregion/messiah-fervor-for-late-rabbi-divides-many-lubavitchers.html)

combination with other hypotheses. These dead ends include the legends hypothesis in view of the very early date of the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–11 (as well as other considerations discussed in Chapter 2), the no experience hypothesis in view of the consideration that the ‘eyewitnesses’ would have leaked out the truth that they did not experience anything when persecuted (as well as other considerations discussed in Chapter 3), the swoon hypothesis which would have convinced no one of Jesus’ resurrection but only of his need for medical attention, and the escape hypothesis in view of the unreasonableness of thinking that the enemies and friends of Jesus all failed to recognize that he was not crucified.

What about the remaining two hypotheses? The best combination of the intramental and mistaken identity hypotheses which the sceptic can postulate is as follows. The sceptic can claim that the intramental hypothesis explains the experiences of only one group of people (the Twelve) as well as the experiences of Peter, James, and Paul individually, while the mistaken identity hypothesis explains the experiences of the five hundred and the other apostles besides the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:6–7). The reasons why the latter two groups misidentified ‘Jesus’ could be (a) they were not as familiar with Jesus as were the Twelve and James, and/or (b) their experiences of the ‘resurrected Jesus’ were vague (due to circumstances such as seeing ‘Jesus’ from a faraway distance, for example). Sceptics might suggest that the disciples came up with the notion of ‘spiritual body’ by combining experiences which (unknown to them) were caused by mistaken identity and hallucinations. This combination is the best, because other possible combinations would involve postulations which (in view of the considerations explained in previous chapters of this book) face intractable problems, such as group hallucinations one after another, misidentifications by those who had lived with Jesus for a while (i.e. the Twelve, including Peter, and James), or an appearance of a ‘naturally physical Jesus’ to Paul.

Nevertheless, this combination still faces serious difficulties.

First, it does not explain how the tomb of Jesus became empty. Other naturalistic hypotheses would have to be added to explain the empty tomb, and I have argued previously that they can be ruled out if there were guards at the tomb (and I have argued that there were).

Second, this combination as well as others which have been discussed previously would still require nonevidenced assumptions such as Paul having psychological factors which predisposed him to hallucinate Jesus (see Chapter 4), and it is thus *ad hoc*.

Third, the postulation of a group hallucination of the Twelve is unworkable given the likelihood of its members’ varying mental states and the argument against group hallucination explained in Chapter 4 (i.e. without a corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, the mental states internal to each person within the group would not agree on various details concerning their experience of the external world). A perception of something extramental and independent of their mental states would have

been required to remove all the residual doubts from among all of them, such that they were willing to die for Jesus' bodily resurrection (Chapter 3) and to worship him as truly divine.

Indeed, as argued in Chapter 4, the Twelve would have required pretty 'solid' evidence—such as repeated, multi-sensorial experiences of 'Jesus'—to persuade themselves and their audience that what they saw was a bodily resurrected Jesus and not a hallucination, a ghost, or a vision (cf. Wright 2007, pp. 210–211) and to come to agreement among themselves that this was the case. Multi-sensorial experiences involving the Twelve such as conversing with 'Jesus,' touching him, and eating with him (this would have left behind causal effects when 'Jesus' was gone) are widely attested in first-century documents (Luke 24:30–31, Luke 24:36–43, Acts 1:4, 10:41, John 20:20, 27, 21:12–13, Ignatius *Smyrn.* 3:3), and I have argued for the historicity of such experiences in Chapter 4.

Fourth, as argued previously, the process of counterchecking by the groups of 'eyewitnesses' among themselves and by their audiences, together with other considerations, would have rendered unworkable the hypothesis that the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances were the result of hallucinations, exaggerations, memory distortion, and/or confirmation bias.

Finally, given the critical importance that Paul attaches to the resurrection and to the witnesses (1 Cor. 15:3–11, 17), Paul would not have suggested to the Corinthians who found the idea of bodily resurrection unbelievable to check out the witnesses (1 Cor. 15:6, 12), if vague or unconvincing descriptions of 'Jesus' were what they testified. Furthermore, given the context of persecution and the general scepticism about people rising from the dead, it is unreasonable to think that more than one group of people (the five hundred, the other apostles besides the Twelve) would have wanted to serve as crucial witnesses and be able to persuade their sceptical audiences of Jesus' resurrection, if what they experienced were vague or unconvincing perceptions of Jesus in the first place. Therefore, given these circumstances it is unreasonable to think that more than one group of people misidentified Jesus.

## 7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that combination hypotheses have failed to refute the conclusions established in the previous chapters. It can therefore be concluded that the historical evidence indicates that the tomb of Jesus was empty and that there were people in mid-first century CE who claimed that they had seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion, they truly saw something, what they saw was not caused intramentally but extramentally, and the extramental entity was not anyone else but the same Jesus who died on the cross. Therefore, Jesus resurrected.

# 8 Problem of miracles

## 8.1 Introduction

For many people, one of the greatest difficulties for accepting the conclusion that Jesus resurrected is undoubtedly its apparently miraculous nature. On the other hand, New Testament scholar Graham Twelftree observes that there has been an increased interest in the study of Jesus' 'miracles' in contemporary historical Jesus scholarship. This is contributed by numerous factors, which include 'the failure to show that miracles originated outside the Jesus tradition'; 'the increased confidence in the historical reliability of the gospel traditions' (Twelftree 2011, pp. 2518–2519); 'an increasingly rigorous philosophical and theological defense of the possibility of miracles'; and the 'recognition that the miracle traditions have not arisen in an entirely credulous world' (*ibid.*, n. 10). In this chapter I shall address the problem of miracles with respect to the resurrection of Jesus.

## 8.2 Are miracles impossible?

A number of philosophers and scientists have rejected miracles, claiming that they 'contradict the order of creation' (Reimarus) or are impossible *a priori* (Monod) (Morrison 2001). Following David Hume's (Hume 1748/2000) definition of a miracle as 'a violation of the laws of nature,' Stephen Hawking claims that the laws of nature 'should hold everywhere and at all times; otherwise they wouldn't be laws. There could be no exceptions or miracles' (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010, pp. 29, 34, 171).

In reply, one should note the distinction between laws of logic and laws of nature/order of creation. Laws of logic (e.g. the law of non-contradiction) are necessarily true and inviolable (illustration: there cannot be a shapeless cube in any universe; 'shapeless' and 'cube' would cancel each other out and there would be nothing), and this impossibility can be known *a priori*. Laws of nature, however, can be 'violated.' In fact, scientists have argued that certain laws of nature break down at the Big Bang and that there can be different laws of nature in different universes. Miracles relate to laws of nature rather than laws of logic. One response therefore is to argue that the

Creator of the laws of nature can violate them. Another response is to argue that miracles do not violate laws of nature, only their universality (Colwell 1983). Yet another response is to argue that, instead of understanding a miracle as ‘a violation of laws of nature,’ it can be understood as ‘an event which would not have been produced by the natural causes operative at a certain time and place’ (Moreland and Craig 2003, pp. 566–568). In other words, a miracle is ‘an act by some power external to the natural world’ (Bartholomew 2000, p. 81). Using the analogy of the law of arithmetic, Lewis writes,

If this week I put a thousand pounds in the drawer of my desk, add two thousand next week and another thousand the week thereafter, the laws of arithmetic allow me to predict that the next time I come to my drawer, I shall find four thousand pounds. But suppose when I next open the drawer, I find only one thousand pounds, what shall I conclude? That the laws of arithmetic have been broken? Certainly not! I might more reasonably conclude that some thief has broken the laws of the State and stolen three thousand pounds out of my drawer. One thing it would be ludicrous to claim is that the laws of arithmetic make it impossible to believe in the existence of such a thief or the possibility of his intervention. On the contrary, it is the normal workings of those laws that have exposed the existence and activity of the thief.

(Lewis 2001, p. 62)

J.L. Mackie notes,

The laws of nature . . . describe the ways in which the world—including, of course, human beings—works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it.

(Mackie 1982, pp. 19–20)

Unless we assume that causes other than natural causes do not exist (which would commit the fallacy of begging the question against Theism), we should not regard miracles to be impossible.

Historian Brad Gregory (2006, pp. 137–138) notes,

Any conviction that precludes in principle the possibilities that transcendent, spiritual reality exists, that divine revelation is possible, that divinely worked miracles occur or have occurred, that there is an after-life, and the like, cannot itself be demonstrated *a posteriori*, in our present or in any realistically foreseeable state of knowledge. To verify such a conviction with respect to miracles, for example, would among other things require observation of all natural occurrences at all times and places, including those in the past—a patent impossibility. The



undeniably fruitful *a priori* assumption of metaphysical naturalism in the natural sciences is not and cannot be a proof that in fact, for example, no miraculous events of the sort described in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament have ever occurred. Since it is impossible to verify that none of them occurred, it is possible that some of them might have occurred. Therefore to assert that none of them *could* have occurred is to assert a metaphysical belief about reality, to pass from the *postulate* to the *dogma* of metaphysical naturalism (emphasis in original).

The point here is that a historian qua historian should not beg the question for or against the possibility that Jesus resurrected miraculously. Behe's example and Licona's thought experiment noted in Chapter 1 nicely illustrate how methodological restriction can hinder one from finding out what happened in the past, and that history involves humans but should be open to the possibility of human interaction with non-human persons. If a historian were to exclude *a priori* the possibility that Jesus' resurrection was miraculously caused by God, it would also import unwarranted theological and philosophical assumptions into his/her judgment. As an example of such unwarranted importation, Troeltsch (1898/1991) claims that the same kinds of causal laws and natural processes operative today were operative in the past (the principle of analogy), and that the universe is a closed system of natural antecedents and consequences (the principle of correlation). Thus miraculous intervention by God in history is excluded on the grounds that such events are not observed today and the assumption that the universe is causally closed. In reply, the background assumptions of Troeltsch's principles of analogy and correlation beg the question against the existence of a God who would cause miraculous events in history only in certain unusual circumstances in order to reveal himself through these events. What we do not see now does not imply it did not happen in the past. As Evans explains,

Many religious believers have thought that God would only perform miracles in quite unusual circumstances. If one believed that the incarnation of Jesus was a historical event that made possible the redemption of humanity and the whole created order, one might reasonably believe that miracles might accompany that event even if they do not occur today.

(Evans 1996, p. 198)

### 8.3 Are miracles improbable?

Sceptics might argue that even if miracles are possible, we have overwhelming evidence against believing their occurrence. Hume writes,

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle,

from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.

(Hume 1748/2000, pp. 86–87)

Referring to the resurrection of Jesus, Hume writes,

But it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed, in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.

(*ibid.*, p. 87)

One might object that Hume is begging the question by assuming that ‘unalterable experience’ and ‘uniform experience’ are against every miraculous event. As C.S. Lewis writes,

No, of course we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely ‘uniform experience’ against miracles, in other words, they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately, we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we know all the reports are false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle.

(Lewis 2001, p. 162)

To avoid the charge of begging the question, a sceptic might modify Hume’s argument such that, instead of assuming that our experience against miracle is unalterable and uniform, s/he cites multiple experiences of (say) people who have not experienced miracles, and concludes that we have overwhelming evidence against believing their occurrence. A sceptic might argue that rationality requires that we believe what is most probable and that our experience indicates that miracles are the least probable events. Ehrman (2003a, pp. 228–229) argues that because historians can only establish what probably happened and a miracle is highly improbable, the historian cannot establish that a miracle occurred.’

