

# Why I Don't Buy the Resurrection Story (1999)

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## Forward

This lengthy essay was revised in 1999 from the original 1998 version. The new text unites the original with the thirty-three addenda that accumulated over that year, and reconsiders many probabilities and adds a few new details. I am very grateful to all those who criticized the original or offered suggestions. The thirty-three addenda were inspired by all of my readers, and the incorporation of these now into the new text is a further recognition of their valuable contribution.

A lengthy and admirable [critique of this essay](#) by Ryan C. Renn is also available on the web. His work responds to the original version, and the new version has been revised in part due to his criticisms, so some of his points may be obsolete, while others are directly answered.

Renn makes many arguments that I do not find relevant to the point of my essay. For example, he asserts that he, "for one, do[es] not desire to be 'just as right' as Thomas was in the Gospel of John." This is an issue of the ethics of belief, of what he thinks a person *ought* to believe, given certain reasons, and this is based upon his own subjective values. I simply disagree with him. Thomas behaved far more ethically than any other character in the story, in my opinion. But such disagreements as this are beyond the scope of this essay and I will not address them here. Other critics have told me that reason and facts don't belong in questions of faith and that they are only a barrier to a personal relationship with Jesus. This is also a claim about the ethics of belief, and it is a sentiment that I find to be quite immoral, but that also does not belong here. I have addressed the ethics of belief in other essays: see [Do Religious Life and Critical Thought Need Each Other?](#), [What Atheists Ought to Stand For](#), and [A Fish Did Not Write This Essay](#).

These and other arguments of Renn's which I do not answer directly are in some sense already addressed by these and other essays of mine, where my credentials, epistemology, and attitude toward history are all presented, directly or indirectly, to the public view. As I find the time, I continually add to these. If you think I need to write on something not addressed there already, please send me feedback (see link at bottom). But in particular, I encourage interested readers to point out any specific argument of Renn's that I ought to address but fail to here.

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## Introduction

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Many things could be said which cast doubt on the story of the Resurrection of Jesus by God, but there are three above all which are most decisive in leading me to reject the story as unworthy of belief. This essay details these three primary reasons. The importance of this essay is to explain a major reason why I am not a Christian: since I cannot rationally bring myself to believe this story, I cannot rationally bring myself to be a Christian. Those eager to convert me respond that few Christians hold the resurrection to be the *sole* revelation of God, but I do not claim this. The resurrection is only the *central* revelation justifying the *Christian* faith, i.e. not just belief in god, but in a particular God with a particular plan that we have to follow or be damned. As Paul writes, "If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is groundless" ( 1 Corinthians 15.17). Indeed, the only reason I wrote the essay was because over 100 (by last count) Christians had e-mailed me or knocked on my door making *exactly* this argument: the resurrection of Christ proves that the Christian God is all-powerful and will save us in the same way. It is this argument that this essay responds to.

My would-be benefactors are not alone: a joint work of 14 leading Christian apologists such as William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, Gary Habermas, and Douglas Geivett, concludes with the argument "If God has acted in human history, particularly in the Incarnation, earthly life and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then human beings clearly are a focus of God's interest and concern" (p. 276, *In Defense of Miracles*, InterVarsity Press, 1997) and "the resurrection of Jesus represents victory over the grave, not only for Jesus but for all who believe in him" (p. 279, *Ibid.*). In my ten years experience in this field, I have seen this to be the *standard* argument for converting to Christianity, regularly used to persuade others to join, and hailed as the reason many believers themselves joined.

There may be other good arguments for believing some kind of god or other exists. The present essay does not address that question. But if the resurrection is not a proof of the *Christian* creed, what is? If one wishes to think that the Christian system allows even doubters of the resurrection to be saved, then perhaps the resurrection need not be a proof of anything. But insofar as "whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16.16), and so long as the resurrection stories were written "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20.31), the resurrection must be a proof equal to the task of saving lives, and my essay remains pertinent in pointing out that the resurrection fails to meet that standard.

There are other reasons why I consider Christianity to be an ill-chosen creed, such as the morals actually taught in the Bible, many of which are abhorrent to a compassionate and just man, or other details of its theology which run counter to observable facts. Even though other aspects of the creed are agreeable, the falsehood of its most important claims, and the imperfection of its teachings, are sufficient grounds to abandon it--just as these are sufficient reasons for Christians to abandon every other religious faith in the world, no matter how well-meaning or wise in their

teachings. This does not mean I throw out the baby with the bathwater--for if there is anything good in Christianity which can be defended as good without appeal to the supernatural, I am probably a firm believer in it. I just don't see the need to call such things "Christian" as opposed to merely "human," for Christians do not hold the monopoly on wisdom. At any rate, here I will only discuss the falsehood of the central Christian "supernatural" claim, that of the Resurrection.

## **1. The Event is not Proportionate to the Theory**

According to the Christian theory, God is god of All Mankind, and more than that, He is god of All the Universe. This is inconsistent with the proof offered for such a deity, that of the Resurrection of Jesus. This event is said to defy nature and thus prove God's supremacy over death and to assure us that, by believing in this deed, God will perform the same deed for us. An inconsistency exists here in two respects:

- (1) A miracle whose purpose is to prove something to all mankind must logically be an event that can be observed by all mankind.
- (2) An event which is to demonstrate the power and existence of a "god of the universe" must logically demonstrate divine powers of such a magnitude, and not of a vastly lesser magnitude.

Why are these problems? To begin with, a "god of all mankind" could have carved "Jesus Lives" on the face of the moon, where all mankind could witness the miracle, and observe it for all time without relying on hearsay--at the very least, he could have extended the darkness and earthquake and mass rising of dead people, reported to have occurred at his crucifixion by Matthew (27:45-54), over the whole earth, where it would be recorded by every historian of every civilization, so that all mankind could share in the prodigy--he could have attended the moment with a voice or vision seen and heard by every human being, affirming his divinity and sending the message of Life to all. Why, a "god of the universe" could have even rearranged the stars to spell "Jesus Lives"--the sort of feat that can never be replicated by technology and which would demonstrate a truly universal power over all of nature. Without miracles of such magnitude, a god fails to show the extent of his power, fails to advertise to all his subjects, and fails to prove himself thereby. He fails to exhibit his means and message in a manner proportionate to what we are supposed to believe about him.

First of all, a resurrection of one man observed by a handful of others in one tiny spot on one tiny planet in one tiny corner of the cosmos is more consistent with a very minor deity (or a very stingy and secretive one), or even more likely a natural event: for there is an easy naturalistic explanation in religious zealotry or scientific ignorance. Of course, even if we grant it was supernatural, there is no good reason to believe in, or even care about, a petty Palestinian deity--some spirit or magician or alien capable of pulling off such a small-time swami trick.

**Even Granting the Existence of the Supernatural, This First Point Holds: The Event is Not Proportionate to the Theory**

Now, as William Lane Craig writes, "It would be very odd, indeed, were an atheist to grant the resurrection of Jesus as a historical and miraculous event and yet assert that perhaps only an angel raised him from the dead" (*Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Edwin Mellom, 1985, p. 497). But this comment is snide, because it transforms what I and others say into a very different supposition: for to say "an angel did it" is to presume that there was a greater being around who sent him. Thus, naturally, anyone who makes such an argument is behaving very oddly, indeed. But I know of no one who has ever made that argument, except perhaps early Christian heretics and pagan critics, who were content to believe in many gods, even those who would pull off tricks just to lead the credulous astray.

I only grant the possibility of other supernatural powers here for the sake of making a philosophical point: the resurrection, *even if genuine*, is an inadequate reason to become a Christian, for "carving the moon or rearranging the stars is more consistent with the Christian's description of God, as well as more consistent with that god's purported objectives." Yet, despite the importance of those objectives, despite the reputed magnitude of God's powers, we see nothing even remotely like this. Thus the event is, at best, poorly planned, considering its intended effect and declared purpose, and at worst, no more a proof that the Christian god is One and All and Good than the feats of Indian gurus, if also genuine, would be proof of the Hindu cosmology.

But the fact is that I no more believe that Sarapis used Vespasian to heal the blind and lame than I believe that Simon Magus used magic to fly through the air. But if we allow any evidence to point to the supernatural, to any unobserved possibilities like gods, then we allow all the evidence to do so. We must be consistent. If we think the resurrection story as we have it proves *anything* supernatural, then if Tacitus insists that eye-witnesses saw Vespasian, at the command of Sarapis, heal the blind and lame, if Aelius Aristides insists that Aesculapius came to him in a dream and cured his disease, we must accept that as proof that Sarapis and Aesculapius exist, too. There is abundant evidence of magic and demons and ghosts in antiquity. What are we to make of it?

My point is thus *not* that, e.g., it is actually possible that Jesus used magic to restore himself to life, but that if he did so, God would then have failed "to exhibit his means and message in a manner proportionate to what we are supposed to believe about him." That is, even were I to grant it was supernatural, I am left with no reason to grant that there is a god of all the universe, and one and only one god, and that not believing in this event would secure my eternal damnation. For if I were to allow the possibility of the supernatural on such feeble evidence, I must allow much more than this. I must allow the possibility that there are many gods, that there is such a thing as magic, that I may be reincarnated, that I may be able to escape this unreasonable Palestinian demonlord by hurtling my soul into Nirvana. In other words, the event itself is not sufficient to accomplish the task of saving my life--it is like throwing a life preserver to the victims of the Titanic, knowing full well they will freeze to death anyway. It is too little, too long ago. And, as I say quite directly, "A god ought to know better."

**No Miracles Today Implies None Then**

The Resurrection demonstrates no more than amazing natural events or, at best, supernatural events of a minor scale. That is one reason why the "God of the Universe is Proven by the Resurrection" argument fails to be rationally convincing. Such a god would not use a mere Resurrection as proof of his existence, and even if he did, we cannot accept it as such, for we cannot rule out the equally probable actions of a lesser deity, nor even natural causes (i.e. of the event itself, or the account of it).

But the point goes even deeper still. An event only observed by a few men can only be a proof, as Thomas Paine wrote, for those men. It can never be a proof for all mankind, who did not observe it. No amount of argument can convince me to trust a 2000 year-old second-hand report, over what I see, myself, directly, here and now, with my own eyes. If I observe facts which entail that I will cease to exist when I die, then the Jesus story can never override that observation, being infinitely weaker as a proof. And yet all the evidence before my senses confirms my mortality. My identity is inexorably connected with my ability to see, hear, think, feel, and remember--it is built necessarily upon my memories, derived from all these things. Yet we know for a fact that by removing certain portions of one's brain, or removing the materials needed for the brain to function, such as oxygen, we cause each of these elements of human identity to be lost or altered. The memory of words has its place in the brain, the ability to imagine images has its place, and we know them. When our brain loses blood, as I know from direct experience, it stops working, and when it stops working, all thinking ceases to exist.

Yet if you can remove my memories by removing sections of my brain, if you can remove my will or my reason or my emotional control by damaging other sections of my brain, if you can cause my whole consciousness to grind to a halt and fail to notice a whole minute of time by merely draining me of blood, then it follows necessarily that if you remove all the parts of the brain, if you remove all of its blood and put none back in, then there will not be anything left to call "me." A 2000 year-old second-hand tale from the backwaters of an illiterate and ignorant land can never overpower these facts. I see no one returning to life after their brain has completely died from lack of oxygen. I have had no conversations with spirits of the dead. What I see is quite the opposite of everything this tall tale claims. How can it command more respect than my own two eyes? It cannot.

This argument that restoration of life is "impossible," based on present observations, does not presupposes naturalism and materialism. It only presupposes that what we observe now is how things worked then. I must add that I do not really claim that restoration of life is impossible--indeed, I think it is very definitely possible--I simply don't know of anyone (or thing) who can pull it off, and thus I don't believe that anyone (or thing) has. If God were regularly performing unquestionable miracles today, perhaps turning all guns in the world into flowers, rendering the innocent impervious to harm, protecting churches with mysterious energy fields, and all the queer things we would expect if there really was a god, then the very same argument that I use here would actually *vindicate* the resurrection as most probably miraculous. After all, even the followers of Jesus reputedly got to watch him raise Lazarus from the dead, drive demons into pigs, walk on water, glow, and talk face-to-face with Moses, and converts got to watch disciples resist snake poison, stand beneath flaming tongues appearing in mid-air, and speak in a dozen languages without having learned them--if this were really going on now, I just might be a Christian. Thus, I do not presuppose materialism at all. My argument is perfectly consistent with

godism. The evidence of today simply does not produce any godist conclusions, leaving us to wonder which is more likely: that God stopped parting seas and raising the dead, or that these stories are, for various historical reasons, fictions. I have written on the related matter of the gullibility of witnesses in the time of Jesus in another essay: "[Kooks and Quacks of the Roman Empire.](#)"

Nor am I even arguing that "no resurrections now means none then" on the false analogy that ordinary people today are like Jesus. Since Jesus was a special case, you might say, obviously his resurrection hasn't been repeated. But my argument has nothing to do with this analogy. It has to do with the fact that "no miracles now means none then"--in other words, it would not be necessary to repeat the exact same miracles of Jesus to change my conclusion. All that is needed is the demonstration that God, like the laws of nature, is a regular, functioning part of what exists today, and that he actually has powers sufficient to work a resurrection. There is, in my experience, no such demonstration of present miracle-working (of any kind) sufficient to suggest that a particular miracle, like the resurrection of Jesus, is likely to be a miracle from a god. This is actually the way everyone thinks, all the time: we do not believe stories that come to us second-hand which contradict our direct experience, because each fact presents us with two possible realities, the only evidence of one is a story, the only evidence of the other is direct observation. The latter always wins: for no amount of persuasion will convince me that a poisonous snake won't kill me, no matter how many men named Jesus are reported to have said otherwise. Above all, even the author of the gospel of John depicts Thomas the Doubter as rational and wise for refusing to believe without direct observation, and this shows that we have no more grounds to believe than Thomas did, and until granted the same evidence as he, we are as right as he was to call it bunk.