One might challenge Ehrman’s assumption that the probability of a miracle is very low. Licona (2010, pp. 196–197) asks,

But how does the nontheist historian know this? Testimonies of God’s intervention in history occur with every claim to answered prayer. Although many claims of God’s intervention could in reality be coincidence, many claims of coincidence could in reality be God’s intervention.

Plenty of people have claimed to have experienced miracles such as divine healing even today (Keener 2011, pp. 264–768). A recent publication by

Harvard University Press notes a survey which indicates that 73% of US medical doctors think that miraculous healing occurs today; the publication also notes that there have been documented cases of tumours disappearing and the blind healed after prayer (Brown 2012). Sceptics would need to assess these cases carefully rather than dismissively make sweeping claims such as ‘uniform human experience is characterised by an absence of miracles.’ While one might not have experienced a miracle oneself, one should consider the experiences of others as well as the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection with an open mind. A reasonable person should be willing to let his/her presuppositions be challenged by the evidence (McKnight 2005).

More fundamentally, Ehrman’s reasoning is flawed, for he fails to ‘distinguish between the probability of a miracle claim considered apart from the evidence and the probability of the claim given that evidence’ (McGrew 2013). Ehrman assumes that the former is very low. However, the latter may be high given the specific evidence for that particular miraculous claim. Craig explains this using the Bayesian calculus.<sup>1</sup>

$$\frac{\Pr (R/B\&E) = \Pr (R/B) \times \Pr (E/B\&R)}{\Pr (R/B) \times \Pr (E/B\&R) + \Pr (\text{not-}R/B) \times \Pr (E/B\&\text{not-}R)}$$

First, Craig explains that Ehrman’s argument that the resurrection is improbable (i.e. the  $\Pr (R/B\&E)$  is very low) solely because the background information that miracles are improbable (i.e. the  $\Pr (R/B)$  is very low) is misconceived, as it completely ignores all the other relevant factors such as the probabilities of the naturalistic alternatives. Thus, even if the  $\Pr (R/B)$  is very low, the probability for the resurrection  $\Pr (R/B\&E)$  could still be very high if the probabilities concerning the naturalistic alternatives ( $\Pr (\text{not-}R/B) \times \Pr (E/B\&\text{not-}R)$ ) are very low (Craig and Ehrman 2006, pp. 14–16). Craig goes on to say that while the Bayesian approach is helpful for illustrating the error of Hume, Ehrman, and others, he has reservations about using it to argue for Jesus’ resurrection because of the difficulty with assigning a numerical value for the prior probability of Jesus’ resurrection. Thus, he uses the approach of inference to the best explanation to argue for Jesus’ resurrection. I discuss the difficulty concerning prior probability at the end of Section 8.4).

1 As used by Craig in Craig and Ehrman (2006, pp. 14–16). He explains, ‘B = Background knowledge; E = Specific evidence (empty tomb, postmortem appearances, etc.); R = Resurrection of Jesus. Then  $\Pr (R/B)$  is called the *intrinsic probability* of the resurrection. It tells how probable the resurrection is given our general knowledge of the world.  $\Pr (E/B\&R)$  is called the *explanatory power* of the resurrection hypothesis. It tells how probable the resurrection makes the evidence of the empty tomb and so forth. These two factors form the numerator of this ratio. Basically,  $\Pr (\text{not-}R/B) \times \Pr (E/B\&\text{not-}R)$  represent the intrinsic probability and explanatory power of all the naturalistic alternatives to Jesus’ resurrection.’

Ehrman's error is similar to that committed by Rachels and Rachels (2012, p. 50). They ask us to think of a situation in which someone tells you that a dead man came back to life. They then argue,

We have to ask which is more likely: (a) That a dead man came back to life (b) That the report is mistaken. Of course it is more likely that the report is mistaken. We know that often people get things wrong, make mistakes, exaggerate, and even lie. These are common occurrences. On the other hand, we have never known someone truly dead to return to life. Therefore, a reasonable person will conclude that the report is probably mistaken.

(*ibid.*)

The problem with Rachels and Rachels' argument can be illustrated by thinking about another situation: suppose you and your community grew up in a hot jungle and have never seen ice, and someone from Europe visited you and told you that water can be frozen. If you say, 'Of course it is more likely that the report is mistaken. We know that often people get things wrong, make mistakes, exaggerate, and even lie. These are common occurrences. On the other hand, we have never known that water can be frozen. Therefore, a reasonable person will conclude that the report is probably mistaken'—you would be wrong! The moral of this story is that Rachels and Rachels' argument is too sloppy; it fails to consider the specific evidence for the particular case in question. While there have been many mistaken reports, we should consider the evidence that is specific to the particular case of Jesus' resurrection.

Second, why think that the Pr (R/B) for the resurrection is very low? We can certainly grant that the Pr (R/B) for 'Jesus rose from the dead *naturalistically*' is extremely low, but the Pr (R/B) for 'Jesus rose from the dead *supernaturalistically*' must be 1 if an omnipotent God wants to raise Jesus from the dead! One can only assert that the intrinsic probability for the resurrection is very low if one can show that it is probable that:

- a* God never exists, or
- b* God had ceased to exist, or
- c* even if He exists, it is probable that God would not want to raise Jesus from the dead.

Due to lack of space it is impossible in this chapter to go into a discussion on the probability of God's existence. Others and myself have argued elsewhere that there are good independent reasons (*viz.* the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments) for thinking that a God who can act supernaturally (e.g. by creating our universe) exists (Loke 2017b, 2019, forthcoming; Craig and Moreland, eds. 2009).

Alvin Plantinga has objected that the case for Jesus' resurrection suffers from the problem of dwindling probabilities. Plantinga argues that to reach

the conclusion for the truth of the resurrection and incarnation and other ‘great claims of the gospel’ on historical grounds, one would require a chain of propositions, starting from our background knowledge K for the existence of God (T), followed by

- A: God would want to make some sort of revelation to humankind;
- B: Jesus’ teachings were such that they could be sensibly interpreted and extrapolated to G, the great claims of the gospel (including the incarnation);
- C: Jesus rose from the dead;
- D: In raising Jesus from the dead, God endorsed his teachings; and
- E: The extension and extrapolation of Jesus’ teachings to G is true.

Plantinga argues that, even if we were to assign generous values (say, 0.9) for the probability of T, A, B, C, and D, when we calculate the probability of E by multiplying the conditional probability of one proposition on another or a set of others (e.g.  $0.9 \times 0.9 = 0.81$ ,  $0.81 \times 0.9 = 0.729$ ,  $0.729 \times 0.9 = 0.656$ , etc.), the probability dwindles to a minute value (note how the numbers in italics get smaller with each successive step). He therefore concludes that the historical argument is insufficient to support serious belief in doctrines such as the resurrection and incarnation (Plantinga 2000, pp. 268–280, 2006).

In response to this problem, McGrew points out that Plantinga’s blunder lies in falsely assuming that the probabilities of the background propositions are fixed. The fact of the matter is that, while background beliefs such as theism are premises for the resurrection (and for the incarnation), the resurrection can also serve as a premise for background beliefs such as theism. Thus, the probability of theism should be updated after considering the evidence for the resurrection (McGrew 2009, pp. 644–648).

McGrew gives the following analogy. Consider these two propositions.

- A: Alvin Plantinga exists.
- B: Alvin Plantinga sent me an email on March 3, 2007.

McGrew explains,

Let us suppose that, on the morning of March 3, 2007, you have never heard of Alvin Plantinga as a real person, never read any of his books or articles, and have no other specific evidence regarding his existence. Suppose that we attach to the name ‘Alvin Plantinga’ a Russellian definite description like ‘A philosopher of religion, presently teaching at Notre Dame, who is known for his development of a school of thought known as Reformed Epistemology.’ You might be able, with effort, to come up with a probability for A based on extremely general considerations such as whether the first and last names are common or uncommon, how many philosophers there are in the world and at Notre Dame, and the

like, but this is all. . . . But on the evening of March 3, you sit down at your computer, access your email, and up comes a note from someone introducing himself as Alvin Plantinga, describing himself more or less as in the definite description . . . it would be a terrible blunder if you actually took as  $P(A)$  on total evidence the probability it had in the morning and treated that as an upper bound on the probability for B. This would be flatly wrong, for both A and B must now be reevaluated on the strong evidence supporting B directly and A indirectly.

(*ibid.*, pp. 649–650)

McGrew points out that in most of our interactions with ordinary people, our strongest evidence for their existence is the direct evidence for the things they have done and said—for what we might call their revelations of themselves. Similarly, the incarnation and resurrection, supported by historical evidence, must be considered as revelations of God, and hence as additional evidence for God's existence. Thus the probability of background beliefs such as the probability of theism (this probability is based on the independent reasons mentioned earlier for thinking that God exists) cannot be regarded as fixed, but must be updated in light of the additional evidence for the incarnation and resurrection (*ibid.*).

A number of sceptics of the resurrection have attempted to show that, even if God exists, it is probable that he would not want to raise Jesus from the dead. Voltaire (1764/1901, p. 273) famously argued that ascribing miracles to God would indicate a lack of forethought:

It is impossible a being infinitely wise can have made laws to violate them . . . if He saw that some imperfections would arise from the nature of matter, He provided for that in the beginning; and, accordingly, He will never change anything in it.

However, McGrew (2013) notes that Paley (1794/1859, p. 12) and others replied that God in his foresight would have wanted to set up a universe with regularities that no mere human could abrogate and then suspended them so as to authenticate a revelation.

Martin objects that the intrinsic probability would be small even if God exists, because

- 1 Miracles have detrimental effects of impeding scientific progress as it is a violation of scientific laws, and great difficulties and controversies arise in identifying miracles. Since God would be able to achieve his purpose without these detrimental effects, he would not use miracles.
- 2 Even from a theistic perspective, violations of natural laws are relatively rare.
- 3 Even if God wants to send his Son to die for sinners and resurrect him, he could have done so on many other possible occasions, and therefore

the probability of God resurrecting his Son on *this* particular occasion must be low.

- 4 Both theists and non-theists agree that most alleged miracles later turn out to be false (Martin 2005a, pp. 46–52).<sup>2</sup>

In response, first, as noted earlier, rather than defining a miracle as ‘a violation of scientific laws,’ a miracle can be understood as ‘an event which would not have been produced by the natural causes operative at a certain time and place’ (Moreland and Craig 2003, pp. 566–568). Given that the Christian’s claim that Jesus resurrected is that he was raised *super-naturalistically*, that it is a claim about a single event rather than regular events, and that it is not a claim about how the universe normally works, it does not impede any scientific research about *naturalistic* events and how the universe normally works.

Second, miracles are identifiable; in particular, with respect to the resurrection of Jesus, the evidence for the event (e.g. the tomb was empty, the disciples claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion), together with the exclusion of the naturalistic alternatives and the presence of a relevant religious context, will entail sufficient epistemic justification for the conclusion of a miraculous resurrection.

Naturalistic alternatives are of two kinds: first, there are naturalistic alternatives *to* the resurrection event; i.e. Jesus did not rise from the dead; rather, the disciples stole the body and made up the claim to have seen him alive, or the disciples hallucinated, or Jesus did not die on the cross, etc. This kind of naturalistic alternatives have already been considered and excluded in previous chapters. Second, there are naturalistic alternatives *for* the resurrection event; i.e. Jesus did rise from the dead but it was not caused miraculously; rather it was caused naturally; e.g. it was a scientific anomaly or it was caused by aliens that are yet unknown to us. This kind of naturalistic alternative will be discussed later.