[See my review of *In Defense of Miracles* for more on the general issue of miracle claims]

### **A Message for All Would be Sent to All, and No Infallible Being would Entrust Fallible Minions as Couriers**

So much for the miracle being inadequate to the task of convincing all mankind, and so a failure as far as divine plans go. What about that second problem? The colloquialism of a tiny event happening only in Palestine makes no sense if a god wanted all mankind, including the Chinese, to witness the event and be saved. It makes more sense if it was a local idiosyncrasy and not a divine event at all. That is to say, The Resurrection, as told, is more consistent with a mere natural occurrence which inspired a few local yokels, than with an act of a cosmic god aimed at saving all mankind. It is too small, too puny, too long ago. A god ought to know better. But men, we know, are prone to think of their little tiny place as the whole of creation, and of their little tiny slice of history as the whole of time. Men, we know, are more than capable of making this story up, or of believing it without really checking the details. The story is all too sensible as a yarn, whether sincere or devious. But as the centerpiece of a divine, cosmic plan, it makes no sense at all.

A Resurrection, after all, is not all that impressive a feat. If so, why haven't there been more of them? There have been. I give examples in section 2. I could even add the obvious: how many resurrections have been secured by CPR and electric defibrillators? We don't think about it now

because it is so common that we take it for granted, but we now have hundreds, even thousands of Near Death Experiences on record to show that people are coming back from the dead in droves (cf. Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson, *At the Hour of Death*, Hastings House, 1990, for the largest study, Susan Blackmore *Dying to Live*, Prometheus, 1993, for the best survey and analysis, and Gary Habermas and J.P. Moreland, *Immortality: The Other Side of Death*, Thomas Nelson, 1992, for the Christian take on all this).

Moreover, it is popularly believed that the office of the coroner was established, in part, to prevent people mistaken for dead being buried or cremated alive. It is precisely because cases of people surviving or being revived from seemingly fatal circumstances are replete throughout history that the case of Jesus' survival is not unique at all. As I will note, even if we take all records as entirely true, we have no account at all of anyone confirming that Jesus was actually dead: heart stopped, brain degenerating. And since we cannot have a resurrection without an actual death, we have no record at all, not even an invented one, that Jesus was actually resurrected from the *dead*.

But all that aside, a resurrection is localized, not cosmic in scale, and it is not that technically difficult. Carving the moon or rearranging the stars is more consistent with the Christian's description of God, as well as more consistent with that god's objectives. We already expect that we, mere humans, will be capable of accomplishing resurrection in fifty to a hundred years. Not only does the cryogenics industry suggest this, but certain logical inductions about the progress of science and technology ought to suffice. Even a real resurrection can only prove a wonderworker of meager, within-the-realm-of-humanly-possible powers. It cannot prove a god of cosmic, supernatural might. And a god of cosmic might would want to prove he was the latter, not the former. Thus, the Resurrection is not consistent with what a cosmic god would do, but it is consistent with what ignorant men would dream up and believe with all credulity. So the falsehood of the Resurrection is thus more reasonable, more likely, than its truth, even within the theory of Christianity itself.

## **2. The Evidence Casts Suspicion on the Event being a True Resurrection**

I am inclined, myself, to think that Jesus simply died, and the rest was invented, consciously or not, by his disciples, as a means to carry on his teaching and gain divine authority for it--precisely the same thing preachers use the story for today. But even if we posit that there is some truth to the appearances of Jesus after his death, even if we grant half of the argument, as I am willing to do here, the argument fails to convince. Why? Because there are too many reasons to doubt that a miracle occurred at all.

For the event to be a miracle, the Resurrection must defy the course of nature, and for that to happen, Jesus had to have died. His heart had to have lain still and quiet for days, his brain had to have starved from lack of oxygen, with the whole network of neurons largely desintegrated, dissolved from massive cell death and the pooling of blood acids. Gases and fluids had to pool in his extremities and body cavities, with rigormortis setting in, and coming and going as it does. His body had to rot. Anything less than this cannot be considered death. If his heart kept beating, perhaps one can argue it was only in defiance of nature that it did so, and perhaps one can extend

this argument to the brain, to the decay of the corpse, or to every aspect of death. Perhaps Jesus lay in a magical, miraculous stasis. This would entail that he was not Resurrected from death, but that he *survived* by a miracle instead. But this would still be the claim that he survived by miraculous intervention, and that his survival was in spite of nature, and not an exhibition of the natural, if extraordinary, course of physics, chemistry, and biology. I claim that we have no reason to believe that either miracle occurred. For we have no reliable evidence that Jesus died, and we certainly have none whatsoever that he survived by some magical kind of stasis: no one observed the corpse of Jesus while it lay in the tomb, and no doctors examined him, on the cross or off it.

Ineed, not only do we have no way of really knowing that Jesus died on the cross (we can't travel back in time with the medical machinery and team of doctors necessary to certify it), there is an abundance of evidence which throws suspicion on the claim that he did. This suspicion, even though it does not produce a certainty that he survived, is nevertheless sufficient for any rational person to remain unconvinced that anything miraculous happened, even if it actually did. That is, even if a god wanted this to be a proof of something, he failed to make it so. The evidence leaves enough room for survival to be possible, and not too improbable. But even if the survival of Jesus could be proven to be very *unlikely*, it still cannot be excluded with enough certainty to justify categorically denying it, and so it cannot be excluded with enough force for one to believe that divine intervention is the most sensible explanation.

It is easy to test the Christian's honesty in claiming that the evidence warrants rational belief. Simply posit essentially the same evidence and essentially the same account, but given of a modern Bob, whose central message was that Christianity was a lie, and that his was the true word of God, and his resurrection was proof of that. Would the Christian convert? Logically, he must, for the evidence is exactly equal in merit but for these details: the new message is more recent and has not had the opportunity of being doctored or mishandled in transmission, and it has occurred in an age where almost everyone is literate and in possession of more scientific literacy than even the most educated scholar of two millenia ago. These two advantages are enough to give the evidence for the new messiah far more weight than that for the old (we might even add a third: the fact that the means and personnel would be available to test the event in ways never possible two millenia ago). But would the Christian convert, and renounce Christ? I doubt it. I think, then, the Christian would see all that is really wrong with his own evidence. It is far too weak to warrant conversion to Bob. But this entails that it is even weaker still in the case of Christ.

### **A Cumulative Case Can be Made that Jesus did not Really Die**

Decision theory is the science of making our decisions more accurate, and more capable of being analysed. The idea is simple: instead of trusting in intuitive judgements that others cannot examine, and that we cannot consistently weigh against other judgements, we can try instead to assign numerical values to the weight of our judgements, and use math to analyze them. In this section, I will use this method, so that you can follow along and do your own math with your own judgements, and so you can see what weight I give to my own judgements. The statistics that I employ from here on out are thus given to quantify my estimations of the relative weight of options, so that you, and I, can see more clearly what I mean by "this is unlikely" or "this is very

likely" or "this is more likely than that." I am doing the same thing everyone does when they evaluate evidence and make a decision concerning what to believe, only I am doing it more openly and with greater precision. I am committing to more concrete guesses, and not hiding behind vague allusions.

Why? The first reason is that because this allows other readers like yourself to insert your own values for each probability, based on your own beliefs about, and familiarity with, reality. And, using exactly the same evidence that I present, you can come to your own conclusion. That is the merit of applying decision theory to something like this--especially an issue that is so very complicated. In the end, I will consider the possibility that my estimates are greatly in error, and then show that even if they are ten times off the mark, then my conclusion is still valid. Indeed, they could be a hundred times off the mark, and I think my conclusion would still be valid, for even a royal flush is a very unlikely event, yet hardly a miracle.

This leads me to another reason I use numbers here: it is often claimed that an event is a miracle when it is so unlikely to happen naturally that there is no way we could expect it to ever happen. This invites us to test this theory by estimating the unlikelihood of the Resurrection to see if we must conclude that it is a miracle. For instance, it is sometimes argued that the odds of life forming by chance are beyond all possibility of actually happening within the given size and age of the universe (see, for example, my essay [A Comprehensive Refutation of all Attempts to Calculate the Improbability of Life](#)). There are certainly natural events that are so rare that they only happen to one person every generation, and though this means that there is a 1 in 6 billion chance of such an event happening naturally, we see that this is almost certain to happen once every generation. The odds of a natural explanation for the Resurrection must be less than at least this figure before we can conclude that natural explanations are too implausible to believe. It must be added, however, that some events that are even very likely may still only ever happen once: that a man exactly like Winston Churchill should be born and grow up to lead England during a war with a Nazi-run Germany is certainly no miracle, even though it is almost certain to happen only once in all of time. This is because the convergence of all the right circumstances must be present, and even though such a convergence is not improbable in itself, that such a convergence would happen again *is* improbable, to the point of being almost impossible. Thus, even though I find the Resurrection to be more likely than an event that happens only once in a generation, it does not follow that it should have happened more than once, despite the passing of hundreds of generations. Like Winston Churchill, that the right circumstances could converge once may be likely, but that they would do so twice might be extremely unlikely indeed--although we do have a record of a resurrection, giving birth to a religion, happening at least one other time: the resurrection of the Thracian Zalmoxis, which Herodotus (4.94-6) feels happy to give a natural explanation in trickery, even though he could not really have had any more proof than we do in the case of Jesus.

It is important to emphasize that my use of statistical numbers is not science. I do not claim scientific accuracy. I only claim to be making *decisions* about probability, which everyone does, with less care, every time they decide what to believe. So this is not a trick or a pseudo-argument, but an attempt to make my reasoning more transparent and thus more easily tested against the reader's own subjective understanding of the same facts. I thus encourage, and expect, every reader to consider each fact on their own, and determine in each case their own estimations

of probability, and then do the math again, based on their own estimations. Decision theory is designed for this very purpose.

### **What Are the Odds that he Could Have Survived?**

Jesus, we are told, was taken down the same day he was put up, without breaking his legs, unlike the others crucified with him (John 19.32). Death by crucifixion typically took days, and breaking the legs is, based on this passage, taken as a possible means of hastening death, by perhaps cutting off the airway under the weight of the crucified's own body (though it must be noted that this may not have happened, or may not have been a practice at all). Thus, the possibility of his survival remains. Being removed before the typical time of death, and being treated uniquely among all others in the same place and time, in such a way as to increase greatly his chances of survival, casts great doubt on his death. If we imagine that even as few as 75% of all victims survived on the cross more than a day (at least such odds are necessary for Pilate to express amazement at Jesus' early demise in Mark 15.44), then already we have a 75% chance that Jesus did not die on the cross.

It has been noted that we must also explain how Jesus survived his scourging or torture, as well as the crucifixion itself *and* the burial. But this is not necessary. All accounts as we have them show Jesus alive after any torture he suffered, so we do not have to account for his surviving it--all witnesses already claim that he did. It is also not remarkable. People in history have survived far worse. The removing of tongue, nose, and ears was a common punishment in Sumeria, and you can bet they did not use antiseptics, anesthetics, or sutures, and this was all too often survived--that was, in fact, the point of doing it. As for the burial, being carefully swaddled and lain on a slab in an open, roomy tomb is never going to present a survival problem.

Evidence from Josephus has been used to make the survival of Jesus seem less likely (*Life of Flavius Josephus* 420-21). However, the passage says nothing about what wounds the victims received before being crucified (they were war captives, after all, not peacefully arrested criminals), nor does it say how long they were up, or how long they lived before finally giving in, only that they died while under the care of a physician. Of course, in antiquity, care by a physician, employing unsterilized needles and knives for surgery and suturing, and using unscientific folk remedies like hot baths or poisonous hellebore, could easily magnify the chances of death. Yet one out of the three rescued lived. At worst, this calls for changing my estimate of surviving a few hours, after a mere beating beforehand, from 75% to 33%. I think the circumstances are too different--even though there is no doubt that if Jesus lived, he most likely did not live long (how long did Josephus' friends live?)--and the data too limited: his two dying friends could easily have just been unlucky or longing for death from their crushed spirits. But I will grant it anyway.

### **What Are the Odds of Trickery?**

Three of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion depict a sponge soaked in some liquid being pressed into Jesus' face, with Jesus expiring immediately thereafter (Matthew 27.48-50, Mark 15.36-37, John 19.29-30). We are told it was sour wine (*oxos*), which was often used to revive the swooning, yet Jesus expires immediately afterward, a suspicious reaction indeed. So the

possibility of his being drugged is a distinct possibility. We cannot check what was really placed on the sponge, and we have no neutral account of the sponge-offering. Certainly, I will not bet my life that it was not a drug that was supplied, and his immediate and otherwise inexplicable death after receiving the sponge makes the chances of a drug greater still. What are the odds that Jesus was drugged into the mere appearance of death? I originally said that it must be at least 50%. For who can bring forward any evidence against the possibility? But I will be overly skeptical of such a clever trick, and say that the odds are only 1%.

But it has been said that if one offers a secret plot to explain how this all happened, not only is it all conjecture (or worse), it must be based on a selectively inerrantist reading of the gospels. Both objections are misapplied. One must admit, conjecture or not, that a secret plot was possible, no matter how unlikely. Indeed, as we know from the elaborate frauds pulled off by Alexander of Abonuteichos recorded by Lucian, and the witches who drew down the moon by various schemes recorded by Hippolytus, fraud was evident in antiquity, and had it not been for the mere chance of these keen fellows happening upon them and bothering to root them out, we would never know anything about the fraud behind their schemes. Most observers were credulous, or didn't care to prove false what they already rejected out-of-hand [I discuss the historical and philosophical issues surrounding ancient miracles in detail in my [online review of \*In Defense of Miracles\*](#)].