Third, factors such as the rarity of miracles, the many other possible occasions for God to resurrect his Son, and the fact that most alleged miracles turn out to be false does not imply that the probability that God resurrected Jesus on this particular occasion would be low, for these factors may well be irrelevant to God concerning whether he wanted to resurrect Jesus on this particular occasion.

In particular, it should be noted that the objection against the reasonableness of miracles based on the apparent infrequency of miracles does not

2 Martin has offered other arguments against the intrinsic probability of the resurrection (Martin 2004, 2005b). In response, Martin’s arguments (e.g. Jesus’ approval of slavery is immoral, Jesus’ argument that one is saved by following a strict moral code contradicts Swinburne’s atonement view, etc.) are cited from his own *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Martin 2002), a work which has been criticized for ignoring much of what has already been written in commentaries, journal articles, and monographs (Copan 2004).

work. When evaluating rare hypotheses, infrequency is not the main consideration; the main consideration is the reason for the infrequency. In the case of evaluating natural impersonal causes, infrequencies can help us exclude natural impersonal causes and naturalistic alternatives to Jesus' resurrection given that natural causes are supposed to act in predictable and law-like ways. For example, by thinking about the law-like causal pathways that are required to produce perceptions, we can determine that, without a corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, the mental states internal to each person within a group of people would not agree on various details concerning their experience of the external world. Given this reason it is no wonder that a recent study by Bergeron and Habermas (2015) concludes that collective hallucinations are not found in peer-reviewed medical literature. However a miraculous event is supposed to be caused by a supernatural personal free agent, and it is not unreasonable to think that an infrequent event happened as a result of a *personal* agent freely choosing to act in a certain unique way only on a special occasion.

Licona (2010, p. 175) asks us to suppose,

when my son was very young I completely supported his weight by holding his hands above his head and walked along side of a swimming pool while he walked on the water. The fact that billions of people have not walked on water does not influence the probability that my son did.

Indeed, because the experiences of those billions of people does not affect our understanding of the causal pathway involved in the event of Licona freely choosing to hold up his son. Thus infrequencies cannot help us exclude miracles given that a supernatural personal agent might freely choose to act in certain ways only on rare occasions. As philosopher Stephen Davis observes concerning the objection from rarity with regards to the resurrection of Jesus, the rarity of resurrections cannot be equated with improbability. He explains,

What is being ignored here is the fact that the Resurrection hypothesis involves the free choice of an agent, viz., God. This is why the rarity of Resurrections (which everyone will grant) cannot be equated with improbability. Suppose I want to buy a car, and I enter a lot where there are a thousand cars for sale, of which only one is red. Now what is the probability that I buy the red one? Clearly, that probability is not just a function of the infrequency of red cars in the sample. This is obviously because my selection of a car might not be entirely random as to colour. Indeed, I might freely choose to buy the red car precisely because of its uniqueness.  
(Davis 1999, p. 59)

The objection from infrequency of miracles begs the question against a God who may well choose to cause miraculous events only occasionally



in religiously significant contexts, for example, to confirm what certain religious leaders (such as Jesus) proclaimed has divine origin and to reveal himself through these events. Hence, the lack of frequency of bodily resurrections is not an adequate reason against the hypothesis that ‘Jesus rose from the dead super-naturalistically’ given that there is good evidence for this event, that all other naturalistic hypotheses can be reasonably excluded, and that a religiously significant context is present.

Martin objects that because God could have become incarnate and resurrected on an innumerable number of other occasions, it is unlikely that the incarnation and resurrection would have taken place in first-century Palestine. He gives the illustration that it is unlikely that a mother who has decided to pay her child’s debt and who could do this on an innumerable number of other occasions would (suppose we know of no reason why the parent might act at one time rather than another) settle her child’s debt on a particular day, say July 8 this year (Martin 2011, pp. 288–289).

But what if the child sees the money coming in on July 8? It would be ridiculous for him to doubt it just because his mother could have paid on other days. This illustrates that we should assess the evidence (‘seeing money coming in on July 8’) rather than objecting the way Martin did. The fact that there are many other possible occasions for the parent to pay ought not be taken to imply that the probability that she would pay on this particular day would be low, because there might be reasons why she would want to pay on this particular day, reasons that are perhaps unknown to us. In that case, the probability that she pays on this particular day is not just a function of the number of other days available. For Martin to justify his objection, he would have to bear the burden of proof to read the omniscient mind of God so as to ensure that there is no reason why God would want to incarnate and resurrect Jesus in first-century Palestine, and this he has failed to do.

Martin might object, ‘But doesn’t the Christian have to bear the burden of proof to show that God has good reason to incarnate and resurrect Jesus in first-century Palestine, rather than, say, in the second century, third century, etc.?’ No, just as the child does not need to bear the burden of proof to show that his mother has good reason to pay on July 8 (rather than July 9, July 10, etc.). Given the evidence for the payment (e.g. ‘seeing money coming in on July 8’) and evidence against the alternative hypotheses (e.g. there is evidence against him having a hallucination of money coming in on July 8), he can reasonably conclude that his debt was paid on July 8. Likewise, given the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection (‘post-mortem appearances,’ ‘empty tomb’) and evidence against all the possible naturalistic hypotheses (as argued in previous chapters), it can reasonably be concluded that Jesus resurrected.

Understanding a miracle as a counter-instance to natural law, Antony Flew (1976) argues that there can never be stronger reasons for accepting the report of a non-repeatable counter-instance to a natural law because the evidence for it is weaker than the evidence for the natural law. The

latter is highly confirmed by a large number of people and can be tested by anyone at any time, with the result always the same: the dead stay dead, whereas reported counter-instances to natural laws are supported only by personal testimonies of a relatively smaller number of people from the past. Shapiro (2016, pp. 133–134) objects that the resurrection hypothesis ‘asks us to believe something that is completely beyond what we know to be true about how the world works,’ whereas a naturalistic hypothesis such as a twin brother hypothesis asks us only to believe that someone had a dishonest twin. He thinks that we ought to accept the second hypothesis for the same reason we ought to look for alternative explanations to a person who claims alien abduction as an explanation for her recent absence.

In reply, Flew’s assumption that the dead always stay dead begs the question against the resurrection of Jesus. One still needs to explain the reports for Jesus’ resurrection, and I have already argued that the naturalistic explanations can be ruled out. Moreover, Flew should not compare the evidence for the natural law with the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection, for the former only goes to show that ‘the dead stay dead *in the absence of supernatural intervention*,’ which does not exclude the plausibility of the latter occurring by divine intervention. ‘What we know to be true about how the world works’ (Shapiro) is true about the world when it is left to itself, but it does not render it unreasonable to believe that there is something beyond which can interfere with the world. As McGrew observes,

Christians no less than their atheist friends believe that there is a way that the universe behaves when it is left to itself. In the ordinary course of events, virgins are not pregnant and dead men stay dead. The central Christian claims are not attempts to contest these generalizations; they presuppose them. That is why the Christians have been shouting from the rooftops for nearly twenty centuries that the resurrection was a miracle. The evidence for how the universe behaves when it is left to itself, be it ever so strong, must not be mistaken for evidence that it always is.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, as noted in previous chapters we have reasons to rule out naturalistic hypotheses such as the twin brother hypothesis. It is true that we need to consider alternative explanations to the alien abduction hypothesis just as we need to consider alternative explanations to Jesus’ resurrection. However, in the case of Jesus’ resurrection we have evidence to rule out the alternative explanations as demonstrated in previous chapters, but this has not been demonstrated in the case of supposed alien abduction. Thus we should accept the former, but not the latter.

3 [www.theopentableblog.com/single-post/2018/06/11/Is-the-Resurrection-Unbelievable](http://www.theopentableblog.com/single-post/2018/06/11/Is-the-Resurrection-Unbelievable)

#### 8.4 **Objection: an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence**

A sceptic may concede that miracles are possible and that the argument against the plausibility of miracle based on infrequency fails, but still insist that we do not have sufficient evidence to establish a miracle. He/she may cite Hume's maxim:

That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish: And even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.

(Hume 1748/2000, p. 87)

This maxim lies behind the oft-repeated claim that 'an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence.' Hume illustrates this maxim by applying it to the claim of resurrection:

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

(Hume 1748/2000, pp. 87–88)

In this passage Hume says that he is in principle willing to believe in a miracle if the evidence for it is so extraordinarily strong that a denial of it would require a greater miracle.

In reply, Hume's idea of 'greater miracle' and 'mutual destruction of arguments' is flawed. Hume is assuming that a greater miracle is an event that is less probable, and as noted in the previous section Hume assumes that an event that is less probable is one which is contrary to our frequent experiences. However, as explained previously we should think in terms of causal pathways instead of frequencies, in which case there is no mutual destruction of arguments. The empty tomb and the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances require a causal explanation: which causal pathway explains them? On the one hand, as explained previously we should not use infrequency to rule out a personal cause resurrecting Jesus which explains the empty tomb and the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances. On the other hand, given the arguments in previous chapters we should rule out the naturalistic alternatives and conclude that Jesus resurrected. The empty

tomb and the claims of Jesus' post-mortem appearances must have been caused by something, and if we can rule out the alternative explanations we should embrace the conclusion.

Others have replied that one must be careful not to exaggerate the sensible requirement that 'an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence' into an insuperable epistemic barrier, as it would lead to absurdities and the destruction of common sense instead. McGrew explains,

The Humean objection has also been vigorously contested as destructive not only of miracle stories but of common sense as well. The 19th century saw a proliferation of satires in which Humean scruples about accepting testimony for extraordinary tales were applied to the events of secular history, with consequences that are equally disastrous and humorous. . . . Whately's satire, which is the most famous, 'establishes' on the basis of many historical improbabilities that Napoleon never existed but was a mythic figure invented by the British government to enhance national unity.

The lesson is that while one may legitimately require more evidence for an extraordinary story than for a mundane story, one must be careful not to exaggerate this sensible requirement into an insuperable epistemic barrier, for this would result in a standard that cannot be applied without absurdity in any other field of historical investigation (McGrew 2013).

To avoid the absurdities, one should not require the evidence for 'an extraordinary claim' to be extraordinary in the sense of forming an insuperable epistemic barrier which would prevent us from recognizing extraordinary individuals and events, but rather in the sense of being sufficient for demonstrating the unreasonableness of alternative hypotheses. Thus, if someone claims that he saw an aeroplane, one could easily believe the person without demanding evidence that would demonstrate the unreasonableness of alternative hypotheses, but if the person claims he saw an alien, than one would need to be more careful that one has such evidence. While we do not at present have adequate evidence to rule out alternative explanations (e.g. hoaxes, misidentifications) with regards to claims about aliens—and indeed in many of these cases we do have adequate evidence to show that it is probably a hoax, misidentification, etc.—what is extraordinary about the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is that, as argued in previous chapters, we do have adequate evidence to rule out the alternative explanations in this case. Moreover, the historical testimony for Jesus' resurrection is extraordinary in the sense that, compared to (say) the death of Socrates, we have more eyewitnesses, more lines of ancient testimony, and a large number of witnesses who were willing to die for their testimony<sup>4</sup>

4 I thank Mark Boone for this point.

(see Chapter 3). To do history properly, one must allow for the possibility of exceptions involving extraordinary persons, and the exception in this case is well justified by the evidence.

In Part 2 of Hume's essay 'Of Miracles,' Hume makes four claims in his attempt to show that no claim of miracle (including Jesus' resurrection) has ever been established by sufficient evidence. I shall consider three of these claims in this section, the fourth will be considered in Section 8.8.