All that remains is to see, based on what evidence supports that possibility, what the odds are. The sponge event, for example, is very odd. So is the fact that Jesus was removed so early and treated so well. But added to this, the opportunities were rather great, as I will soon note: a day of no guards, a wealthy supporter, and being placed in *that man's* tomb by *him*. Thus, trickery is no blind conjecture. It is actually plausible. This, and many other, objections people raise are actually already built in to my decision-theory analysis: I yield to the objectors, and give odds of 1%. What odds do you give?

As for this charge of "selective inerrantism," that is as bogus a charge as any that existed. One can say as much about every work of history or fiction ever written. If I read Sol Yurick's *The Warriors* and note that his hero's use of a penny gum machine shows that gum only cost a penny when the book was written (1965), am I being "selectively inerrantist" simply because I acknowledge that this book is otherwise a work of fiction? And if I conclude from a study of available water supplies in Greece that Xerxes could not possibly have fielded as many men as Herodotus claims he did, but accept as true the rest of that historian's account of the Persian War, am I to be impugned for being "selectively inerrantist"? You decide.

Many of my points depend on certain New Testament passages being historically accurate, without making any argument for their accuracy. Doesn't that, at least, weaken my argument? This is not a problem, in itself, thanks to Catch 22: if someone argues that the verses my theory is based on are false, then it becomes more likely that the resurrection story itself is false. For if lies or errors exist in important details of the story, though this does not prove the story false, it still throws greater doubt on that story being correct, not less. The probability of it not being a miracle is then even greater than I make it out to be. But I am deliberately giving the Christian argument a reasonable chance, by allowing at least some truth to the resurrection accounts, even though it is possible (albeit unlikely, in my opinion) that they are totally fabricated.

But I also address at several points in my essay the possibility that certain passages are false, like my discussion (below) of how rejecting the spearing story affects the leg-breaking story, where I make the point that if we reject that account entirely, then we also have no reason to think his legs were broken, since no other account remarks on this practice. The same holds true of my analysis of the spear wound's location: it has been rightly noted that John's description may not be accurate, but it then follows that we have no idea where the spear wound was, and thus we still cannot know whether the wound would have been fatal. In a similar fashion, if we reject any passage as false which I grant as true, then my argument becomes stronger as a result, not weaker. This is because, unless there is a contradictory passage already in existence (and those relevant cases I address, such as the varying accounts of Paul's "visitation" discussed in section 3), if we reject any given passage, then we are left with no basis for any assumptions at all, much less the assumption of a genuine resurrection.

I ask all readers, if they think any particular passage being false creates a particular problem for my conclusion that the Resurrection was not a miracle from a god, to please point out the fact so that I may consider the matter and address it, or correct my conclusion accordingly. But I cannot answer general, unspecified objections.

### **A Digression on Witnesses Being Willing to Die**

It is still rather unlikely, I am told, that the original believers were making what they believed up for personal gain, in light of the persecution they suffered, and I have a lot to say about this, requiring a substantial digression. It is neither necessary to assume they made it up, nor is it certain that if they did they would be unwilling to die for some greater good that they saw in their creed. And if any original eye-witness did face death and recanted we might not have heard about it: Matthew's remark at 28.17 that some eye-witnesses didn't believe may be seen as a rhetorical defense against evidence of recanters. But most importantly, as I will argue in detail, most believers, and all whom we know died for their belief, were not eye-witnesses. This proves without a doubt that people were willing to die for something that they believed merely on someone else's word. And if they were willing to do that, might they not be willing to die for equally feeble reasons? From kamikaze Japanese dive-bombers and torpedo-peddlers, Islamic suicide-bombers, to any of the dozens of suicide cults in history, or indeed the whole nation of Israel, twice fighting against an obviously unbeatable and demonstrably vindictive Rome, because of beliefs in prophecies of their victory, it is clear that people have a tendency to be willing to die for a seemingly good cause, even when the cause really isn't that good.

It is important not to forget that, in actual fact, we have no reliable record of any eye-witness dying for their belief. All martyrdom accounts are of converts, not witnesses, except for that of Peter. But the account of his death is first found in the Gnostic Acts of Peter, a tale which includes, among other things, a talking dog, a flying wizard, and the resurrection of a tunafish. Moreover, the account is Gnostic and assumes, as in Peter's dying words in it, that the Resurrection was spiritual, not physical, a point I will be discussing in more detail in section 3. But most importantly, he would not have escaped death if he had recanted, for he was killed by a magistrate, as the story relates, whom he had angered with his political meddling, and not because he was a Christian. So his death does not prove that he was willing to maintain his faith

despite being threatened with death if he didn't recant, because he wasn't. He was condemned no matter what his profession of faith, so his devotion proves nothing here.

Let us also not forget that Paul himself, the one without whom there would have been no Christianity as we know it, was not an eye witness. And the first actual account of a martyr is that of Stephen (Acts 7.54-60). But Stephen was not recorded anywhere as being among the original disciples or among the witnesses of any appearance of Jesus: he is listed as being a very devout member of the later converts, Acts 6.5. One might say that as he is being set upon by a mob, he has a vision of Jesus sitting next to God in the sky, but this is clearly not a physical appearance: none of the mob or onlookers saw this, and the details are far from being that of a physical appearance. Moreover, if Jesus was alive and walking about at this time, surely he would be mentioned in Acts as still participating in the movement, but instead, he had already been taken up (Acts 1.9-11), and surely he would have stepped in front of Stephen and intervened if he were "there." But there is more to this. Stephen gives a speech, professing the belief for which he is killed and is willing to die, yet he does not mention the appearances of Jesus after death, nor the empty tomb, or anything like that. He merely professes that Jesus was the messiah, fulfilling Jewish anticipations, and that Jesus was unjustly killed. Indeed, he does not even claim that Jesus was God or the son of God. Stephen seems to be treating Jesus like all the other famous prophets who were killed, and whose deaths were regarded as a rebuke upon the wickedness of Jewish authorities who reject God's message. Stephen, and others in the early church, may thus have seen their victory in the belief and salvation of the believer, not in Jesus' resurrection. At any rate, Stephen was willing to die for a lot less than the claims of Jesus' appearances or even divinity.

And it is not enough to say that Stephen "could" have been thinking of the resurrection when he died, because the point is that *we have no evidence of any kind that he died for that reason*, and therefore no basis for assuming that he did. If any of the eye-witnesses stood firm for the same reasons Stephen did, then we don't even need to explain why they would be willing to, since Stephen's reasons contain nothing miraculous in them. There is also the possibility that the early creed was of a spiritual resurrection, as I will discuss later. Of course, we must also consider the unlikely but still possible notion that the resurrection beliefs were produced by delusion or expectation or deception by untouchable parties. Joseph of Arimathea, or Jesus by himself, or with accomplices who went unnamed and unnoticed but aided him for money or for a sense of a greater good, could all have brought the event about without the disciples being any the wiser, as I discuss above and below. Such possibilities allow one to hold that there was never anything but sincere belief, and in such a case their very belief would actually *cause* them to disregard death (as is evident in all martyrdom tales, cf. also Acts 5.41).

There is still the problem of the "original believers," those who would have been privy to any kind of deception or hyperbole (if we conclude that there was such). But history is replete with people willing to die for a seemingly greater good. Remember Jonestown. And do not forget the image, still burned in my brain, of the Buddhist monk setting himself on fire before the American embassy to protest the Viet Nam War. In antiquity we have the case of Proteus Peregrinus, and various suicidal Brahmen. I will eventually outline several reasons why the Christian creed, even if known to be in some sense a lie, would be believed to be a necessary

change for the good of Israel, and there have been millions of revolutionaries in history willing to die for just such a cause.

But I have been accepting an assumption here: that the original believers were actually willing to die. But by all accounts, they avoided violence by any means possible. Look at the adventures of Paul, for example, e.g. Acts 9.23-25, 29-30. And why did what happened to Stephen never happen to Peter or any other eye-witness? Is it an accident that Peter recants precisely when he cannot protect himself from sudden retribution, but then reconverts when safe? And who else among the original cast could fall back on Roman citizenship for self-defense like Paul did? Even the one early account of Peter's death that we have, if true at all, claims that he was killed for political reasons, and not for his belief. And if their story was in any sense a sham, the conspirators would actually seek to spread their message while guarding themselves. They could have easily maneuvered other followers into the path of violence--a deed no more unscrupulous than the possible murder of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.1-11--or even left town when it suited them: see, for example, Acts 8.1--and what are they doing in Tyre, begging Paul not to go back to Jerusalem in Acts 21.3-6? See also 22.18, etc.

There is also the bigger problem that persecution could not possibly have been so serious as it is often painted to be. As both Suetonius and Tacitus show regarding the persecutions in Rome, it was unusual, and politically motivated by one or two events, and the onlookers were sympathetic. I must also add that we have no good evidence that there was any eye-witness in Rome--even if Paul was there, he was not a true eye witness. There is no other record in any history of any other persecution until that under Pliny in the 2nd century (apart from a poorly attested act of Domitian, equally sporadic and atypical). In Jerusalem, there was also no unified opposition to the creed (Acts 5.33ff., 23.6ff.), there was large enough support to actually instill fear in the *persecutors* (Acts 5.26, 4.21-22), no other source records any persecution in Jerusalem, not even Josephus (though he describes many riots and violent disputes), the legal powers of the Sanhedrin did not extend to any Greek quarter or city in the region (like Tyre), and Paul and the other persecutors merely put people in prison (Acts 5.17, 8.1-3), which was always, for whatever reason, easily escaped (Acts 5.19, 5.22). Moreover, no non-Jews would have cared, and there were whole cities of non-Jews in Judaea, as well as Samaritans who also would not have cared. Acts even says there were often times of peace (Acts 2.47, 9.31). Surely the opposition must have been rather fickle, if it allowed this.

But there are more direct questions I can ask: When Paul returns to Jerusalem, preaches the creed, and starts a riot, it is only he, and no one else in the church--who were clearly there (Acts 21.17ff.)--who is attacked or arrested. Why is that? And why do the reasons he is attacked have nothing to do with his profession of Christianity? (21.29, 21.38) Why does there have to be a conspiracy of foreigners to trump up a false charge and drag out false witnesses to get Stephen arrested? (6.8-14) And why does Paul only report that it was refusal of circumcision that caused persecution, not belief in the resurrection? (Galatians 6:12) On the other hand, how is it possible that a persecuted church can maintain its council of elders right in Jerusalem for years on end? They must have been very wily indeed. Why were they not all killed or arrested? Why is the only actual death we hear about in this persecution that of Stephen, which was an isolated riot, begun over what was actually a trumped-up misunderstanding of what the Christians were actually preaching (Acts 6.13-14), and not a reaction against what they actually believed? There is simply

too much reason to doubt that the "persecution" of any eye-witnesses would have been serious enough to dissuade them from any plan that had enough merit to get them going in the first place.

### **What Are the Odds That He Did in Fact Survive?**

Above all, what evidence do we have that he was dead? We are not told of doctors. Only soldiers give their assessment. But they have no training in this. Indeed, they are among the least knowledgeable in anatomy and medicine, and they never seem to even touch him to examine him, except, by one account, at spear's length. Ancient accounts of misdiagnosed deaths exist. Pliny the Elder, writing in the 60's and 70's AD, collects several of them in his *Natural History* (7.176-179): people who were deemed dead, observed as dead all through their funeral, and on the pyre, ready to be set aflame, but who walked away nonetheless. One account includes a wound that would seem almost certainly fatal (a cut throat, 7.176). Alexander the Great himself was impaled by a spear, which punctured one of his lungs, yet he recovered. Even modern accounts of misdiagnosed deaths exist: as recently as 1989 in Springfield, Ohio (cf. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Aug. 17, pg. 2A) and 1994 in San Leandro, California (*Orlando Sentinel*, Jan. 29, pg. A20).

More interesting is what an unnamed member of the school of Aristotle recorded sometime in the 3rd or 2nd century B.C. in a collection of amazing things (many of which are known natural phenomena) called "On Marvellous Things Heard." An excerpt from entry 101 reads as follows:

They say that there is a tomb on Lipara, one of the seven islands called the Isles of Aeolus, about which they tell many marvels . . . [including the story] that someone who got himself drunk before dawn fell asleep there. His servants searched for him for three whole days, and on the fourth they found him seemingly dead and carried him to his own tomb. After all the funeral rites were finished he suddenly rose and related what happened to him.

The author doubts the story simply because it sounds more like a legend, but he admits it should be recorded, and it seems evident from Pliny that this was a common theme throughout the known world at the time. This no doubt reflects the fact that such misdiagnoses were commonplace enough that everyone had heard at least one such story.

Most interesting of all is an ancient Jewish document called the *Tractate of Mourning* (*Semahot*), which describes the very reasons for the tradition of going to the tomb on the third day (counting inclusively--thus, the *second* day after burial, by our reckoning): "One should go to the cemetery to check the dead within three days, and not fear that such smacks of pagan practices. There was actually one buried man who was visited after three days and lived for twenty-five more years and had sons, and died afterward" (8.1, translation by Shmuel Safrai, "Home and Family," *The Jewish People in the First Century* (1976), vol. 2, pp. 784-5). In other words, misdiagnosis was actually common enough that an entire tradition was developed to make sure people were not buried by mistake--the very tradition which probably motivated Mary's visit to the tomb of Jesus in the first place!

What are the odds that Jesus was misdiagnosed as dead? As it is, we must grant at least a 10% chance that the soldiers mistook him for dead, and that is granting them an amazing diagnostic skill. If Jesus was drugged, this chance would certainly have to rise to at least a 50% chance, for how would common soldiers know anything of the possible effects of drugs, much less that they had been administered? As far as they knew, the sponge was soaked in vinegar. Since I give the odds of being drugged at 1%, we can assess the total chance of misdiagnosis at  $(0.01 \times 0.50) + (0.99 \times 0.10) = 10.4\%$ . With a basic chance of survival of 33%, this makes a chance of actual survival, misdiagnosed as death, of 3.4%.

We also have accounts of survival despite incredible injuries. The Coast Guard WWII hero Douglas Munro was impaled a dozen times by Japanese rifle bullets, yet continued to drive his landing boat, dying only after completing his mission--receiving the Medal of Honor posthumously. So even when very unlikely, survival is demonstrably possible. And complete recovery need not be assumed. Jesus had no known ministry after his death, wrote nothing, and commissioned no inscriptions, despite having wealthy benefactors who could have arranged it (although it is still strange, even if he actually was resurrected, that such things were not commissioned). In my opinion, he certainly must have died soon after his ordeal. Some early manuscripts of Luke lack the reference to Jesus being carried up to heaven (24.51), simply saying that he "left them" in the middle of a blessing (*diestê ap' autôn*), which may mean that he simply died.

It is typical of surviving such ordeals that a sudden but temporary upswing in health should precede eventual downturn and death. In the National Library of Medicine MEDLINE database, record (acc.) 68403724, such an account is recorded: a terrorist bomb threw so many fragments into the brain of Assaf Ben-Or that surgery was ruled out as impossible without killing him. His brain was bleeding heavily internally and the doctors could do nothing about it. A week later, he was listed in good condition and was talking and walking. He then died shortly thereafter. Certainly, passion and drugs can improve chances of such a temporary upswing: it is not impossible, and not even remarkably unlikely. The possibility of such a thing cannot be dismissed in the case of Jesus, who was far less injured than Assaf Ben-Or, and who had no cut throat, no impaled lung as far as we know, no dozen rifle wounds. So survival is even far more likely in the case of Jesus than that of Assaf or any of these other survivors.

### **What Are the Odds That Jesus Was Speared?**

Though he must have had at least a 33% chance of not having died on the cross, John records a spear wound. It has been said that the description of the wound pouring out blood and water suggests a mortal wound, being a blow near the heart. But in fact the only place in the body where a noticeable amount of water or any clear liquid would be visible, along with blood, to a medically ignorant soldier a spear's length away, is the large intestine, suggesting a wound that is unlikely to be fatal until many days later. Munro and Assaf and these other amazing survivals probably occur, let's say, 1% of the time, but a spear wound to the large intestine, though likely to kill in time, is nothing compared to the wounds these people temporarily survived. I, myself, must say the odds of surviving such a wound for up to a week must be better than 50%. Throw in the chances of surviving a partial day of crucifixion (33%), and we get a chance of survival, with

the spear wound, of  $0.33 \times 0.50 = 16.5\%$ . With misdiagnosis as well, we get a final chance of  $.104 \times 0.165 = 1.7\%$  (or about 1 in 60).

But the account of his being speared is illogical and late. It appears only in John, the last of the gospels to be written (after 90 AD). There, soldiers decide not to break his legs because he is dead, and then spear him to make sure he is dead. This is contradictory and inexplicable behavior. The spear wound later comes up in the context of the doubting Thomas story, which only appears in John. As a late insertion in the story, it looks an awful lot like a rhetorical "vicarious conversion" aimed at answering arguments of skeptics, and being late this is to be expected: such doubts had certainly been voiced by then, and John would have liked to answer them. Thus John has as much a motive to invent the spear wound as he has to invent the entire Thomas story, which, after all, is found in no other account, not even in the writings of Paul. All three facts create great doubt that Jesus was stabbed with a spear. This makes survival even more likely. The odds that the spear story is false, based on the fact that three earlier accounts fail to mention it, that John has a rhetorical reason to invent it, and the account of it does not make sense, I think must be at least 75%. This gives us a 75% chance that the odds of survival and misdiagnosis are 3.4% and a 25% chance that they are 1.7%, for a combined chance of  $(0.75 \times 0.034) + (0.25 \times 0.017) = 3\%$ .

One might argue that the "not breaking his legs" account must be dropped if we drop the spearing account. Actually, some argue that John felt the need to claim that Christ's bones were not broken in support of prophecy, as is stated explicitly in John 19:36, and many commentators find a connection with the passover-prohibition on bone-breaking, based on Exodus 12.46 and Numbers 9.12, and John's other predilections for such an analogy. Of course, the same passover rule also prohibits taking the flesh outside the house, which doesn't fit here, and John's words are also taken directly from Pslam 34:20, a passage which discusses righteous men in general, and has no overt connection with the messiah or crucifixion or anyone's death. I once was a skeptic of this reading, but now believe it plausible that there are good reasons for John to invent the whole leg-breaking story to justify his passover lamb analogy, or even to make his Doubting Thomas story work: if it really was a common practice to break the legs (we don't know if it was), John would have to figure out how to make it not happen or else Jesus would be crawling to Thomas on broken legs (and it wouldn't make sense if John had Jesus' legs heal but not the wounds in his hands). But whatever our reason for rejecting it as unhistorical, if John invented the story we are then left with no reason to think Jesus' legs were broken--since no one else mentions it, and we don't even have any other record of this ever being a common practice.

The spearing *also* has a scriptural reason to be invented or mentioned. Since it is taken from an actual messianic passage in Zechariah 12, it could reasonably be expected to be about the messiah and thus anyone in John's position might assume it ought to apply to Jesus, or they would want it to apply, to "prove" Jesus was the messiah. But that passage also mentions other things, like the blinding of the world's horses, and the besieging of Jerusalem at the same time as the coming of the messiah, which John omits. Thus, he is borrowing only what he wants to use. Our question is thus "why?" The use of the wound to dramatize the Doubting Thomas story gives the only obvious reason. It is also possible that in this or even also the leg-breaking account he may have needed a scriptural passage to justify what really happened. But this is less likely

given: 1) the illogic of spearing him after leaving his legs alone, 2) the fact that it dovetails with the already-suspicious Doubting Thomas story, and 3) it is not mentioned by anyone else.

### **Was the Tomb Guarded?**

But what about the guards? Doesn't the fact that the tomb was guarded make escape unlikely, even if Jesus survived? Although one gospel accuses the Jews of making up the theft story, it is only that same gospel, after all, which mentions a guard on the tomb, and the authors have the same motive to make that up as the Jews would have had to make up the theft story: by inventing guards on the tomb the authors create a rhetorical means of putting the theft story into question, especially for the majority of converts who did not live in Palestine. And it is most suspicious that the other gospel accounts omit any mention of a guard, even when Mary visits the tomb (compare Matthew 28:1-15 with Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, and John 20:1-9), and also do not mention the theft story--this claim is not even reported in Acts, where a lot of hostile Jewish attacks on the church are recorded, yet somehow this one fails to be mentioned. Neither Peter nor Paul mention either fact, either, even though their letters predate the gospels by decades. Worse, Matthew's account involves reporting privileged conversations between priests and Pilate, and then secret ones between priests and guards that no Christian could have known about (27.62-65, 28.11-15). This is always a very suspicious sign of fiction. Such a story could very easily be a Christian invention. They had the motive to make it up, to answer the objections of later skeptics (just like the Thomas story in John), and the story looks like an invention, because it narrates events that could not be known by the author.

How would this story develop? If a doubter had claimed that the Christians "could have" stolen the body, and someone overheard this charge and, in the manner of all rumors which get altered in transmission, thought that they heard the body was stolen and then accused the Christians of theft, the Christians could have responded that "the Jews said that, to thwart us" (as Matthew says, "this story is spread around among Jews to the present day," 28.15). This would be quite plausible, since the story does portray the Jews as having a motive to torpedo the cause. One can easily imagine the skeptics answering back that if the Jews really feared theft, they would have guarded the tomb. This skeptical charge would then inspire the addition of guards, which would also require a story of bribery to explain why there are no guards around who could vouch for the resurrection, as well as the invention of an earthquake and angelic intervention to explain why the guards would not interfere with Mary, since, now that he has placed guards on the scene, Matthew has to invent some bizarre reason for their cowering before a woman, a strange story appearing in no other accounts of Mary's visit to the tomb.

It seems, then, that a lie is getting larger and more implausible, in a desperate *attempt* to make it more plausible, a fate that has befallen many a tall story. This fits with the fact that Matthew is the most prone to recording implausibilities: cf. the earthquake, recorded nowhere else, even though it split rocks, cf. 27.51; the zombies, 27.52-53; not to forget the fable concerning Herod and the killing of the babies, cf. 2.16, a story told of kings and great men for centuries before and after Jesus, and yet not mentioned by anyone else in this case, not even by other New Testament authors (especially Luke, who dates the birth of Jesus ten years after Herod died! cf. 2:1-3), and not even by Josephus, who mentions all the other atrocities of Herod. So what do I think are the odds that the guard story is an invention? I estimate at least 30%. What about you?

### **If the Tomb had Guards, What are the Odds of Evading Them?**

At best, neither the story of theft nor that of guards is more likely to be true than the other. But even if we assume a guard, the gospel also depicts these guards as accepting a bribe to lie about theft, and thus it follows that the guards would be just as likely to accept a bribe to allow Jesus to escape. Indeed, they would probably have no qualms about accepting both bribes, being twice the richer for it. And since Jesus was buried in the tomb of his rich and influential supporter, Joseph of Arimathea, there is an irrefutable possibility of bribery.

Some have suggested that Roman legionaires were immune to bribery, out of loyalty to Rome, superhuman discipline, or fear of horrible punishment, even though there are numerous cases of bribery among the legions reported in ancient texts, and no one has yet offered any evidence that it was even rare. But this question is actually moot, for if there were guards at all, it is virtually impossible that they would be legionaires. Pilate would not care that much about petty religious squabbles among the natives, nor about the fate of a body of a foreign criminal that he already released to the dead man's followers. Pilate's trial behavior makes his disinterest clear even in the Christian sources, but it is even greater than they make out, as any perusal of Josephus would show. Thus, if Pilate even provided a guard, it would have been, at best, an auxiliary--a non-citizen soldier. But even more likely, it would have been the local militia, like the temple guards or city watchmen who were under the command of the local city councils, and who were often slaves or freedmen. The story, as it is told to us, actually supports this.

First of all, the Greek says the Jews only tell Pilate "order the tomb to be secured" (*keleuson oun asphalithênai ton taphon*, Matt. 27:64), which permits but does not entail providing a guard, for it could also mean only allowing one to be set. Pilate responds "you have a guard" or "have a guard" (*echete koustôdian*, 27.65), and the verb here may be indicative or imperative: the former actually denies that he meant them to take one of his men, and the latter only allows but does not entail this. But then he tells them to make the tomb secure as *they* know how (i.e. he does not give these orders to the guards, but the Jews), and then the Jews themselves "secure the tomb with the guard" (*êsphalisanto ton taphon...meta tês koustôdias*, 27.66). In other words, the passage as written does not entail sending a guard, but more likely means allowing the Jews to arrange their own guard. They had temple guards of their own, or could have simply appointed anyone to the task. As members of the city council, that was their job. This interpretation has further support in Matthew: when legionaires or Pilate's men are meant, this author usually says so (cf. Matt. 27.27, 27.54), and the word for "guard" used by Pilate (*koustôdia*) does not mean an actual person (that would be *koustos*) but the general idea of "a guarding." So when Matthew writes Pilate as saying "have a guard" he means "set a watch," not "take some guards." Moreover, Matthew 28:11-15 reports that these guards go immediately to the Jews after the discovery of a missing body, not to Pilate or any superior officer, but this would be even stranger behavior for a Roman legionaire than accepting bribes.

But even if we exclude bribery, there are other ways in which the guards would be ineffective. We do not know the configuration of the tomb site, yet we know it belonged to a wealthy supporter, and that the body was placed in the tomb by that supporter, and that the disappearance occurred on a high holy day, when, due to religious laws and observances, the fewest potential

witnesses would be about. The possibility of covert escape, given these facts, is great indeed. There is also the possibility of a switcheroo: the body could have been taken to another tomb than the one claimed, and thus the guards could have been guarding an empty grave all along. And it cannot be forgotten that there is no account given of why the Jews would know where the tomb was. If they had been *told* which tomb he was buried in, a different tomb could have been deliberately pointed out, or the body already removed. This is especially important, because we have no record of Jews or guards looking in the tomb to make sure a body was there before closing it up. Matthew only says that they put a seal on a tomb which had already been closed by Joseph (27.66). So we must admit that the actual body could have been taken anywhere from the start, especially since it was "taken" by a wealthy supporter, who could buy anyone's silence or complicity. The mere fact that Pilate allowed him to take the body shows that Joseph had an awesome degree of influence: that he was a rich and influential member of the elite, and a Christian convert, is claimed by the gospels themselves (cf. Matt. 27.57, Mk. 15.43, Luke 23.50-51, John 19.38).

Most importantly, no guards or suspicions of mischief were raised until *a day later* (27.62-63). This means that Joseph had *carte blanche* with the body. Matthew 27.57-61 records that Joseph was given the body directly, and sealed the tomb himself. The only ones recorded as being with him are the two women, also supporters of the movement. So even if the accusation of theft, even if the guards, are genuine events, as Matthew himself writes the guards were only requested a day later. By then the body could already have been stolen, Jesus could already have escaped, or never even been in the supposed tomb when guards were finally posted on watch.

As one can see, these factors make the chance of Jesus escaping detection rather great. What do I think the odds are that Jesus escaped detection, given the fact that he had at least a full day with no one guarding him? I will say 50%. The chance that he did in fact have a full day to himself and his supporters? Based on the account as given by the Christians themselves, at least 80%. And if we include the odds that the guard story is an invention, and thus that there were no guards at all, this 80% still becomes 30%. This means there is a 30% chance that the odds of escape were 50%, and a 70% chance that the odds were 40% ( $0.8 \times 0.5$ ), for a total chance of escape equal to  $(0.3 \times 0.5) + (0.7 \times 0.4) = 43\%$ . If we include, say, a 20% chance of successful bribery, the odds get even better: at least  $(0.3 \times 0.5) + (0.7 \times ((0.8 \times 0.5) + (0.2 [\text{chance of no delay in posting guard}] \times 0.2 [\text{chance that posted guards were bribed}]))) = 46\%$ . I have not even included in this number the chance that guards were immediately posted, and were not bribed, yet that Jesus, having survived, still escaped detection by some means like a hole in the tomb or a switcheroo. I will give this a mere 1% chance, which will not increase the odds of escape by any significant amount: 46% is already pretty good!