First, Hume claims,

There is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time attesting facts, performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable: All which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.

(Hume 1748/2000, p. 88)

However, contrary to Hume, it is not the case that all the considerations he lists are necessary. For example, the considerations explained in Chapter 3 are already sufficient to show that the earliest Christians who were persecuted would not have been willing to lose everything for what they do not believe to be true and be condemned by God after death for being false witnesses. This point holds regardless of whether they were 'of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind,' and it would suffice to rule out 'all suspicion of any design to deceive others.' Moreover, as argued in previous chapters, the earliest Christians were rational enough to debate, to think about the evidence for their faith, to consider its consequences such as having to face frequent dangers and martyrdom, and to persuade others to hold to their views. Regardless of whether all of them were of 'such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning,' they already possessed sufficient characteristics to rule out delusion of Jesus' resurrection caused by naturalistic alternative hypotheses. For example, the groups of people who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus were already of sufficient number to rule out delusion caused by hallucination (see Chapter 4), and they included members familiar enough with Jesus to rule out delusion caused by mistaken identity (see Chapter 5). Finally, even if the earliest Christians did not attest facts 'performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable,' nevertheless based on considerations established in previous chapters it can still be shown that they claimed that they had seen Jesus

alive after his crucifixion, they truly saw something, what they saw was not caused intramentally but extramentally, and the extramental entity was not anyone else but the same Jesus who died on the cross. Therefore, Jesus resurrected.

Second, Hume claims that people tend to believe in miraculous stories because of the passion of surprise and wonder. He argues,

If the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality: He may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it, with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause: Or even where this delusion has not place, vanity, excited by so strong a temptation, operates on him more powerfully than on the rest of mankind in any other circumstances; and self-interest with equal force . . .

The many instances of forged miracles, and prophecies, and supernatural events, which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvelous, and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind.

(Hume 1748/2000, p. 89)

Hume fails to note the evidence of the earliest Christians doubting the resurrection (see Chapters 3 and 4) as well as audiences of the earliest Christians doubting the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12; Acts 17:32, see Chapter 2). The evidence indicates a soberness of mind rather than an easy acceptance of miracle in this case. Additionally, the severity of the threat of persecution facing those who would believe and proclaim Jesus' resurrection would have ruled out any easy acceptance and spreading of tales of surprise and wonder in this case, as well as vanity and self-interest as motivations (see Chapters 3 and 4). Moreover, if the earliest Christians had 'the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause' as Hume suggests, then contrary to Hume they would not have persevered in their narrative if they knew that it was false, because it would be inconsistent with their devotion to the God of Israel, as argued in Chapter 3. While there have been many instances of forged miracles, etc., it would be a false generalization to conclude that all claims of miracles are forged. The reason why it would be a false generalization is that the case of Jesus' resurrection is of vastly different character compared to the cases of forged miracle (see further, Section 8.8). As shown in previous chapters, there is good evidence to think that Jesus resurrected, and as explained earlier the case cannot be reasonably explained away by

Hume's suggestion of 'the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvelous.'

Third, Hume claims that reports of miracles 'are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations' (Hume 1748/2000, p. 90). McGrew (2009, p. 653) replies,

But to call first-century Judaism 'ignorant and barbarous' would be itself historically ignorant, and to suggest that this absolves us of taking the testimony of the eyewitnesses seriously is a classic example of trying to dismiss evidence without doing any actual argumentative work.

Again, Hume fails to note the evidence of the earliest Christians doubting the resurrection (see Chapters 3 and 4) as well as audiences of the earliest Christians doubting the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12; Acts 17:32, see chapter 2). The evidence indicates that despite their ignorance of modern science, first-century people knew that dead people do not rise naturally and they would not have believed any such thing easily. In such circumstance, the question of what caused the earliest Christians to believe that Jesus resurrected and to stake everything on it (1 Cor. 15:17) still needs to be answered, and it has been shown in previous chapters that the answer is that Jesus was truly resurrected.

Shapiro (2016, pp. 63–68) offers another argument against miracles based on the base rate fallacy, which is essentially as follows: Suppose a person is tested positive for a rare disease X, the test is 99.9% reliable (only one in a thousand who tests positive doesn't really have the disease), yet because the disease is so rare (1 in 10 million), the chance of the person having X is still very low (1 in 10,001). To ascertain that the person really has X, a more reliable test would be needed. This illustrates that an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence.

Shapiro applies this to the case of Jesus' resurrection: suppose a group of people claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus, the testimony of the group was 99.9% reliable, yet because resurrection (if it happens) would be so rare, the chance of the group having seen the resurrected Jesus would still be very low. Citing Shapiro, Shermer (2017, p. 78) writes, 'of the approximately 100 billion people who have lived before us, all have died and none have returned, so the claim that one (or more) of them rose from the dead is about as extraordinary as one will ever find.'

In reply, the case of rare disease mentioned by Shapiro is disanalogous to Jesus' resurrection. In the former case the probability is calculated based on the assumption that it is a random sample, i.e. the chance of randomly finding a person who is tested positive and has the disease. However, in the case of Jesus' resurrection, the probability is not that of randomly finding someone claiming to have seen a resurrected person and that the person

resurrected. One needs to consider the extraordinary religious context concerning the claim that Jesus resurrected (see later).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, with regards to testing for a rare disease X, saying that ‘the chance of the person having X is still very low (1 in 10,001) even though the test is positive’ is too superficial. One should ask the deeper question of why the test would give a false positive in 0.1% of cases. What are the specific alternative explanations for a positive result? One possible explanation is that there could be other things (e.g. other proteins in the blood) which can also cause a positive result. If such alternative explanations can be excluded, then no matter how low the base rate of X is, as long as the test shows a positive result, the person has X. Likewise, one can eliminate the alternative explanations to Jesus’ resurrection, such that, no matter how low the base rate is, we can conclude that it happened. The moral of the story is again the exclusion of alternative hypotheses, and this has been accomplished in previous chapters.

Shapiro (2016, p. 130) objects that we have less historical evidence for Jesus’ resurrection compared to the historical evidence we have for events such as the destruction of Pompeii, the sinking of the Titanic, or Lincoln’s assassination. He claims,

Because miracles are far less probable than routine historical events (volcanic eruptions, sinking ships, assassinations), the evidence necessary to justify beliefs about them must be many times better than that which would justify our beliefs in run-of-the-mill historical events. But it isn’t. The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is simply not as good as that which historians normally require of events that happen with greater frequency.

In reply, Shapiro’s argument confuses the evidence we have with the evidence that is required. We have more evidence for (say) Lincoln’s

5 In personal correspondence, Dr Timothy McGrew explains, ‘The base rate fallacy is the fallacy of ignoring the base rate—ignoring, that is, what you know about the statistical distribution of the feature of interest in your reference class. If you know that you’re dealing with a disease that is very rare among Asian women, and your patient is an Asian woman, and you have no other information relevant to her having that disease, then the base rate is low and it will take a great deal of evidence for you to come to a rational belief that she has the disease. But if you know that she has three female relatives who all have the disease, your reference class will be different. If there were a population that formed a clear appropriate reference class, and our only means of evaluating the probability were by direct inference from the frequency of resurrections within that class, then the base rate would be relevant to P(R|B). But what would that reference class be? Living organisms? Human beings? Human males? Human males whose lives uniquely fulfil millennia of messianic prophecy? The latter seems to be a great fit. Unfortunately, the number of members in that reference class is . . . one. And that’s the one about whom we’re trying to reason. So the reference class approach isn’t very good.’ The consideration concerning reference class illustrates that religious context should not be ignored.



assassination, and even more evidence for (say) the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana in 1981 which was watched live by millions. Assassinations are less frequent than weddings. Yet we do not reject Lincoln's assassination simply because the evidence for it is not as good as the evidence we have for the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, because the evidence we have in the case of Lincoln's assassination is already sufficient to rule out alternative hypotheses and to establish that it happened. Likewise, even though the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is less than the evidence we have for Lincoln's assassination, as argued in previous chapters the evidence we have in the case of Jesus' resurrection is already sufficient to rule out alternative hypotheses and to establish that it happened.

A sceptic might object that, even if each of the naturalistic alternatives to the resurrection is improbable, their disjunction is not improbable.<sup>6</sup> For example, consider the outcome of rolling a fair die. Even if the probability of each of the alternatives to 6 (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) is rather low (i.e. 1/6), their disjunction is not improbable (i.e. 5/6).

In reply, first, the die example assumes that each outcome has a non-negligible probability: 1/6 (= 0.166 . . .) is non-negligible and we often do see the outcome of (say) 3 happening naturally. However, it has been argued in previous chapters that each of the naturalistic alternatives is not the case and thus has negligible probability (far lower than 0.001; in cryptography, negligible probability is typically assigned a value of less than  $1/2^{128}$ ). It might be objected that mistaken reports concerning miraculous claims have non-negligible probability and we often do see them. In reply, while the probability of a mistaken report in general is not low (I discuss some cases, e.g. concerning Bodhidharma, in Section 8.8), it would be false to conclude on this basis that the probability for the specific case that Jesus resurrected is low. The reason is because the Bayesian analysis discussed in Section 8.3 has shown that one should 'distinguish between the probability of a miracle claim considered apart from the evidence and the probability of the claim given that evidence' (McGrew 2013). Therefore, while there have been many mistaken reports in general, one should consider the evidence that is specific to the particular case of Jesus' resurrection and think about the possible ways by which the reports concerning Jesus' resurrection appearances could have been mistaken, and these ways have all been excluded by the considerations explained in the previous chapters. For example, it has been argued in Chapter 4 that mistaken reports due to hallucinations, i.e. the intramental hypothesis—widely regarded by sceptical scholars as the most plausible naturalistic alternative to Jesus' resurrection—would not work because of multiple considerations against it, one of which is that, without a corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, the mental states internal to each person within a group of people would not agree on various details

6 I thank Andrew Brenner for helpful discussion concerning this objection.

concerning their experience of the external world; indeed, collective hallucinations are not found in peer-reviewed medical literature (Bergeron and Habermas 2015). Thus the intramental hypothesis has negligible probability or ‘vanishingly small probability’ (to use McGrew’s term for his evaluation of the hallucination hypothesis; see McGrew 2009, p. 626). Given that the six logically possible ways (i.e. the legends, no experience, intramental, mistaken identity, swoon, and escape hypotheses) by which the reports concerning Jesus’ resurrection appearances could have been mistaken have all been excluded as shown in the previous chapters, it can be concluded that the reports are not mistaken in stating that Jesus resurrected.

Second, in the case of rolling a fair die it can be shown that the outcome of 6 has equally low probability to each of the non-6 alternative outcomes. However, it has been argued earlier that while it has been shown that each of the naturalistic alternatives has negligible probability, it has not been shown that the resurrection of Jesus has equally negligible probability. In particular, it has been explained in Section 8.3 that infrequency of resurrections is not a good reason to think that ‘God raised Jesus from the dead’ has negligible probability.

The die example however is analogous to the case of Jesus’ resurrection in this sense: the probability of each of the logical alternatives must add up to 1 ( $1/6 + 1/6 + 1/6 + 1/6 + 1/6 + 1/6 = 1$ ). Likewise, the probability of each of the seven possible categories of explanations concerning the claims of Jesus’ post-mortem appearances—viz. legends, no experience, intramental, mistaken identity, swoon, escape, and resurrection—must add up to 1. Since each of the six naturalistic alternatives has negligible probability and that the probability of the disjunction of six negligible probabilities is negligible, it can be concluded that the resurrection of Jesus happened (i.e. the probability of Jesus’ resurrection has negligible difference from the probability of 1).