### **What Do I Conclude From All of This?**

The combined odds of survival, misdiagnosis, and escape are thus, in my opinion,  $0.03 \times 0.46 = 1.4\%$  (about 1 in 70). That means that given what we know about this event, I must believe there is 1 chance in 70 that nothing miraculous occurred. Am I being too liberal? Cut the odds in half, quarter them, even cut them to a tenth that figure, and we still have odds that are too great to rule out. If there were only 1 chance in 10,000 of nothing miraculous occurring, that would still be good enough a chance to discount any miraculous explanation. For who needs to resort to

"miracles" to account for what can occur even once in 10,000 times under the same conditions? It is amazing, truly, but not impossible--as we began, we noted that even an event that occurs only once in 6 billion lifetimes is still not miraculous. You might as well use a royal flush in a local poker game as proof of God's divine might. Royal flushes and resurrections are two separate things, so comparing them is a false analogy, you might say. But I do not compare the events. I compare the *odds* of either event being natural rather than miraculous. If survival in all the same circumstances, as far as we can know them, by *natural* means is 1.4%, and the odds of a royal flush happening naturally are in the vicinity of 0.0000003% (the actual odds vary, of course, depending on how the game has been dealt, how many players there are, etc.), and we know royal flushes happen without being regarded as miracles, why should we regard something that is nearly a quarter-million-times more likely as miraculous? Even if we try to argue that more poker hands have been dealt than people have died, we still don't escape the fact that this comparison is merely an illustration. For even if only one hand of poker were ever dealt in history, and it was a royal flush, we would *still* be unjustified in calling it a miracle. In fact, it would hardly occur to us to make such a claim. We would merely say "Wow! What a coincidence!"

Thus, no matter what you argue, an event that can happen 1 in 10,000 times is still not rare enough to regard as a miracle. That it has not happened more often is due to the fact that the same circumstances have not presented themselves, just as they have not generated another Winston Churchill. Indeed, I will say that the odds of an eclipse meeting the Battle of Pydna were astronomical--pardon the pun. Yet it happened. Do we need a miracle to explain it, simply because it was so amazing a coincidence? A 1.4% chance of survival is *vastly* more likely to see out than the event at Pydna. Thus, we cannot seek an explanation in miracle. We simply have no grounds. We would have something to argue with if we could state how often miracles happen, but since we do not really know for sure of *any* miracles happening, we are left back where we started: natural explanations are simply more likely. Indeed, this is true *even if the resurrection just happened to be a real miracle*. Hence the argument in section 1.

### **How Do We Account for the Rise of Christianity?**

I do not think Jesus survived. I think section 3 more closely describes what happened, since the rise of a religion from the ashes of a defeat is more probable than its continuation from some kind of survival scenario, at least given the evidence as we have it. Section 2's aim was not to argue what I think happened, but to show that the event does not qualify as a miracle, on the grounds that at least one natural explanation (survival), possibly even the least likely one at that, is still well within the realm of the naturally possible. But an interesting question has been asked of me: "How do you explain the development of early Christianity if Jesus was not truly raised from the dead?" This question has been asked many times in many different forms, and it deserves a lot of space here. Although my essay seeks only to examine whether the "resurrection" itself was a miracle from a god, and not the development of the Christian creed, the two are not unrelated.

In general, it would be sufficient that the original witnesses thought (or deceitfully taught) that Jesus was truly raised from the dead, either spiritually or physically. It is not at all necessary, nor even more likely, that such teachings should follow only a true resurrection, and this is why I

think actual death is more likely than survival to have generated the faith of Christianity, so I will say something on why I come to this conclusion. I will discuss in section 3 various reasons and motives why this story would be believed or told by eye-witnesses. As for men like Paul (the true father of Christianity) and all converts to the creed, their faith in the story's truth would not really depend on whether the story was true, since they could not, and as far as we know did not, check. All that mattered was whether the story's tellers were believed, and it is quite demonstrable that audiences were ready to believe almost anything in those days. Again, I have written an essay on this very point, "Kooks and Quacks of the Roman Empire."

Thus, the only relevant concern is the probability that those few *eye-witnesses* would transmit such a story given that it was not a genuine resurrection. This is complicated by the fact that the early Christian creed may not have involved a physical resurrection at all. It is very likely (even if not certain), that Christianity began with the message that Jesus was raised in a *spiritual* sense. If so, then we do not need to explain why the "witnesses" would tell such a story, beyond what I already discuss in section 3, since it is very easy to believe, and there were sufficient motives and expectations that would lead to such a belief.

All that would then need explaining is how this early faith transformed into the belief in a physical resurrection. To that end, I believe this change could have occurred as a result of any or all of these possibilities:

(1) The increased rhetorical need to win converts. A physical resurrection is a more concrete and wonderful proof of victory over death, and we have indications that these stories were changed to make them more convincing or impressive, e.g. Paul's three conversion stories in Acts, as well as the account in Galatians; the late Coptic development of an appearance story for Mark, all the way to John's Doubting Thomas story, the possible fiction of the guarded tomb, and so on.

(2) Confusion by later members over what the original message was. This is likely especially at a distance. Paul shows in his many letters, especially 1 Corinthians, that perversion of doctrine was a going problem even when he was alive. And this is even more likely after the death of the original preachers, and the widespread ruin and confusion caused by the Jewish War in the 60's AD, resulting in the destruction of the church at its source. Indeed, the fact that the appearance stories are very ambiguous as to whether they were physical or spiritual (as I argue in section 3) could easily be the product of the confusing nature of a message being differently told, and differently heard, by numerous preachers and hearers of the creed.

This confusion might even be expected, as the result of defensive "hedging": when eye-witnesses were pressed by skeptics of a physical resurrection, either by would-be converts or Jewish authorities, the Christians might naturally sing a different or more ambiguous tune, so as to satisfy everyone (as Paul declares to be his own strategy: "I am all things to all people," 1 Corinthians 9.19-23), and head-off skeptical investigations or attacks. This would certainly explain why we have no reports from church enemies who investigated the story, and no sign of any worry addressed in the epistles about whether the tomb really was empty.

(3) Some doctrinal dispute now lost to us due to the victory of one orthodoxy and the suppression of all other views under the title "heresy." In other words, the physical resurrection

may simply have been one interpretation that won the propaganda war after the church was well under way, and thus only gospels favorable to such an interpretation survive. Since the four gospels were selected in the 160's by Tatian, and the other books chosen by Irenaeus in the 180's, yet heresies were being declared even as early as the 140's (against Marcion), we know that there were controversial versions of events that were suppressed before the orthodox canon was chosen.

(4) The idea was imported through syncretism with other religious beliefs. This is especially likely when the creed mingled in Greek society, where traditions of physical resurrection already existed (cf. Herodotus 4.94-96, Lucian *The Lovers of Lies* 13, Origen *Contra Celsum* 2.55, 3.26, 3.32-33, Diogenes Laertius 8.67, Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 2.28, 10.11-12, Apollonius *Mirabilia* 2-6, Pseudo Aristotle *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus* 839a, Phlegon *De Mirabilibus* 1-3). Apologists often parrot the false claim that a physical resurrection was "anathema" to the Greek mind, yet the evidence I cite above shows otherwise. Moreover, the only evidence Christians offer for this "anathema" theory is Acts 17:30-32, but that passage actually proves that many Greeks were receptive to the idea. The verses tell us that "some of [the Greeks] sneered, but others said 'we want to hear you again on this subject'...[and] a few became followers of Paul and believed." Does this look like the idea was "anathema" to the Greek mind? Hardly.

But if we allow the alternative, that a physical resurrection was believed or taught by some of the eye-witnesses, we must explain why they would do that. Of course, it may not have been taught by all of them: the earliest source is Paul, who was not an eye-witness and may have taught a different gospel, the others agreeing that in principle it was the same message and that the details were less relevant. This is suggested by the letters of Peter, where emphasis is placed on the transfiguration and none on the resurrection, and Paul's claim that he was willing to adjust his message to suit his audience (1 Corinthians 9.19-23). But if a physical resurrection was in the message of at least some of the eye-witnesses who preached the creed, there are the possibilities of design (whether with or without the collusion of the witnesses, e.g. the sponge theory, the escape theory, etc.), or of fabrication or delusion (addressed best in section 3 of my essay), which allow plenty of room for stories of miraculous survival to arise or be developed among the followers of Jesus after he actually died.

If he survived, however, some have suggested that this would produce a different result: namely, the witnesses would see him as having narrowly escaped death, and not as having been divinely resurrected. This is not necessarily true. Although this is more likely if the survival was an accident, it is less so if it was by some design, and if it was design, we will never know it, for any definite proof of fraud would have been covered up at once, and it is only when keen skeptics were on hand that ancient fraudulent miracles were uncovered (cf. Hippolytus *Refutation of All Heresies*, Lucian *Alexander the Quack Prophet*, etc.). It may also have been partly both: Jesus may have, as he is portrayed to have, preached that he would be resurrected, and may have even believed it himself, such that his accidental survival would be readily interpreted in light of this expectation, even by himself.

The question remains: why would appearing half-dead and desperately in need of medical attention evoke worship of Jesus as triumphant? This question was first advanced by David Friedrich Strauss in his second "Life of Jesus" in 1864. The question assumes, naturally, that

there was no plan, before or afterward, to alter the account for the greater good of the cause, and that Jesus did in fact appear half-dead and "desperately" in need of medical attention. Assaf did not, after given a brief time to recover, and Jesus was not as badly as injured as he. There is also the possibility that Jesus held a self-delusion of immortality, or other religious passions, which could make him ignore or act as if he was unhurt, behavior which might actually have prevented his long-term survival at the expense of seeming fine in the short term, a course of events not unheard of in history or medical science. The question also assumes that the witnesses would not delude themselves, because of their own needs and expectations, something I think was very likely, based on what even I have seen of the behavior of fanatics. But I personally do not think Jesus would have appeared so unwell as Strauss suggests--at first--but the problem of "after" is a real one.

Thus, we are left only with the question of where he went afterwards, for which we have no clue as to the answer, and this is one of the reasons that I find survival, though still possible, to be the weaker explanation. Did he go into the wilds and die anonymously? Did one or two faithful converts, or all of them, quickly cover up his genuine death for the good of the cause? Was his second death interpreted as an ascension by reason of delusion or expectation, and his body disposed of in some unknown fashion? These become increasingly unlikely, but whether his brief survival was seen as miraculous or not, there remained good reasons to cover it up and portray it as miraculous.

First of all, his message may have been seen as too important, or his followers may have seen their position as too precarious, to let the truth escape. There also remain good reasons to misinterpret it as miraculous: it would be natural to deny the reality, in order to restore their faith in his divinity and power, and justify all the time and credulous faith that they placed in him and his message, as well as to convince themselves that they, too, will be chosen and resurrected, and thus escape death, the hope of all hopes. Lest anyone think this unlikely, I offer the case of Jonestown: several survivors have, in order to preserve their faith that Jim Jones was good and divine, concocted stories of secret government hit squads, and still today stick by their "eyewitness" accounts of groups of soldiers firing machineguns into the crowds, despite overwhelming evidence that only a few dozen were killed by firearms (and they only by single pistol shot to the head each), the other 900 by suicidal doses of poisoned punch. For example, see Michael Meiers, "Was Jonestown a CIA Medical Experiment? A Review of the Evidence," published by Mellon Press, which also published over four books by Jonestown survivors, all with bizarre "eyewitness" accounts justifying their participation in, and one might think, guilt-ridden survival of, the Jonestown disaster.

Nevertheless, after considering all of this, I think at least the odds that Jesus "survived" are affected by the evidence that his survival was eventually taught as miraculous. One must consider the possibilities of design, before or after the fact, of fabrication or hyperbole, and of misinterpretation or delusion, and then account for the possibilities that his actual death afterward would be covered up or unmentioned in any record.

(1) The first possibility is that of design, which I have already assigned as 1%, based on the very odd detail of the sponge (not to mention the odd burial arrangements, early removal, etc.). It is interesting to note that the Zalmoxis story may have been heard by Jesus or a colleague and

inspired the idea of a similar plan. Indeed, it is even possible that this plan failed, and that Jesus died even though he expected to survive by deceit, at which his colleagues might have tried to salvage the plan by hiding the body. Regardless of these musings, given that the resurrection was in any way a set-up, what do I think are the chances that it would go off as planned and thus produce the desired result (the story as we have it)? I will say it had a 25% chance of success, including covering up his actual death later, for a final chance of  $0.01 \times 0.25 = 0.25\%$ .

(2) The second possibility is fabrication. I will detail in section 3 many reasons to suspect this, but I will still only give it a 10% chance, giving the followers the benefit of a doubt, and accounting for the difficulties of pulling off such a lie, even though they are not actually great, especially if the first story was ambiguous as to whether it was a physical resurrection, and considering that, according to Acts 1.3, they waited 40 days before spreading the story.

(3) The third possibility is misinterpretation or delusion. I think the chances are very good for this. Even in the accounts themselves, the witnesses seem overly receptive to such an effect. For instance, Mary sees a gardener and then thinks it is Jesus and acts as such (see section 3). Normally, I would make the odds at least 75%, based on my belief that natural explanations are more likely than supernatural ones. But if I put aside that belief for a moment, I must still make the odds 50%, since the accounts themselves as analyzed in section 3 do not completely jibe with an actual resurrection, but do largely fit the misinterpretation hypothesis.