The last sentence illustrates how a difficulty often mentioned against the Bayesian approach to prove Jesus’ resurrection against naturalistic hypotheses may be avoided, namely the difficulty of assigning prior probability for Jesus’ resurrection. My argument by exclusion—based on the logically exhaustive list of hypotheses formulated in Chapter 1—can lead to the conclusion that Jesus resurrected without having to first assign a number for the prior probability of Jesus’ resurrection, which is a tricky thing to do. In particular, it avoids the objection that ‘we cannot prove the resurrection because we do not know how to read the mind of God to know what is the probability that God would intervene in this case.’ While this difficulty is not necessarily insurmountable—Swinburne (2003, 2013a, 2013b), for example, has offered plausible reasons (based on arguments from natural theology, religious context, etc.) for thinking that God had revealed his intentions—the difficulty is entirely avoided by my approach. Using the argument by exclusion, one does not need to argue what the probability is that God would intervene in this case; one only need to show that there is

no good reason to think that it is improbable and that to think otherwise would be to import unwarranted philosophical assumptions into his/her judgements.

Finally, it should be noted that, in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of the conclusion that Jesus resurrected, it is not necessary to claim ‘negligible probability’ for each of the naturalistic alternative hypotheses, even though I have argued that this is in fact the case. Even if one disagrees with my assessment that each of the naturalistic alternative hypotheses has ‘negligible probability’ or ‘vanishingly small probability’ (to use McGrew’s term), one can still say that each of these naturalistic alternatives has been shown to be very improbable. For example, even if one assigns to each of the six naturalistic alternatives a probability of one in a thousand (which is very generous and much higher than the vanishingly small probability calculated by McGrew), that still leaves the resurrection with a probability of 99.4%.<sup>7</sup> This should warrant assent from a reasonable person.

### 8.5 Could it be a scientific anomaly?

Could the resurrection of Jesus be a scientific anomaly? The scientific anomaly hypothesis is evidently fantastically improbable: we have enough understanding of natural laws to know that people do not rise from the dead *naturally*. It is unreasonable to think that it only naturally happened once so far in human history out of the billions of deaths which have occurred. Likewise, with regards to Shapiro’s (2016, p. 115) suggestion that the body in the tomb disappeared as a result of extremely rapid decomposition, we have enough understanding of the natural world to know that bodies do not disappear as a result of decomposition within a few days *naturally*.

Regarding the religious context in which the claims of Jesus’ resurrection occur, the historical evidence indicates that the earliest Christians perceived that Jesus’ ministry was marked by ‘miracles,’ that he taught them about God’s purposes with a divine authority, that he manifested an extraordinary standard of moral behaviour, and that he thought of himself as truly divine (i.e. on the Creator side of the Creator–creature divide) (Loke 2017a, chapter 6). Additionally, Licona argues that Jesus predicted that his violent and imminent death would be followed shortly afterward by God’s vindication of him via resurrection (Licona 2010, 2014). The occurrence of Jesus’ coming back to life three days after his death by crucifixion, together with this context, demands an explanation. It is contrived to think that this event, out of billions of deaths which have occurred, happened as a scientific anomaly and is associated by chance with a person’s claim to be divine and/or with the person’s prediction of it. On the other hand, the miraculous resurrection of Jesus is not contrived given this context. One might object that such a religious

<sup>7</sup> I thank Andrew Brenner for this comment.

context would also increase the probability that the disciples had hallucinations and delusions of Jesus' resurrection, but these hypotheses have already been ruled out based on other considerations discussed in previous chapters.

## 8.6 Would future scientific discoveries explain away Jesus' resurrection?

Science only describes the natural world when it is left on its own, whereas a miracle is supposed to describe what happens when the natural world is not left on its own. Therefore, there is no contradiction between miracle and science (cf. Gant 2019, p.3). This does not mean we should believe in every miraculous claim; indeed, many such claims (e.g. the Chinese goddess Chang-e who was said to have flown to the moon) are superstitions with no historical basis. Neither does it mean we should not believe in any miraculous claim; we need to be open minded and consider the reasons and evidence.

It should be noted that the argument for Jesus' resurrection is not based on gaps in our knowledge; hence it is not an argument from ignorance. Rather, it is based on reasons and evidence. It is because there are reasons and evidence (discussed in previous chapters) for thinking that (I) many people claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus shortly after his crucifixion, (II) they did not make baseless claims but had some kind of experiences, (III) what they experienced was not caused intramentally but extramentally, (IV) the extramental entity was not another person but the same Jesus who died on the cross, therefore (V) Jesus resurrected. Concerning inferring a supernatural cause for Jesus' resurrection, Licona (2014, p. 122) argues,

virtually all of historical inquiry, and certainly all that concerns antiquity, involves inference, since the past and all of its causes are forever gone. If natural explanations cannot come close to explaining the relevant historical bedrock when they appear in a historical context that is charged with religious significance, historians are justified in employing inference and positing a theoretical entity, even a supernatural or divine agent, in order to explain the relevant historical bedrock.

Licona thinks that the fulfilment of the aforementioned criteria for identifying a miracle is important, since it places a check on those led by credulity from employing a 'God-of-the-gaps' argument where one supplies a divine agent for a cause presently unknown to us.

Sceptics might object that it still amounts to God of the gaps, for there could be natural causes for Jesus' resurrection that are still unknown to us. Sceptics might object that the argument for the conclusion that God raised Jesus from the dead is based on

- 1 Excluding naturalistic alternatives according to our current understanding of nature.

However, there could be

- 2 Naturalistic alternatives beyond our current understanding of nature, such as undiscovered natural laws or aliens.
- 3 Supernatural alternatives other than God, e.g. angel, demon.

It must be admitted that there have been many religious believers throughout history who commit the ‘God-of-the-gaps’ fallacy. For example, when people in the past did not understand certain natural phenomena (such as lightning and thunder), they thought that these are caused directly by the gods (e.g. by the god of thunder). As scientific understanding progresses, however, these explanations are replaced by scientific ones. Nevertheless, the fact that many events which were previously thought to be explained by a divine cause can now be explained by science does not imply that every event which is thought to be explained by a divine cause can be explained by science. The reason why this would be a false generalization is that the events in question could be of vastly different character. In order to avoid false generalization, the correct way to proceed is to assess, on a case-by-case basis, which explanation is the best for each case. I have argued in Loke (2017b) that giving an account of how lightning occurs as a result of natural causes is very different from giving an account of what is the ultimate explanation for the natural causes, that the question of ultimate origins can only be answered by a Divine First Cause, and that it is not a God-of-the-gaps answer.

It is true that the progressive nature of science indicates that our current understanding of nature is limited. However, this does not imply that our understanding of nature is totally unreliable. We need to examine the purported items of knowledge case by case, and assess how strong the evidence is for each case. The National Academy of Sciences (2008) notes,

Many scientific theories are so well-established that no new evidence is likely to alter them substantially. For example, no new evidence will demonstrate that the Earth does not orbit around the sun (heliocentric theory), or that living things are not made of cells (cell theory), that matter is not composed of atoms, or that the surface of the Earth is not divided into solid plates that have moved over geological timescales (the theory of plate tectonics).

Likewise, our scientific knowledge of natural laws indicates that dead people do not naturally rise.

Even if the resurrection of Jesus has a natural explanation which is yet unknown to twenty-first-century scientists, we still need to ask how could it have been known and utilized to raise Jesus in the first century and vindicate his claim to be truly divine. Such a knowledge and ability to manipulate natural laws would still require a supernatural agent in any case.

Many atheists insist that one should try to find scientific explanations for every event rather than inferring God as an explanation, which they regard as intellectual laziness. For example, Lüdemann claims that real historical work cannot rest content with a past event which cannot be fully explained by social science (Lüdemann 1994, p. 80).

In reply, Padgett (1998, p. 305) asks,

But why not? Is social science, rather than God, now omniscient? With prejudices and confusions like these, Lüdemann's book provides an excellent example of the way the myth of a purely historical Jesus leads to both bad history and bad theology.

We need to ask why we seek explanations in the first place. Are we just seeking explanations for the sake of seeking explanations? No, we seek explanations for the purpose of understanding the truth of the matter. Unless we have already assumed beforehand that the truth of the matter is that God did not act—this would be a circular argument against miracles. Otherwise, if we have good reasons—after doing the hard work of assessing the evidence—to think that the truth of the matter is that an event was caused by God, we should accept this explanation. It would make a bad detective to exclude possible answers beforehand by way of a circular argument, without due consideration of the arguments for those answers. The statement that 'we should only accept a scientific explanation for a past event' is a philosophical statement about science and reality rather than a scientific statement. It is a bad philosophical statement, for it presupposes that all events must have purely natural explanations, which begs the question against divine action. In order not to beg the question, we have to remain open to the possibility that certain events might indeed be caused by God and examine the reasons which have been given.

### **8.7 Can we infer God as the cause of Jesus' resurrection?**

In his more recent writings, Ehrman (2014, p. 149) has conceded, 'it is in theory possible even to say that Jesus was crucified, and buried, and then he was seen alive, bodily, afterward.' However, he insists,

What is not a plausible historical conclusion is that God raised Jesus into an immortal body and took him up to heaven where he sits on a throne at his right hand. That conclusion is rooted in all sorts of theological views that are not widely shared among historians, and so is a matter of faith, not historical knowledge.

Can we infer God as the cause of Jesus' resurrection? One might ask what reasons there are to think that the agent who raised Jesus is God rather

than (say) aliens, psychic powers, false prophets with supernatural powers, evil spirits (Cavin 2005, pp. 34–36), multiple gods, or an ‘Almost God’ (‘one enormously powerful but not quite omnipotent being’) (Shapiro 2016, pp. 46–47).<sup>8</sup>

In reply, alternative hypotheses such as aliens, psychic powers, false prophets with supernatural powers, evil spirits, and so on are ad hoc, because there is no independent reason for thinking that such entities (if they exist) have the powers to resurrect the dead. However, we have independent reasons (*viz.* the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments) for thinking that there exists a God who can act supernaturally by creating our universe with its natural laws (Loke 2017b, forthcoming; Craig and Moreland, eds. 2009). We can infer that such a God who created the natural laws would also have the power to raise the dead. Believing in one God is more reasonable than believing in multiple gods, for it is consistent with the widely accepted scientific principle (Occam’s razor) that causes should not be multiplied beyond necessity (Craig and Sinclair 2009, p. 192).<sup>9</sup>

Given these reasons, the demonstration that there is good historical evidence for thinking that Jesus claimed to be truly divine (*i.e.* to be on the Creator side of the Creator–creature divide and of equal ontological status as God the Father; see Loke 2017a) would—together with historical evidence for his resurrection—be a good reason to believe Jesus’ claim that his coming back to life was an act of God the Creator and a vindication of Jesus’ claim to be God incarnate (for defence of the incarnation against other objections, see Loke 2014a, 2017a). Thus, we have reasons to think that the Creator of the universe had revealed himself in history in the person of Jesus. Given that Jesus regarded the Scriptures of Israel as divine revelation (Moyise 2011) and given that the Scriptures affirmed God the Creator as all-powerful rather than as an ‘Almost God,’ we can therefore also conclude that the Creator of the universe affirmed this as well.<sup>10</sup> Shapiro (2016,

8 One might argue that we have independent reasons for thinking it is the God of Israel who raised Jesus, since the unusual event occurs in Jerusalem where biblical prophecies has hinted at a saviour from the line of David. However, the sceptic might reply that aliens, ‘almost God,’ etc. could also have originated these biblical prophecies by masquerading as the God of Israel or as angels.