I concluded that the odds of survival were 1.4%. I can now recalculate this according to the above observations, to account for the odds that survival would generate the religion as we have it. The odds that survival would produce the stories as we have them are, in my own estimation, equal to  $1 - (0.9975 \times 0.9 \times 0.50)$ , or one minus the product of the chances that each option above would fail to account for the evidence, = 45%. Thus, the combined odds of both survival as reckoned above, and the production of the stories as we have them, is  $0.014 \times 0.45 = 0.6\%$ , still well too high to lead anyone to conclude that a miracle had to have happened. Again, even if we cut the odds by a factor of ten this remains true, since even 1 chance in 2,000 is still too good a chance to dismiss, given the extent of human history and comparisons with other, even more unlikely things, which have happened, and still happen, regularly.

But isn't it a little coincidental that the one who was purported to be the Christ was also the one who survived the rigors of crucifixion? What are the odds of *that*? The odds are very good indeed. Countless people have survived even worse rigors, but no story of miracles surrounded their survival precisely because neither they nor their companions ever claimed such. What are the odds that an amazing event being trumped up as miraculous would produce stories that it was a miraculous event? Pretty good, I imagine. It is precisely because Jesus' extraordinary claims coincided with an otherwise unusual event that it became told as a miracle from a god rather than just an ordinary miracle of natural causes, like that of Assaf Ben-Orr. To make anything more out of this is even worse than arguing that an eclipse occurring the very day of the Battle of Pydna, the most decisive victory of Rome over Macedonia, sealing the fate of Greece for the next thousand years, is so improbable that it must have been a miracle from a god. It may have been a miracle by some definitions, but it was by no means a special act of a god. It is what reasonable people call a coincidence.

### 3. The New Testament Casts Suspicion on Jesus Actually Appearing After Death

I am not personally certain whether Jesus survived, but the fact that we can cast so much doubt on it proves that the Resurrection was not unusual enough to demand a miraculous explanation. But even if we accept that he died, there is an even greater suspicion cast on his actually appearing afterward. My arguments in this section do not seek to prove that the appearance accounts, as stated in the texts, can't be true. Rather, I aim to show, first, that numerous aspects of the stories make more sense when given natural rather than supernatural explanations (e.g. seeing a gardener as Jesus), and second, that natural explanations are possible enough that there is no good reason to resort to miraculous explanations, and third, that there is enough that is fishy about these accounts to suggest that they are not telling us everything. In my opinion, this reveals the confusion of varying traditions circulating by the time the gospels were written. All this is not quite the same thing as saying that the accounts could not have happened the way they are reported. Indeed, many of my arguments will derive from exactly the way that they *are* reported, hence my position is that such aspects of the stories often make *more* sense with natural explanations.

#### Paul's Vision

The first recorded appearance (in terms of when it was written, not when it was supposed to have happened) is to Paul, and it is clearly a vision. In one account, he does not see Jesus, only a flash of light (9.3-5), and those with him do not see Jesus, but only hear him (Acts 9.7). Paul could have been speaking in another voice, which the others took as Jesus (or which the author of Acts portrays them as taking to be Jesus, since we don't have their account of it, after all). But the fact that no one, not even Paul, saw Jesus in the flesh makes the point well enough. Most importantly, Paul never says in his letters that he ever saw Jesus in the flesh. Moreover, this particular encounter in Acts has all the earmarks of something like a seizure-induced hallucination: Paul alone sees a flash of light, and he hears voices and goes blind for a short period. An embolism is sufficient to cause or explain all of this. We can add to this the fact that the earliest manuscripts of the earliest gospel, Mark, do not mention any appearances of Jesus: all the appearances in that gospel occur only in post-4th century manuscripts (cf. *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition, p. 189, apparatus footnote 3), although it is hinted at in the late 2nd century. But as far as we know, the addition first appears in Coptic manuscripts, and is added to Greek versions a century or more later. Combined, these two details make the claim that Jesus physically appeared after death increasingly dubious.

Paul gives other accounts of his vision which claim that others saw it, too. Doesn't this suggest a genuine vision from God? First of all, there is never any mention of Jesus appearing in the flesh. Rather, all that appears is a light from heaven (*phôs ek tou ouranou*, 9.3; *ek tou ouranou...phôs*, 22.6; *ouranothen...phôs*, 26.13). So even if several saw the light, it can still have a natural explanation, from lightning to a reflection from a distant object, or even a simple ray of sunlight peaking through a cloud, any of which could also have induced a seizure or affected Paul emotionally, causing an hallucination (or inspiration). And since we don't have the story from any of these other observers, the story could be embellished or fabricated at leisure, for whatever

reason. In my opinion, Paul may have seen in Christianity a way to save the Jews from destruction at the hands of the Romans by displacing their messianic motives to rebel, and creating a new Judaism more agreeable to the gentiles, open to all and thus uniting rather than dividing, and more submissive to outside authority by internalizing and spiritualizing religious faith, and postponing material and social complaints by referring them to an afterlife. This could have been a deliberate or a subconscious motivator for Paul and others leading the movement. In Paul's case, guilt and admiration may have also played an emotional role.

It is important to consider what this "greater good" was that Paul may have seen in the Christian reform of Judaism. Paul may have seen the clouds gathering on the horizon--the coming Jewish War. The Judaism of Jesus--Jesus was not a heretic, after all, but a genuine Jew, and taught a reform of Judaism--offered an ideal solution to what any intelligent man would have seen to be the impending doom of his people and his faith. Violence was certain to bring about the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. The fate of Carthage, and Corinth--a place whose history Paul was very familiar with--proved that. And the Jewish desire for a savior was becoming militarized. Josephus records the rising violent messianism rising from the twenties all the way to the war in the sixties. Jerusalem was destroyed. Millions were enslaved or killed. The Temple Tax was redirected to Jupiter.

This is why I see in the teachings of Jesus what Paul may have seen: an obvious way for him to save his people and his faith, by teaching a non-violent submission to Rome, a concentration on inner rather than outer expressions of faith, and a displacement of present complaints by promising an accounting after death, and in an apocalypse, and the expansion of the faith beyond racial limits, which was already the secret to the success and acceptance of other Asian religions by Rome, such as that of Cybele and Isis. In doing this, he would succeed in removing those features of other popular messianic movements which were increasingly violent, and overtly divisive and offensive to the occupying power. Moreover, tens of thousands had been killed in riots over the Roman treatment of the Temple, and a reform which would take attention away from that hotbed of violence would have been ideal.

We also have to consider, as I note, the effects of guilt. Paul persecuted the early followers, but what if he realized this was wrong? Indeed, if he realized, consciously or not, that this new reform was essential to the survival of his people and their faith, the guilt may have been unbearable, yet could be easily atoned for by conversion, support, and penance in the form of enduring the persecution that he "deserved" (an eye for an eye). This becomes even more likely when we consider that Paul never saw Jesus in the flesh. Since he only saw a light and heard a voice, long after Jesus had died, if his guilt and his revelation of the need for this new reform led to an epiphany, a moment of clarity, or even combined with the physical effects of an optical illusion, embalism, or other event, which he interpreted as a vision from God, telling him what his conscience was already coming to realize, then all of this becomes a plausible, realistic, and unsupernatural explanation, which happens to fit the facts fairly well.

I think it is most likely that the original experience was a real, seizure-induced vision, because the author of Acts gives the first account as narrative, but the other two are Paul's speeches and thus affected by their need to persuade a particular audience. Thus, the second two accounts contradict the first by claiming his attendants saw the light but did not hear the voice (cf. Acts

22.9, the exact opposite of 9.3-8), and the third account is suspiciously elaborated (26.13-19), with important details omitted from the other two accounts: he claims that his attendants fell to the ground in reaction to the light, yet the first account said that they stood (9.7), and did not see anything, and in both previous accounts he also says that he, not 'they', fell, and that the light flashed around him, not 'them'; he also claims that God gave full instructions in the last speech, yet in the other two accounts God says to Paul that he will get these instructions later, from Ananias. But Ananias is not even mentioned in the third account. Is Paul elaborating his story for a different audience? Has the story grown over time? Which account are we to believe? They can't all be true.

Note, also, that Paul claims in the second account that he was blinded because of the brightness of the light (22.11), yet was led by his attendants, who could obviously still see. This casts suspicion on his claim that the others saw the light. Since all three accounts are presumably from Paul, he may certainly have altered his memory, or embellished the story to make it more persuasive. Surely he would assume, or want to believe, that the others also saw the light, and since, again, we don't have their account we cannot know what they actually saw or heard. It is likely that they neither saw nor heard, but respected Paul's experience as genuine.

It is also rather likely that the author of Acts is taking liberties with what Paul actually reported. This suspicion rises in force if we notice that when Paul gives us his own account in his own writings, we get an incompatible story: in particular, no mention of attendants, or Ananias. Indeed, he flatly states that he did not receive the gospel from man, and that excludes Ananias or anyone else (Galatians 1.12); he says there that he 'returned' to Damascus right away, but still does not mention Ananias. In fact, he would be contradicting himself if he did, since his point is that he did not speak to any Christians after his vision until three years later, and then only to Peter and James (Galatians 1.17-20), and did not return to Jerusalem with Barnabas to reveal his conversion and missionary activities to the church until fourteen years after that (Galatians 2.1-2). Nowhere in this account does he mention people being with him during his conversion. No one else is reported to have seen or heard or even been present when Paul had his vision. Since Paul's own writings are earlier and more authoritative concerning his own life than Acts, which was written by another man almost certainly after Paul had been dead for some years, all the accounts given in Acts are highly suspect, especially any claims that others saw the same light as Paul.

### **Was There an Early Tradition of Physical Appearances?**

Contrary to my argument that there is no evidence in the earliest traditions of any physical appearances by Jesus, it has been suggested that 1 Corinthians 15:5-7 and Mark 14:28 and 16:7 show that Paul and Mark obviously believed in post-mortem appearances of Christ of some sort. But I don't argue against this. When Paul writes about appearances, just as that very passage shows (15.8), he includes his own vision, and makes no special distinction for physical experiences (he only makes a special distinction for the timing of his vision). I think it is almost certain that many people, such as Stephen, had visions. People still do. People had visions of almost every god in antiquity, and still have visions of many gods and beings now, as well as of the deceased, among other bizarre things. The Markan passages likewise make no clear distinction, and thus could refer to visions, not physical appearances. Moreover, that Jesus

*claimed* he would appear, and that someone else also claimed that he would, does not constitute an actual appearance, though it does explain how the expectation would be stirred. The Markan passage does not tell us whether the author thought there were appearances, or what sort of appearances he thought they might be. This produces two interesting possibilities:

(1) Without the late addition to Mark, all Mark says is that there was the expectation of an appearance. He does not record an actual appearance. Why would that be? The Christian must explain this. It is not enough to say some ending was lost and then added or replaced, since the manuscripts of Mark are among the earliest we have, and these lack any ending at all. Why would an ending be lost so quickly? And if it was, what did it say? I am inclined to think that Mark ended it there because appearances were not actually important to the original faith (as Stephen's speech suggests). The disappearance was enough to show his victory over death and hence his divinity. An ascension, whether deduced from or associated with a missing body or not, is a standard motif in the deification of mortals in antiquity. The meaning of the resurrection could also have originally been part of a secret doctrine of initiation. Peter's use of the terminology of a mystery religion suggests this possibility, and John's description of the Thomas episode behind closed doors also looks like such a ceremony (more on this below), and the obvious confusion in all the gospels as to what actually happened after his death could easily be the result of a once-secret doctrine now being corrupted as bits of it enter public knowledge, or as speculation generates its own answers.

(2) The Markan passages are consistent with the possibility that a spiritual resurrection was meant, and the wording even suggests that a *physical* appearance might *not* have been meant. The most basic meaning of both passages in Greek is "I will escort you (plural) into Galilee" (*proaxô hymas eis tēn Galilaian*, 14.28) and "he escorts you (plural) into Galilee" (*proagei hymas eis tēn Galilaian*, 16.7; in that passage, the verb "to see" is the same ambiguous *horaô*, in the future tense, as mentioned above).

The verb *proagô* means "to lead forward, or to lead before." By analogy this verb can mean various other things, including "to go before," but usually only in the sense of *going with*, e.g. as in leading a military advance, leading the way in a dark room, etc. The verb can also mean to increase, to produce, to call up an apparition, to persuade, etc., in each case by analogy with the idea of "leading forward." Note, for example, the verb as used in 1 Timothy 1.18: "the prophecies previously made concerning you," literally, "the prophecies having lead the way to you" (*tas proagousas epi se prophēteias*). Furthermore, even those uses which mean in some sense "going before" are *intransitive*, i.e. they cannot take an accusative object (cf. *The Greek New Testament*, 4th revised ed., p. 149). When an accusative object appears (and in both passages it does: the pronoun "you" (plural), *hymas*), it must be transitive, and that means it must mean in some sense *lead*. Why would Jesus (or Mark) choose this verb, instead of a dozen others that actually mean "go before"? It may be idiosyncratic, it may be bad grammar (not uncommon in Mark), but it may be that something else was meant than later Christian interpreters thought. That this exact phrase appears twice in the oldest known gospel suggests that it may be a very early proverb associated with Jesus or the disciples' perception of him, but this also means it is very prone to reinterpretation by later readers, as most Christian doctrine has been. The phrase may have simply meant that his spirit would be upon them and lead them, inspire them, to go to

Galilee--where, for instance, there would be a vision concerning him, a concept present throughout Acts and the epistles. Indeed, I must say that this is the most likely interpretation.

### **What About the "Hundreds" of Eye Witnesses?**

Paul claims there are hundreds of eye witnesses, many alive at the very time of his writing (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Doesn't that make invention as well as delusion unlikely? Paul, remember, includes himself among the witnesses (15:8). Yet we know that Paul was not an eye-witness. He only saw a light and heard a voice, well after Jesus had already been "taken up." So this passage cannot mean anything more than that hundreds have seen Jesus in visions, not necessarily in person. The verb "appeared" used several times in this passage is *ôphthê* (from *horaô*), which is as vague in Greek as in English. Used in the passive voice, as it is here, it means only "was seen" or "appeared" and frequently means "appeared in a vision" (as in the case of Paul's vision, cf. Acts 9.17).

But above all, one second-hand report of 500 unnamed people, being sent to men in Greece (too far from Palestine to have any chance of checking the account), who may have seen a vision no more material than that of Paul himself--a man who all but declares that he is willing to fib, at least a little, to save lives by winning converts (1 Cor. 9.19-27)--is the flimsiest of evidence. Stories were apparently exaggerated over time in order to win an audience, see for example Acts 22.9, which is the exact opposite of 9.3-8, and suspiciously elaborated again at 26.13-19; compare these three accounts with Paul's own at Galatians 1.7-24. This shows that Christian writers like Luke, and even Paul himself, if what he said is accurately recorded in Acts, were ready to do this. And a vague, unconfirmable, hyperbolic assertion is just the sort of claim all men ought to suspect as rhetorical.

### **Could the Original Gospel Have Been of a Spiritual Rather Than a Physical Resurrection?**

All of the above is compounded by the fact that Paul fervently portrays the Resurrection as spiritual, not physical: "a natural body is sown, a spiritual body is raised" (1 Corinthians 15.44, *speiretai sôma psychikon, egeiretai sôma pneumatikon*, see also 15.50), and he ardently insists (Galatians 1.11-24) that he was not taught the gospel by anyone in the flesh ("I did not consult with flesh and blood," *ou prosanethemên sarki kai haimati*, 1.16), but by revelation from God ("I did not receive it from a man nor was I taught it, but through a revelation of Jesus Messiah," *oude gar egô para anthrôpou parelabon auto oute edidachthên alla di' apokalypseôs Iêsou Christou*). The word for "revelation" is *apokalypsis*, the same word used for the title of the New Testament book of Revelations, and as there and elsewhere it means "manifestation" in a spiritual sense--a vision. Peter also argues this quite explicitly: 1 Peter 3.18 declares that Jesus was "put to death in flesh but made alive in spirit" (*thanatôtheis men sarki zôpoiêtheis de pneumatî*), and as I've already noted, in 1 Peter 5.1 he curiously omits any mention of an empty tomb or a resurrection in the flesh, even though the context would lead us to expect him to.

Note also that Paul does not name any one of these witnesses, except Peter and James [literally, 'Jakob'] (though he does mention "the twelve" even there were only eleven disciples when Jesus supposedly appeared). These are not new witnesses being reported, but the same ones (or rhetorically invented ones). For all we know, Paul could have been including men who had an

experience like that of Stephen in his list of witnesses (a martyr whose death he watched), even though we have no reason to believe Stephen was an eyewitness to any appearance of Jesus in the flesh. Paul could also have been reporting hearsay, which I think is most likely--after all, I seriously doubt he interviewed 500 people, and so should you.

Certainly, nowhere in the account given in the Gnostic Gospel of Peter is it said that Peter believed Jesus appeared in the flesh after death. Likewise, the two epistles of Peter placed in some versions of the New Testament also make no mention of a physical resurrection, nor even of an empty tomb for that matter. Indeed, when Peter (if we accept the letter as genuine) argues that he was an eyewitness (*epoptê*, literally an initiate in the highest rank of a mystery religion, but also meaning spectator) and that his teachings are not "cleverly devised tales" (*sesophismenois mythois*) he does not mention after-death appearances or the empty tomb, but only the transfiguration, and a voice from heaven heard at that time (2 Peter 1.16-19), which appeared in private to only a few (Peter, James, and John) *before* Jesus was killed. This is important, for it shows that the Resurrection appearances were not considered the most important evidence of divinity. Indeed, even if we accept the authenticity of the letters of James, Jude, and John, *none* of them mention an empty tomb or a physical resurrection either.

### **What Did Paul Teach: a Physical or Spiritual Resurrection?**

It has been noted that Paul's assertion that the resurrection is spiritual rather than natural, based on 1 Corinthians 15.44, requires that *psychikos* mean "physical" which it often does not. But this is essentially a non-argument. Simply because adjectives change meaning according to context, it does not follow from that fact alone that an adjective never takes on one or another meaning. You can get nowhere with such a point. An adjective's meaning in any given place is entirely dependent on its own context and not on its meaning in others. The following will exhibit what I mean, and why people like Renn and Craig toy with context to make everything mean what they want it to--a talent which Christians have mastered *ad nauseum* over the course of the past two thousand years (for an unrelated Calvinist example, see [Two Examples of Faulty Bible Scholarship](#)).

Renn argues that there are six uses of this adjective in the New Testament. The first he lists is 1 Corinthians 2.14-15, which he translates "the natural person does not accept what pertains to the Spirit of God, for to him it is foolishness, and he cannot understand it, because it is judged spiritually. The spiritual person, however, can judge everything but is not subject to judgment by anyone." From this he deducts that *psychikos* "obviously does not mean 'physical' or 'spacially-extended'--it means 'under the control of natural desires'." I do not know where he gets that interpretation, for it is not evident from this passage. Indeed, it sounds like something Augustine would say (is Renn retrofitting late Christian exegesis onto Paul? I don't know).

A more reasonable interpretation is apparent to those who read the whole corpus of Paul. Those familiar with Paul know that he regularly puts down Greek philosophers (1 Corinthians 1.20, 1.22-23, Colossians 2.8), and it seems evident from the context here (1 Corinthians 2.1, 2.6) that this is what Paul is talking about: the gospel is not philosophically articulated, but known spiritually. He is thus not talking about desires (a concept nowhere mentioned in chapter 2), but the nature of wisdom, contrasting the wisdom of *physicists* (*physikoi*) with that of Christians. In

antiquity *physikos* was, much like today, the name for anyone who studied the nature of the universe in terms of deductive principles (i.e. in those days, philosophers). Thus, it seems to make more sense for Paul to be saying here that men who are immersed in the physical, i.e. the study of nature in place of God, "just don't get it." This is to be expected from a man writing to an audience smack dab in the middle of Greece, which, as we know from Paul's adventure in Athens, is crawling with philosophers who are quick to apply the Socratic method to this new gospel. Paul is heading off such debates by removing the gospel from that kind of philosophical analysis: it is a matter of the spirit, not philosophy.

Renn comes to the same deduction from 1 Corinthians 15.44, but I can find nothing in the context about desires there. The context seems quite unmistakably about physical vs. spiritual life. The section begins with the question "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" (15.35), and goes on from there, trashing the idea of the body being raised, and discussing how there are different kinds of bodies, and answering with a distinction between this kind of life, and that of the spirit. In other words, a spiritual vs. physical contrast is the most rational interpretation of what he is arguing here: beginning with vv. 42, "So it will be with the resurrection of the dead: the body that is sown perishable is raised imperishable...it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body...the first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven..." and then vv. 50: "I tell you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Can there be any doubt what he means here?

The next passage Renn cites is James 3.14-16 (which can have nothing to do with what Paul thought, as it was written by a certain James, if it is authentic at all). Literally translated vv. 15 reads "this wisdom [i.e. that which leads to jealousy, etc.] has not come down from above (or 'from the beginning' or 'from more general principles'), but is of the earth (lit. 'a thing on the ground'), natural, demonic (lit. 'in the category of divine-spirit-things' from *daimones* or 'demon'-the Christians are the first to use this word in a negative way)." From this passage Renn concludes that "it is obvious that *psuchikos* is referring to origin ('not from above'), rather than immateriality." I don't even see the logic here, much less how it is obvious. Nor do I see how this conclusion relates to the point he is making, since if that is what it means here, it is still consistent with it meaning "physical" in the main Pauline passage above: the body would then be "not from above," and thus "of a physical origin." But it is rather more reasonable to read it in the sense of "philosophical," i.e. bad wisdom comes from the physics of the philosophers: either the idea, or the world itself, as conceived by the idea--a concept very common in Christian thought, early and late. James has placed three adjectives in a row: concerning this wisdom he tells us its location (earth), nature (physical, naturalistic), and value (demonic, bad). I cannot see how anything more can be read into this.

Then comes Jude 1.19, again not from Paul's hand, and the date of its writing is unknown (scholars suspect it is at least second generation). Renn says *physikos* here "simply means 'separated from the Spirit,' rather than having to do with corporeality." Again, I cannot see how this contradicts its use as "physical" in the main Pauline passage, for if there are two kinds of body, and one is "separated from the spirit" then it must either be physical or made of something else, but we have no notion of two kinds of spirit-stuff in Christianity, leaving only the former interpretation. But again I think he misses the point of the passage. Jude says, literally, "These are the ones causing division: physicists who do not have spirit." As 1.10 suggests, the whole

letter is attacking those who don't understand the gospel and, bound to the flesh and earthly concerns, pervert it. Even if he is not attacking philosophers specifically, the meaning almost certainly refers to people who have their mind on *things* rather than salvation (1.20), and are thus stuck in the physical world (by reason of their attachment to it), lacking contact with the spiritual. This explains why Renn would think it means "being controlled by one's nature" (a meaning of this word nowhere found in any dictionary or grammar of Greek that I know of) since it is related to the idea, but it is not that in itself, but the cause of that: one is controlled by one's nature by being preoccupied with the physical world, just as physicists are.

I think a similar mistake is made in Renn's analysis of *pneumatikos*. Things of the spirit are divorced from the physical, and that is why they lead to and are associated with a particular attitude. But more importantly, he seems unaware of the fact that adjectives can be *both* substantiative and associative, in different contexts. So even where the adjective has an associative meaning ("having to do with the spirit"), it does not follow that it never has a substantiative meaning ("made of a spiritual substance" or "spiritual" in the sense of composition or existential quality). As an adjective it will naturally change connotation according to context. All adjectives do, in all languages that I know of. For example, associatively, a metallic hue is obviously not made of metal, but, substantiatively, a metallic car is. And note how in either example the nature of the adjective could be reversed, e.g. if the pigment includes metals or if only the color of the car is being described, and this can be known *only* from context. Likewise, demonic wisdom may mean evil wisdom or it may mean knowledge of demons, or knowledge from demons, and a *physikos* may be a man preoccupied with material things, a man who follows his inborn nature, a man who is made of physical substance, a man who was created by natural processes, or a man who studies physics.

Even without a knowledge of Greek one can see how this explains changing meanings in all the passages Renn cites, and how many of these passages are consistent with a substantiative (sub.) interpretation, others with both a substantive and associative meaning (both), and some with only an associative (ass.) meaning: Rom 1:11-12 (both), 7:14 (sub.; it is contrasted with *sarkikos*, "made of flesh" or "having to do with flesh," from *sarx*, cf. 1 Cor 9.11 in light of the context set at 9.1-7 where the contrast is between spiritual work and physical work, and cf. Rom 15.26-27), 1 Cor 2:13-16 (both; see above), 3:1-3 (ass., and then sub., i.e. spiritual food contrasted with physical food), 10:3-4 (sub.), 12:1 (sub.), 14:1 (sub.), 14:37 (ass.), 15:44-46 (sub.; note that to read it as ass. requires also believing Paul thinks no one is spiritual until raised from the dead, which contradicts all his other associative uses of the term), Gal 6.1 (ass.), Eph 1:3 (sub.), 5:18-20 (ass.), 6:12 (sub.), Col 1:9-12 (ass.), 3:16 (ass.), 1 Pet 2:5 (both).

### **Does an Empty Tomb Entail a Physical Resurrection?**

Likewise, in all the gospel accounts, no one sees Jesus rise from the dead. They only observe a missing body, and later are visited. William Lane Craig wisely sidesteps the issues I am bringing up by focusing on this empty tomb, as if that were such a proof of anything--as if no one even in modern times has ever lost track of a body, as if there were no grave robbers, as if thievery by design were so improbable for a group who had a desperate need for some story to keep their movement alive. I do not mean to imply here that Craig never discusses any other evidence (like the appearances), but that he sidesteps the fact that no one saw Jesus *rise* from the *dead*, and that

the evidence strongly suggests that there may have been no early tradition of physical appearances at all. His arguments, in all his works, dismiss both interpretations at once, by appealing to the empty tomb.

Indeed, I find that Craig often gets himself tangled into a mess by doing this: for example, Craig argues against theft by saying that "no one but Joseph, those with him," (like who?) "and the women initially knew exactly where the tomb was. Joseph probably surprised his fellow Sanhedrists by placing the body in his own tomb instead of having it buried in the criminals' graveyard" (*In Defense of Miracles*, InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 259: see my discussion of [Craig's "Empty Tomb" argument](#)). Yet this is a fact which actually makes theft *more* likely, and has no effect at all on random grave robbers who would not care who they were stealing. Lest one think stealing a body is odd, any Egyptologist can tell you that dozens of mummies are missing from tombs looted thousands of years ago. Corpses (actually, certain parts of them, like the skull) were used by sorcerers, and these body parts were likely to be a hot item on the black market--and the skull of a sorcerer or holy man would be even more valuable still. As far as the rest, that only Joseph and other followers knew where he was buried makes it even more likely that a switcheroo, an escape, or confusion resulted. Yet Craig ignores this consequence of his own argument.