9 It should be noted that this argument does not exclude the possibility that we could have other reasons (*e.g.* historical evidences of divine revelation) for thinking that the single ‘First Cause’ is a tri-unity of persons, *i.e.* a single First Cause in which there are three persons). See Moreland and Craig (2009, pp. 575–596).

10 The scriptural data concerning omnipotence has been subjected to two different interpretations (Brink 1999, pp. 139–144). The minimizing interpretation tends towards the conclusion that God is in fact not presented as all-powerful in the Scriptures (Geach 1973). By contrast, the classical interpretation concludes that the scriptural data affirms that God is all-powerful. Proponents point out that the scriptural data includes not only God’s actual reign (*i.e.* ‘power over’) over humanity and the universe, but also his unlimited capacity for action, as shown by the frequency with which phrases like ‘all things are possible for God’

p. 44) objects by claiming that God's intention to do a miracle is simply not available to us. In reply, God's intention can be understood by considering what is spoken by a person who claims to be a prophet and whether his/her claim is confirmed by an act which only God the Creator can plausibly be regarded as having the power to do.

Sceptics might object by noting the claim that some of the experiences noted in Chapter 4 may be evidence of physical manifestations of evil spirits who masquerade as the dead. They might therefore suggest the possibility that, even if there is no evidence that they could resurrect the dead, evil spirits could have caused visions of the resurrected Jesus and faked the resurrection.

In reply, the supernatural vision hypothesis (whether the vision is caused by God or angel or demon) does not explain the empty tomb; other explanations would need to be given for the removal of the body from the tomb so as to fake the resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, in order to avoid the charge of making an ad hoc claim to explain away the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, the suggestion in Chapter 4 concerning the possibility of experiences being caused by physical manifestations of evil spirits would need to be proven against other possibilities, but the sceptic has failed to demonstrate that. On the other hand, we have independent reasons (viz. the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments) for thinking that there exists a God who created the universe (Loke 2017b, forthcoming; Craig and Moreland, eds. 2009). One can argue (as Swinburne does) that the God who created the universe would not have permitted such a massive deception in the case of Jesus. On the contrary, there are reasons for thinking that such a God would interfere in history by becoming incarnate, and that it is highly improbable that we would find the evidence we do for the life and teaching of Jesus, as well as the evidence from witnesses to his empty tomb and later appearances, if Jesus was not God incarnate and did not rise from the dead (Swinburne 2003, 2013a, 2013b; cf. Cavin and Colombetti 2013; for discussion on the evil-god hypothesis, see also Hendricks 2018). The fact that we do not have similar claims together with comparable evidence for the resurrection of other religious figures (see Section 8.8) is also evidence against the existence of evil spirits who could simply fake the resurrection and would be permitted by God to do so.<sup>11</sup>

One might ask whether God could have done a miraculous act to cause someone to be crucified in Jesus' place; this is the Islamic escape hypothesis

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appear in virtually all layers of the biblical literature—Gen. 18:14, Jer. 32:17, Job 42:2, etc. (Brink 1999, pp. 139–144). Furthermore, the Scriptures affirm that God does whatever he pleases (Ps. 115:3, 135:6, Dan. 4:35), and this carries with it the sense of freedom from limitations or restraints (Erickson 1998b, p. 168). Overall, the classical interpretation, more than the minimalist, does justice to the totality of the scriptural testimony (Brink 1999, p. 141; contra Geach 1973).

11 Concerning Divine Agency and replies to other objections to miracles, see Larmer (2013).



often attributed to the Quran (Surah 4:157–8) and Gospel of Barnabas 217. Habermas and Licona (2004, pp. 184–185) object that both of them were written centuries after the time of Jesus and thus are of dubious worth as historical sources concerning Jesus. Craig objects that the hypothesis is theologically untenable, for it implies that, by misleading the disciples into thinking that Jesus was risen from the dead, Allah himself is to blame for foisting the religion of Christianity on the world, resulting in hundreds of millions rejecting Islam (Craig and Ally 2009). Moreover, the earliest Christians were evidently concerned about passing on the traditions of Jesus' teachings and to reinforce the authority of these traditions in the churches (for the importance of these early traditions, see Dunn 1998, pp. 188, 649–658), and one of these traditions states, 'this is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me,' and 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me' (1 Cor. 11:23–26 cf. Mark 14:22–25 parr. (Hengel and Schwemer [1997, Section 6] note that Paul could have obtained these traditions during the period he spent with the apostles in Jerusalem [Gal. 1:18]). This early tradition indicates that Jesus himself taught his sacrificial death.

### 8.8 What about claims of resurrection in other religions?

Sceptics claim that the resurrection of Jesus is just one among many folktales claiming resurrection from the dead or people taken to heaven. Such tales abound in various ancient cultures; examples include tales concerning Osiris, Romulus, and Asclepius (Carrier 2009, pp. 87–88). In the Buddhist tradition the sixth-century monk Bodhidharma was said to have been seen carrying his sandals and walking home after he died and was buried, and when his disciples opened up his grave the body was supposed to be missing. Additionally, there are various similarities (virgin birth, resurrection, etc.) between the stories of Jesus and the deities of other religions such as Mitra, Krishna, etc., even though these religions affirm different theologies from Christianity. Hume (1748/2000) famously claims that accepting as of equal credit the reports of miracles in various opposing religions would cancel each other out.

In reply, the presence of stories of incarnation and resurrection in other religions can be explained by the widespread longing among humankind for a divine saviour and for transcendence over death. This longing for deliverance could have caused people to fantasize and invent various deities and stories of resurrection. However, this does not exclude the possibility that God the Creator could indeed have chosen to fulfil the human longing through the person of Jesus. In contrast with the claim that Jesus resurrected, we do not at present have adequate evidence to rule out alternative explanations (e.g. legend, hoax, misidentifications) with regards to claims about resurrection in other religions. Concerning non-historical (or chiefly mythical) persons who were reportedly apotheosized or raised from the

dead (e.g. Osiris [see Chapter 1], Romulus, Asclepius, Mitra, and Krishna), Habermas (1989) notes,

in each of these cases we find numerous problems such as a decided lack of historical data, reports that are far too late (e.g. Ovid and Livy wrote about 700 years after Romulus was supposed to have lived) or stories about mythical personages who never lived.

While there were ancient scholars who claimed cases of resurrection of historical individuals (e.g. Apuleius reports a resurrection performed by Asclepiades) (Carrier 2009, p. 88), there are workable naturalistic alternative explanations for these cases (e.g. another ancient scholar, Aulus Cornelius Celsus, objects that Asclepiades merely recognized that a man who was being carried out to burial was actually still alive [*De Medicina* 2.6.15]). In the case of Bodhidharma, we do not have evidence to exclude all of these naturalistic explanations; for example, we do not have evidence to show that the story of Bodhidharma's resurrection was not a legend that was disseminated many years after the purported event, and neither do we have evidence to render it improbable that it was a deception.<sup>12</sup> Likewise cases of Marian apparitions have workable naturalistic explanations (e.g. hallucinations, illusions) (O'Connell 2009).

Other claims about historical persons either apotheosized (snatched up to heaven and divinized) or raised from the dead have been well assessed in an article by Habermas (1989). For example, consider the case of Apollonius of Tyana, a first-century neo-Pythagorean philosopher whom Ehrman (2014, chapter 1) claims is similar to Jesus in many ways. Litwa (2019, p. 183) observes,

According to Philostratus, Apollonius was seen in the cities of Smyrna and Ephesus at the same time. Apollonius was later arrested and put on trial in Rome. In his trial, Apollonius electrified bystanders by disappearing from the courtroom and reappearing to his followers several miles outside the city.

However, Habermas (1989) notes that there is only one surviving biography of Apollonius written over 100 years after the end of Apollonius' life shortly after 217 CE, and that he was commissioned to write his work by Julia Domna, wife of Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, 'as a counterblast to Jesus,' which indicates that similarities with Jesus are more than coincidence.

12 According to tradition, he is a sixth-century monk who established Chan Buddhism in China; after his death many legends concerning him arose ('Bodhidharma', in Keown 2003).

Litwa 2019 discusses a range of cases in mythic historiography which he argues resembles the Gospels' depiction of the resurrected Jesus. He claims,

the gospel accounts of Jesus's translation and reappearances have the form of a historical report that mentions real places in apparently real time. If in a general way the Gospels' authors were influenced by Greek mythography, then they were specifically imitating those who put it into historical form.

(p. 173)<sup>13</sup>

For example, in relation to the gospel of Luke's portrayal of Jesus eating fish to prove his materiality, Litwa quotes the 'historical' account of a maiden named Philinnion. Six months after her death, 'she visited a lover over the course of three nights. She dined and drank with him—and even had sex with him (leaving her bra behind)' (p. 184). The account is from Phlegon of Tralles, *Mirabilia 1*, and Litwa states,

the story of Philinnion is presented in the form of a letter written by a public official who stands ready to have the facts of his account checked and reported to a 'king.' From the later résumé of Proclus, we learn that the king is probably Philip II, father of Alexander the Great.

(p. 257, citing Morgan 2013)

Morgan however notes that the compiler of Phlegon's (the freedman of Hadrian) work lived in the second century CE, a few hundred years after Philip II (382–336 BC). The epistolary context indicating a readiness to report to the king<sup>14</sup> may well have been fictitious (p. 306), added to make the story look authentic (p. 320). Centuries later the story was misread as a real account by the compiler of Phlegon's *Mirabilia* (second century CE) and later on by Proclus (fifth century CE) (p. 318). Accounts attesting to 'the resurrection of Aesop' in the early second century CE (e.g. by the historian Ptolemy Chennus) mentioned by Litwa (2019, p. 167) were likewise written several hundred years after Aesop supposedly 'came back to life and even fought with the Greeks in the battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE)' (ibid.). Similarly, 'writers who imitated historical—supposedly "eyewitness"—reports

13 Litwa also mentions cases from the genres of myths and plays; for example, in relation to Jesus' resurrected body passing through walls, he cites Greek mythoi portrayal of 'The god Hermes was able to pass into a room through the keyhole' and 'the playwright Euripides' example of Dionysus passing over walls (p. 181). However, since the genres of myths and plays are disanalogous to the historiographical biographies of the Gospels, I shall ignore such examples and focus on cases from historiographies which Litwa mentions.

14 'So if you decide to write to the King about these things, send me a letter too, so that I can send you some of the persons who provide detailed accounts. With best wishes' (Morgan 2013, p. 305).

(Philostratus, *Heroicus*)’ (p. 173) of the resurrected Achilles were written centuries later: ‘the oldest stone dedication to Achilles comes from the 400s BCE’ (p. 172), while Philostratus’ *Heroicus* was written in the third century CE. Likewise, Herodotus’ report (*Histories* 4.13–16; written around 440 BC) of Aristeas’ (seventh century BC) supposed resurrection mentioned by Litwa (2019, pp. 181–182) was written centuries later.

Contrast these accounts with Luke’s account which was written within the lifetimes of eyewitnesses or those who knew the eyewitnesses of the ‘resurrected Jesus’ and who could verify the details with them, and the other considerations in favour of its historicity explained in previous chapters (e.g. Chapter 4). In view of these considerations supporting the historicity of Luke’s account which were absent from the accounts cited by Litwa, the resemblances noted by Litwa should not be understood as Luke’s imitation. Rather, they should be understood as the resurrected Jesus demonstrating the reality of his resurrection in accordance with the expectations of his intellectual culture; for how else would Jesus prove his physicality if he truly resurrected?

Litwa claims, ‘if readers of the tale were theologically invested, they would presumably give it the benefit of the doubt’ (Litwa 2019, p. 183). In support of his claim he cites Iamblichus’ (c. 242–c. 325) comment,

All the Pythagoreans are disposed to believe the stories told about Aristeas of Proconnesus. . . . They believe all such things were done and themselves attempt many of them, and keep in memory the stories that seem mythical . . . not disbelieving anything that might lead to the divine.

(Iamblichus, *Pythagorean Way of Life*, 138)

However, Litwa fails to note that those Pythagoreans of Iamblichus’ era lived centuries after Aristeas and therefore could not check with eyewitnesses, and lacking the means to falsify or verify the stories they gave them the benefit of the doubt. The first readers of the New Testament’s accounts of resurrected Jesus, however, could check with the eyewitnesses (or people who knew the eyewitnesses) who were willing to sacrifice for the truth of what they saw, and for whom the truth of Jesus’ resurrection was foundational to their ‘theological investment.’<sup>15</sup>

Sceptics have objected that modern technology (which was not available in the past) has exposed many miraculous claims as frauds (Allison 2005a, pp. 308–310; Carrier 2005a, pp. 172–177). In reply, the lack of modern

15 For other replies to the objection from claims of miracles in other religions, such as (for example) the case of Vespasian which Litwa (2019, pp. 150–151) mentions, see McGrew (2009) who (for example) provides various arguments to show that the claim that Vespasian did miracles is probably a fraud.

technology in ancient days does not excuse us from considering the evidence that we do have. As explained in previous chapters, there is good historical evidence for thinking that all the naturalistic hypotheses concerning Jesus' resurrection can be excluded. It needs to be emphasized that the quality of the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is such that it allows for a serious academic debate, unlike the case of Bodhidharma, Mitra, Krishna, etc. The lack of evidence in other cases does not imply the lack of evidence in this case. In other cases the stories either originated many years after the events, were based on hearsay rather than eyewitness testimonies, or lacked attestations by groups of eyewitnesses who were in a position to know whether what they claim was true, and who were willing to lose everything and die for the miraculous claim. What is unique about the case of Jesus' resurrection is that the truth concerning Jesus' resurrection was regarded as foundational for their religion by the earliest Christian leaders, for their motivation to persuade others to believe and for their willingness to suffer and die. In fact, they made it very clear that if the resurrection were not true, then it was dangerous for them and for others to believe it (1 Cor. 15:14–19). Moreover, the event was verifiable by them: they were in a position to know whether they did or did not have evidence to think that their belief was true (Moreland 1998, pp. 247–248). Applying these and other considerations, it can be concluded that the case for the resurrection of Jesus is far stronger than claims of resurrection in other religions and that it can withstand scrutiny.

## 8.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the objections to Jesus' resurrection based on its miraculous nature. Contrary to Hume's definition of a miracle as 'a violation of scientific laws,' a miracle can be understood as 'an event which would not have been produced by the natural causes operative at a certain time and place' (Moreland and Craig 2003, pp. 566–568).

Unless we assume that causes other than natural causes do not exist (which begs the question against Theism), miracles should be regarded as possible.

Ehrman (2003a, pp. 228–229) objects that, because historians can only establish what probably happened, and a miracle is highly improbable, the historian cannot establish that a miracle occurred. However, Ehrman fails to 'distinguish between the probability of a miracle claim considered apart from the evidence and the probability of the claim given that evidence' (McGrew 2013). Moreover, the objection against the reasonableness of miracles based on the apparent infrequency of miracles does not work. While infrequencies can help us exclude certain naturalistic explanations given that natural causes are supposed to act in predictable and law-like ways, a miraculous event is supposed to be caused by a supernatural personal free agent who might freely choose to act in a certain unique way only

on a special occasion in religiously significant contexts. For example, to confirm what certain religious leaders (such as Jesus) proclaimed has divine origin and to reveal himself through these events. While Plantinga (2006) has objected that the case for Jesus' resurrection suffers from the problem of dwindling probabilities, McGrew points out that Plantinga's blunder lies in falsely assuming that the probabilities of the background propositions are fixed (McGrew 2009, pp. 644–648).

Concerning the claim that 'an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence,' I have replied that one should not require the evidence to be extraordinary in the sense of forming an insuperable epistemic barrier, which would prevent us from recognizing extraordinary individuals and events, but rather in the sense of being sufficient for demonstrating the unreasonableness of alternative hypotheses. Thus, if someone claims that he saw an aeroplane, one could easily believe the person without demanding evidence that would demonstrate the unreasonableness of alternative hypotheses, but if the person claims he saw an alien, then one would need to be more careful that one has such evidence. While we do not at present have adequate evidence to rule out alternative explanations (e.g. hoax, misidentifications) with regards to claims about aliens—and indeed in many of these cases we do have adequate evidence to show that it is probably a hoax, misidentification, etc.—what is extraordinary about the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is that, as argued in previous chapters, we do have adequate evidence to rule out the alternative explanations in this case and that the reports of Jesus' resurrection occur in the relevant religious context of his claim to be divine (Loke 2017a). I have discussed the claims of resurrection in other cultures cited by sceptics and argued that they have workable naturalistic explanations and are thus disanalogous to Jesus' resurrection.

I have argued that miracles are identifiable; in particular, with respect to the resurrection of Jesus, the evidence for the event together with the exclusion of the naturalistic alternatives and the presence of a relevant religious context will entail sufficient epistemic justification for the conclusion of a miraculous resurrection. Naturalistic alternatives are of two kinds: first, there are naturalistic alternatives *to* the resurrection event; these have already been considered and excluded in previous chapters. Second, there are naturalistic alternatives *for* the resurrection event; that is, Jesus did rise from the dead but it was not caused miraculously, rather it was caused naturally, for example it was a scientific anomaly or it was caused by aliens that are yet unknown to us.

The scientific anomaly hypothesis is evidently fantastically improbable: we have enough understanding of natural laws to know that people do not rise from the dead naturally. It is contrived to think that this event, out of billions of deaths which have occurred, happened as a scientific anomaly and is associated by chance with a person's claim to be divine and/or with the person's prediction of it. On the other hand, the miraculous resurrection of Jesus is not contrived given this religious context. Even if the resurrection

of Jesus has a natural explanation which is yet unknown to twenty-first-century scientists, we still need to ask how it could have been known and utilized to resurrect Jesus in the first century and vindicate his claim to be truly divine. Such a knowledge and ability to manipulate natural laws would still require a supernatural agent in any case.

Alternative naturalistic causes such as aliens or alternative supernatural causes such as demons are ad hoc, because there is no good independent reason for believing that an alien or a demon who had such powers to resurrect the dead exists. However, there are good independent reasons (viz. the cosmological and fine tuning arguments) for thinking that there is a God who created the universe with its laws of nature (Loke 2017b, forthcoming; Craig and Moreland 2009); a God with such powers would have no difficulty raising the dead. There are also reasons for thinking that such a God would interfere in history by becoming incarnate and that it is highly improbable that we would find the evidence we do for the life and teaching of Jesus, as well as the evidence from witnesses to his empty tomb and later appearances, if Jesus was not God incarnate and did not rise from the dead (Swinburne 2003, 2013a, 2013b; cf. Cavin and Colombetti 2013).

Given these reasons, the demonstration that there is good historical evidence for thinking that Jesus claimed to be truly divine (i.e. to be on the Creator side of the Creator–creature divide and of equal ontological status as God the Father; see Loke 2017a) would—together with historical evidence for his resurrection—warrant the conclusion that his coming back to life was an act of God the Creator and a vindication of his claim.

## 9 Conclusion

The resurrection of Jesus is of fundamental importance to traditional Christian faith. Despite disagreements about various aspects of the New Testament, there is widespread consensus among historical-critical scholars that (1) Jesus died due to Roman crucifixion, (2) very soon afterwards, a number of people had experiences that they believed were appearances of the risen Jesus, and (3) the body of Jesus was missing (Habermas 2005, 2013). In this monograph, it has been shown that the case for the resurrection of Jesus has not been disproved; on the contrary, there are good reasons for thinking that the best explanation for (1), (2), and (3) is that God has revealed himself through miraculously raising Jesus from the dead, thus vindicating his claims to be divine and confirming the salvific work that he has accomplished on the cross.

In reply to the objection that historians should not presuppose whether God acted and should try to explain the claims of Jesus' resurrection appearances and empty tomb in other (naturalistic) ways (Carnley 2019, p. 231), I have explained in Chapter 1 using an original analytical framework that these other naturalistic ways can in principle be excluded by the historian based on historical evidence and that the historian can in principle reason from empirical evidence to Jesus' resurrection. In particular, it has been shown in Chapters 2 to 7 that the historical evidence indicates that the tomb of Jesus was empty and that no naturalistic hypothesis reasonably accounts for what happened to the body of Jesus on the first Easter morning. The historical evidence also indicates that there were people in mid-first century CE who claimed that they had seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion, they truly saw something, what they saw was not caused intramentally but extramentally, and the extramental entity was not anyone else but the same Jesus who died on the cross. Therefore, Jesus resurrected. I replied to the problem of miracles in Chapter 8 and concluded that, since Jesus' resurrection occurred together with his claim to be truly divine (Loke 2017a), there are good reasons for thinking that a miracle of the greatest possible significance occurred on that first Easter morning.

Would this conclusion be overturned by the discovery of more evidence in the future? Sceptics have objected to the historical argument for the



resurrection of Jesus by noting that the historical record we have today is incomplete (Allison 2005a, p. 337). In ancient times, very little was recorded in writing, and of that, very little came down into the hands of later writers, and of that, very little survived for two thousand years (Carrier 2005a, p. 177). Surely many records must have been lost, or perhaps destroyed by Christians, all early written attacks on Christianity were destroyed by the church and are known only in the quotations of Christian authors who rebutted them, and there were many other critiques that were written which we don't know about. How different would it be if we had all the records of the first century (Carrier 2005a, pp. 179, 180–181)? In a similar vein, MacCulloch (2010, p. 112) writes,

We have to remember that the vast majority of early Christian texts have perished, and despite many new archaeological finds, there is a bias among those that survived towards texts which later forms of Christianity found acceptable. One expert on the period has recently estimated that around 85 per cent of second-century Christian texts of which existing sources make mention have gone missing, and that total itself can only represent a fraction of what there once was.

MacCulloch (2010, pp. 120–121) adds,

One has always to remember that throughout the New Testament we are hearing one side of an argument. When the writer to Timothy insists with irritating fussiness that 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent', we can be sure that there were women doing precisely the opposite, who were probably not slow in asserting their own point of view. But their voices are lost, or concealed in texts modified much later. Up to the end of the first century, it is virtually impossible to get any perspective on the first Christian Churches other than that of writings contained in the New Testament, however much we would like to have a clearer picture of why and how conversions took place. There is a silence of about six crucial decades, during which so many different spirals of development would have been taking place away from the teachings of the Messiah, who had apparently left no written record.

Furthermore, there is also the problem of under-determination: just as one can draw any number of curves through a finite set of points to create a thousand pictures, one can come up with many possible hypotheses with the limited evidence (Allison 2005a, p. 339).

In response, O'Collins (2017, pp. 500–501) notes, 'it misconstrues historical judgments to claim that "all historical judgments are open to revision"' (contra Novakovic 2016, pp. 128–129, 155).

It is historically certain that Napoleon was finally defeated at Waterloo, even if some secondary details of the event can be open to revision.

While certainty in history is not established in the way certainty can be reached in mathematics, chemistry and other disciplines, there are innumerable cases of historical certainty.

(O'Collins 2017, pp. 500–501)

For each of these historical certainties, it would be unworkable to try to explain away the contents of all the documentary evidence which indicates its occurrence by postulating the existence of another naturalistic cause X, because X would entail consequences which are false. For example, one might postulate X: a conspiracy which changed all the historical documents to indicate that Napoleon was finally defeated at Waterloo when in fact he wasn't, but such an act would have been noticed by others and left behind detectable traces, which we do not find. It is the entailment of such false consequences that prevent us from coming up with *plausible* naturalistic alternative hypotheses to the historical certainties, even though we can come up with many *possible* alternative hypotheses. Since any discovery of more evidence in the future that might naturalistically overturn the conclusion that 'Napoleon was finally defeated at Waterloo' requires the existence of X which entails false consequences, it is unreasonable to think that any such future discoveries would overturn this conclusion.

The crucial consideration, therefore, is the evidence that supports the historical conclusion in question, and whether there could be another X that could explain away this evidence without entailing false consequences. Now I am not claiming that demonstrating Jesus' resurrection as a case of historical certainty is necessary for the historical argument or for believing that Jesus resurrected—demonstrating that Jesus' resurrection is at least as good as (or better than) the currently available alternative naturalistic hypotheses would have sufficed to show the rational permissibility (or reasonableness) of believing that Jesus resurrected (It has been shown in Chapter 8 that Jesus' resurrection has a probability of *at least 99.4%*, which is far higher than the alternative naturalistic hypotheses). Nevertheless, I do think that the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is stronger than that, and that the conclusion that Jesus resurrected as a case of historical certainty is defensible. For the case of Jesus' resurrection, it has been argued in previous chapters that we have good documentary evidence for its occurrence, and that attempts to explain away the contents of these documents naturalistically would not work. For example, it has been shown in Chapter 2 that, given the substantial manuscript evidence, it is unreasonable to think that (X)—*all* the relevant passages in the Epistles (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15), the Gospels, the church fathers' quotations, their citations of non-Christians, and so on—were interpolated by later Christians (even if they did interpolate a passage like Mark 16:9–10), for such an act would have been noticed by others and left behind detectable traces (as illustrated, for example, by the traces in the manuscript evidence which has enabled us to detect Mark 16:9–20 as an interpolation).

Concerning Carrier's and MacCulloch's point about loss of ancient manuscripts, it has been noted in Chapter 2 that one reason why many of the non-Christian writings did not survive is that no one actively promoted the copying and preservation of their writings as their adherents died off (see Gamble 1995, p. 127). In the case of the Gnostic writings, as explained in previous chapters, their historical reliability were demonstrably inferior to (say) the Four Gospels, thus it is understandable why the early Christians who recognized this did not preserve them. Even if many records have been lost or destroyed by Christians (Carrier) and we only hear one side of the argument for the first six decades of Christianity (MacCulloch), it has been argued in Chapter 2 that nobody in the late first–early second century would have had the power and authority to alter all the copies of (say) 1 Corinthians possessed by different communities of varying (sometimes even opposing) theologies without leaving a trace in the surviving manuscripts from diverse places across the Mediterranean, as well as all the copies of other documents in the first and second century—such as the Four Gospels, Acts, 1 Clement, Letters of Ignatius, etc.—which also attest various eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus.

Likewise, as argued in the previous chapters, the following considerations are well established despite the incomplete record we possess:

### **Historical considerations**

- 1 Jesus' crucifixion in around AD 30.
- 2 Individuals (including former unbelievers Paul and James) and groups of people (including Jesus' apostles who were familiar with him) claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus shortly after that.
- 3 The threat of persecutions against them and their willingness to die for their religion.
- 4 The importance of the claim of Jesus' transphysical bodily resurrection for the earliest Christians.
- 5 The reverent fear of being judged by YHWH for being false witnesses were present among them.
- 6 The scepticism of bodily resurrection were present among them and their audiences.
- 7 The commonsensical idea of 'checking out' the 'eyewitnesses' were present among them.
- 8 The mobility and 'networking' among the earliest Christians.
- 9 The author of Matthew's account of the guard of Jesus' tomb would not have committed a 'credibility suicide' by inventing an easily falsifiable story for his apologetic purpose.

### **General considerations:**

- 10 No group of people would be willing to sacrifice everything for what they do not believe to be true and be condemned by God after death for being false witnesses.

- 11 Without a corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, the mental states internal to each person within a group of people would not agree on various details concerning their experience of the external world.
- 12 Many cases of hallucination do subsequently achieve insight that their experience is hallucinatory after the experience has ended.
- 13 No mere human being would have been able to *naturalistically* cause his own body to manifest ‘transphysicality.’
- 14 A half-dead person still suffering from the wounds of the crucifixion would not be able to convince people that he was the risen Lord of life.

Any future discovery which is claimed to refute Jesus’ resurrection would require another X (e.g. hallucination hypothesis) to explain away these (and perhaps other) considerations taken together without entailing false consequences, but this would not work as shown in previous chapters (e.g. see the refutation of the hallucination hypothesis in Chapters 4 and 7). It is therefore not surprising that claims of discovery of (say) Jesus’ body have turned out to be bogus (see, for example, the supposed discovery of Jesus’ family tomb at Talpiot discussed in Section 6.3).

With regards to the problem of under-determination, it has been shown in this book that the number of hypotheses concerning the resurrection can be reduced to only a few, and that all the naturalistic alternatives can be eliminated once the historical considerations summarized in each chapter and listed earlier are established. While the historical record we have is incomplete and limited, a ‘lack of complete access to the past is not the same as a complete lack of access to the past’ (Keith 2011), and the amount of evidence we have is already sufficient to establish those historical considerations, as demonstrated in the previous chapters. We do not need to possess all the historical records of the first century or to know all the details of the events in order to show that the naturalistic hypotheses are unworkable. All that is required is to establish those historical considerations, given which none of the naturalistic hypothesis is workable as a historical explanation for the beginning of Christianity, as explained in previous chapters. While new hypotheses or new combinations of hypotheses may be suggested in the future, each of them can be classified under one of the logically exhaustive categories stated in this book, and the considerations against that category which have been explained in this book will be used against it. Since it is unreasonable to think that any X can explain away the multiple lines of evidence supporting the case for Jesus’ resurrection without entailing other consequences which are false, one does not need to worry that any future discoveries would support a naturalistic hypothesis that would overturn the conclusion that Jesus resurrected.

The conclusion that Jesus’ resurrection is a case of historical certainty is further supported by the fact that, despite intense scrutiny over the centuries by so many sceptics, the case for Jesus’ resurrection has stood the test of time and that ‘no modern historian has come up with a more convincing

explanation' (Wright 2003, abstract). The eminent historian of Buddhism Paul Williams (2002, pp. 134–135) explains his conversion from Buddhism to Christianity as follows:

It does not seem to me that any other religion or spiritual teaching has anything so dramatic or convincing as the resurrection from the dead—*a resurrection that still seems plausible two thousand years later*—to support its claims. Buddhists (and others) sometimes talk about the wonders their spiritual heroes and heroines have done and can do. But nowhere is there a case so clearly and plausibly demonstrated as the resurrection. That, it seems to me, is a fact. . . . Such a plausible case of resurrection from the dead by a great spiritual teacher—the only such case—when combined with the historical survival of Christianity and the palpable goodness and wisdom of many Christians, is enough for me at least to take the leap and accept Christianity.

(2002, pp. 134–135, emphasis mine)

The conclusion of this book has a number of significant implications for humanity and for theology, in particular the doctrines of revelation, God, Christ, salvation, church, and eschatology.

First, concerning the doctrine of revelation, theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1987, p. 135) concludes,

The historical solidity of the Christian witness [to the resurrection] poses a considerable challenge to the conception of reality that is taken for granted by modern secular history. There are good and even superior reasons for claiming that the resurrection of Jesus was a historical event, and consequently, the Lord himself is a living reality. And yet there is the innumerable repeated experience that in the world the dead do not rise again. As long as this is the case, the Christian affirmation of Jesus' resurrection will remain a debated issue, in spite of all sound historical argument to its historicity.

While I agree with Pannenberg's conclusion that 'there are good and even superior reasons for claiming that the resurrection of Jesus was a historical event, and consequently, the Lord himself is a living reality,' one can question to what extent should it matter for our assessment of Jesus' resurrection that 'and yet there is the innumerable repeated experience that in the world the dead do not rise again.' For as explained in Chapter 8, these innumerable experiences only indicate that, left on their own, the dead do not rise, but these experiences do not rule out the possibility that there might be someone out there in the universe (e.g. an alien with advanced technology) or beyond the universe (e.g. God) who has the power to raise the dead. Moreover, what we do not observe nowadays does not imply it didn't happen in the past—we still need to consider the evidence we have. For example, no scientist

has ever observed a Big Bang happening nowadays, but almost all scientists believed that a Big Bang event happened in the past because of the evidence of its occurrence. Likewise, one should believe that Jesus resurrected because of the evidence, for it has been shown in the previous chapters that the historical evidence indicates that (I) there were people who claimed to have seen Jesus shortly after his crucifixion, (II) they had some kind of experiences, (III) what they experienced was not caused intramentally but extramentally, and (IV) the extramental entity was not another person but the same Jesus who died on the cross. Therefore, Jesus resurrected. Thus, it is ‘the conception of reality that is taken for granted by modern secular history’ that needs to change. Furthermore, I have explained in Chapter 8 that after the historian has established the conclusion that Jesus resurrected, the philosopher and theologian can proceed to argue that the most reasonable cause of this event is God. Thus, we have good reasons for thinking that God has revealed himself in history by raising Jesus from the dead. The truth of the resurrection of Jesus therefore ‘calls for a new conception of history and of God’s involvement in the world’ (Rae 2005, p. 84).

Second, with regards to Christology, Jesus’ resurrection indicates that he was not merely a human figure. As noted previously, Jesus claimed to be truly divine in the context of Jewish monotheism (Loke 2017a). Since there is evidence for thinking that Jesus was bodily resurrected after his crucifixion and that such a significant and miraculous event indicates that his ministry and claims were divinely vindicated, there are good reasons for thinking that Jesus was not only truly human, but also truly divine—in other words, God incarnate.

Third, with regards to eschatology and soteriology, the resurrection of Jesus is proclaimed as evidence of divine judgment in the Scriptures. ‘Because he [God] has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness through a man whom he has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising him from the dead’ (Acts 17:31). The God who raised Jesus from the dead will one day raise all people, ‘some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt’ (Dan 12:2). The resurrection of Jesus is also a divine confirmation of Jesus’ claim to have given his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the Scripture declares, ‘if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’ (Romans 10:9). The resurrection of Jesus is the basis for the glorious hope that those who believe in Jesus will be with him forever, which is far better (Phil 1:23).

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have

1 As noted in Chapter 8, the early tradition in 1 Cor. 11:23–26 cf. Mark 14:22–25 indicates that Jesus taught his sacrificial death.

no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

(1 Thess. 4:13–14)

Finally, concerning ecclesiology, the resurrection of Jesus is the basis for thinking that he is the Lord of the church and that those who obey him as Lord and serve him faithfully would find ultimate fulfilment in life. ‘Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain’ (1 Cor. 15:58).

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