For if only disciples knew where the body was, how can Craig argue (as he does elsewhere) that the Sanhedrists needed only to go point at the body to refute the claim that it was raised? How would they know where to point? Ever hear of the old switcheroo? By all accounts, only Joseph of Arimathea and a few loyal women are certain to have known his burial place. When it came time to point to his empty tomb later on as proof, any empty tomb would do. If, as Craig says, the Sanhedrists would have been surprised at Joseph's choice, they would not have known about it unless the disciples told them, and that means they could have told them anything, even if only to prevent his body's defilement or any attempt to extract it and toss it in with criminals. It is also possible that a general plan to deceive was afoot, or that only one or two people arranged this confusion, and all those disciples that we know by name were also duped by this. Craig often raises my suspicion with such arguments. Can he really believe himself? He claims that theft is "the only naturalistic explanation of the empty tomb that deserves any consideration" (*In Defense of Miracles*, InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 259), which is rhetorically suspicious: by choosing one of the less plausible natural accounts and asserting that it is the most plausible, he gets to attack a straw man. After all, is theft really the only explanation that deserves *any* consideration? Can you spell "hyperbole"?

There is also another possibility: it might not have originally been a theft at all--the body may have simply been legitimately moved, before either guards were posted or Mary visited the tomb. As Amos Kloner writes in "Did a Rolling Stone Close Jesus' Tomb?" (*Biblical Archaeology Review* 25:5, Sept/Oct 1999, p. 29), "During the Second Temple period and later, Jews often practiced temporary burial." In other words, "a borrowed or temporary cave was used for a limited time, and the occupation of the cave by the corpse conferred no rights of ownership upon the family" (Kloner believes "Jesus' interment was probably of this nature"). Kloner cites ancient Jewish writings, e.g. "Whoever finds a corpse in a tomb should not move it from its place, unless he knows that this is a temporary grave" and perhaps like Joseph, "Rabban Gamliel had a temporary tomb in Yabneh into which they bring the corpse and lock the door upon it," just as

Joseph does with Jesus, no doubt for the same temporary purpose, which makes sense given the hurried circumstances of the impending Sabbath (the *Semahot* 13.5 and 10.8 respectively, translations by Dov Zlotnik *The Tractate "Mourning"* in the *Yale Judaica Series* 18 (1966) p. 84, 74). It seems quite plausible that Joseph did not intend to bury Jesus in his own tomb, but only to rest the body there on its way to its final location. We do not know what happened to Joseph, or what his interest in the religion was, so we do not know if he would have tried to refute the resurrection stories that came out months later, or let them flourish for the good of the creed, or if he was dead himself and thus no one who had any influence knew that he had moved the body.

Finally, it is not so hard to doubt the account of the empty tomb in the first place. Jerusalem was totally sacked and destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, so any white lies about whether Jesus was in his tomb, or which tomb he was supposed to be in, could never be checked against the facts after that time, and we have no account in the letters of Paul or Peter that anyone cared to check them before that time--nor in the letters of James, Jude, or John (although their authenticity has been questioned). It is significant that we have no evidence that anyone cared to look. Of all the attacks against the church recorded in Acts, Jews checking the tomb is not once mentioned. Yet what a nice rhetorical coup that story would have been! And of all the things actually written before 70 A.D. (that is, only the epistles) none ever mentions checking the tomb--none even *mentions* the empty tomb, despite many offerings of other kinds of proof (such as Peter's witness of the transfiguration), and despite the fact that Paul's letters are rife with attempts to resolve doctrinal disputes in the early church. Yet a dispute over whether the tomb was actually empty, something we would naturally expect to pop up in distant congregations, like the unruly Corinthians, never appears. This makes perfect sense when we look at Galatians and 1 Corinthians as revealing that Paul does not preach a physical resurrection, for then he would have no reason to mention or even need an empty tomb to justify himself or his gospel. Even if someone else was teaching a physical resurrection then, the fact is that we have no evidence that checking the tomb was ever raised as an issue except in post-70 A.D. accounts. And even if it was--though the Christian is left to explain why we never hear of it--as I already address in several places, the fact is that, given the accounts we have, a body might still not be found, even if (or indeed because) Joseph buried Jesus in a private tomb and no doubt informed the disciples of this by some means.

### **Appearances in Matthew and the Late Addition to Mark**

But what about the appearances? In all the gospel accounts of the appearances, there are features of those accounts which cast some doubt on those appearances actually being of Jesus. For example, Matthew 28.17 reports that only "some" people who actually saw Jesus worshipped him, while "others" doubted it was him (*hoi...idontes auton prosekynêsan hoi de edistasan*, the verb *distazô* means "to doubt, to be doubtful" and the *hoi...hoi* construction translates as "some...others..."). Why would some who saw Jesus doubt it was him? The other gospels provide some clues that might explain this, and which also make the appearances of Jesus doubtful in their own right.

Mark 16.12 records that Jesus "appeared in a different form." The verb is *phaneroô*, and in a passive voice, which means "he was made known, he was revealed" or "he became known, became famous." The choice of verb suggests, and certainly allows, that it is a vision being

described. The phrase *en heterai morphêi* means "with another appearance" or "in another shape" and this means that, in some way, what appeared to them did not look like Jesus, or else it fell into a different category than the physical, and in conjunction with the particular verb above, this also suggests a vision of some kind. This certainly places the event in doubt. It has been claimed that Jesus appearing "in a different form" only means that his body looked different--it could have been radiant, luminous, or something along those lines, or some other glorious change in appearance, and such changes do not necessarily mean that the body is no longer physical. But this is taking the evidence much too far, in my opinion. The phrase *ephanerôthê en heterai morphêi* does not only mean that his *body* looked different (even though it *could* mean that). There is no mention of a body, so one must already go on a limb of supposition to argue that *morphêi* refers to a change of "physical appearance," and it is a narrow limb indeed, since the verb *phanerô* implies something else.

The phrase is simply odd. Why would the author add *en heterai morphêi* at all? If the body was radiant or luminous or something like that, why not simply say so, just as all gospel authors describe the transfiguration? It seems to me that this phrase is just the sort of confusing description of events that one would expect if the stories had become confused, if by the time this passage was written it was no longer certain what the original story was, because there were stories of both physical and spiritual appearances, and of different kinds, perhaps due to speculation and misinterpretation, or rhetorical hyperbole, or the role of mystery and metaphor, or doctrinal disputes or differences, etc. This is why I still call to account passages like this one which are late interpolations. Even though it is an interpolation, it is *still* suggestive of a spiritual experience, evidence that the story was no longer clear, and thus it reflects an uncertainty about the early tradition.

### **Appearances in Luke**

Luke 24.16 records that when Jesus appeared to two men, Kleopas and Peter (based on 24.13, 18, and 34), they did not recognize him (*mê epignônai auton*), even after conversing with him, inviting him home, and eating dinner with him. They only conclude that he is Jesus based on his words and behavior (24.31-32). Many translations say that they "recognize" him and then he "vanishes," as if something magical happened. The Greek is more mundane, saying only *autôn de diênoichthêsan hoi ophthalmoi kai epegnôsan auton kai autos aphantos egeneto ap' autôn*, or, literally, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he became hidden from them." In other words, they "see Jesus" in the stranger but then quickly lose sight of this "vision." It does not say the man left or disappeared exactly (it is possible that he left of his own accord), only that they thought he was Jesus for a moment, and this led them to think that he was in fact Jesus. This also suggests that it was not him, but a stranger whom they thought was Jesus. Certainly, there is enough that is odd about this account to place in doubt the belief that Jesus actually appeared to them.

Luke 24.36-50, which portrays a more concrete appearance, looks a lot like the ending added later to the earlier gospel of Mark (and has the same apparent rhetorical usefulness as John's account of Thomas), and it is possible that this ending did not exist in earlier versions of Luke. It is worth noting that when the accounts are arranged in order of being written, the accounts of Jesus' appearances become increasingly elaborate: from none at all in the original Mark, to the

vague account in Matthew (with the equally vague note that some doubted), to the later addition to Mark, to Luke with this proto-Thomas story, then to John with his elaborate Thomas story. Even if we accept the record as genuine, though there is no truly compelling reason to do so, this appearance occurs only among the disciples, and when the above story is being related, and this makes possible a group vision arising from religious hysteria, or even more likely, the invention of the story by the eleven in order to give their continuation of Jesus' ministry more authority.

### Appearances in John

John 20.14 records that Mary "sees Jesus but does not know it is him" (*theôrei ton Iêsoun hestôta kai ouk êidei hoti Iêsous estin*). The verb *theôreô* means to "perceive" in a very general sense, including mentally, for it can mean "experience," "observe," "look at," "watch" (a *theôros* is a spectator, a member of an audience), or "contemplate," "theorize." The verb *oïda* means "to know" (by having seen or understood). Renn calls into question this interpretation of the Greek verb *oïda*, asking how this definition applies to Matthew 2:2. The verb in Matthew 2.2 is *eidon*, not *oïda*. The former does mean "saw," i.e. in an aorist (past) tense only. It is a defective verb, using *horaô* for its present tense; *oïda* is its perfect form, but took on its own meaning even before Greek began to be written. The latter, though related, only means in one or another sense "to know" (as in Ephesians 5.5, 1 Corinthians 1.11, etc.): "The verb *oïda* is an irregular perfect...which means 'I have seen (with my mind)' = 'I know'" (*Athenaze: An Introduction to Ancient Greek*, revised ed., Oxford University Press, 1991, vol. 2, p. 181); and the compilers of the dictionary of biblical Greek appended to the official research text of *The Greek New Testament*, 4th revised ed. (1994, p. 123) leave no doubt, "*oïda*: know, understand, perceive, experience, learn, know how, be acquainted with, recognize, acknowledge, remember," (cf. 1 Corinthians 1.16), or "pay proper respect to" (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5.12); and as the Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon (9th ed., Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 483) agrees, in the entry for *eidô*, "*eidon* always in sense of *see*...but pf. *oïda*, in pres. sense, *know*." In other words, *oïda* never means "see" (except in a metaphorical sense, e.g. "I see what you mean.").

So the story is as follows: Mary assumes at first that it is the gardener, then she falls into his arms weeping (20.13-17) and takes him to be Jesus, reporting some religious message of his to her later listeners. All of this suggests a vision, or at least that what she saw was not Jesus but some bystander, like the gardener, that she took to be Jesus, and she then imagined the rest or made it up so as to encourage the other mourners with the possibility that their leader was spiritually triumphant. Renn brings up the possibility that some of the passage could be redactional, or that it was still dark outside (Jn 20:1) and that Mary was simply confused (vv. 14-15). The former is hardly a problem for my argument, and the latter does not seem a likely explanation. Redaction actually entails an admission that the story was altered, which increases the chance that other details have been altered, too. But although I mention the possibility that these stories are all or in part works of fiction, I do not base too much on this obvious possibility.

As for the "confusion" account, it is precisely because it does not fit that I quote that passage: Mary would surely have recognized his voice at once (yet she doesn't, 20.15-16), even if it was pitch dark outside--which it most likely was not: Mark 16.2 and Matthew 28.1 say it was around sunrise, which matches Luke's claim at 24.1 that it was early in the morning, since the ancients' reckoned morning (and began counting hours) from sunrise, unlike today. And John's words are

*prôï skotias eti ousês*, literally "in the early (or in the morn), while it was still dark," which allows another interpretation: *skotia* can mean also the gloominess of shadows, and since Mary had no trouble finding the tomb, she and others had no trouble *running* back and forth to and from the tomb, and all the other accounts clearly state it was around sunrise, it most likely was not so dark after all. If the author wanted to emphasize that it was truly dark, he would, as Mark does at 1.35, use something like *prôï ennucha lian*, "in the early, when it was very much night." I must also add that Mary seeing angels just before this even improves the possibility of delusion, at least as easily as it allows actually seeing angels--even more so if we have good reasons to doubt that there are such things, or to doubt that they were so commonly seen then but not now. Moreover, the other passages of "recognition" suggest and support a tradition of seeing Jesus in other people.

Certainly, it is very odd that she did not know who it was until he spoke. Above all, why didn't he accompany her when she went to the others? Why does she only relate the experience to them when she could have taken Jesus with her? And when doubters rush to the tomb to check her story, all they find is an empty tomb--no Jesus. An empty tomb, let me remind you, that the disciples did not know the location of, apart from whatever directions Mary gave them. All of the details of this account are suspicious and add to the swelling doubt.

John 20.19 records that when Jesus appeared to the others, it is after Mary's impassioned story, while all are mourning and have locked themselves indoors "in fear of the Jews" (*tôn thurôn kekleismenôn...dia ton phobon tôn Ioudaiôn*). This is a situation ripe for hallucination (dark place, hopes stirred, fear raging, strong desire for reassurance; see, at the end of the linked page, my [discussion of hallucination and the Gospel stories](#)), or invention (what goes on behind locked doors to a privileged few, who need to cook up something to save their ass [by gaining supporters to protect them from their persecutors], is easily suspect). But above all, the purpose for this appearance, and another, also behind locked doors (to Thomas, 20.26--one wonders if is this actually some kind of an initiation ceremony into an early Christian mystery religion, where "I saw Jesus" becomes a metaphor for something deeper), is to impart belief to the readers in the truth of the disciple's teaching (explicitly stated, 20.27-29, 31) and in their authority to teach it (also explicitly stated, 20.21-23). This raises great suspicion in the truth of the account, for the disciples have both the motive (something to teach, the need for spiritual authority to teach it, and the need to gain supporters to help them escape hostile Jews) and the means (goings-on behind locked doors that are only privy to the disciples) to fabricate it. Means, motive, and opportunity. That makes the basis for a solid case. It is certainly a strong enough case for reasonable doubt.

John 21.4 then records that Jesus appeared outside, but on that occasion his own disciples do not know it is him (*ou mentoi êideisan hoi mathêtai hoti Iêsous estin*). One disciple, "the one Jesus loved" (*êgapa*), who was resting on Jesus' chest during the last supper (13.23 and 21.20), merely says it is Jesus, and Peter swims ashore, presumably to see for sure. But when they all come to eat with this stranger, 21.12 says that "none of them dared to ask him, 'Who are you?', knowing that he was the lord" (*oudeis de etolma tôn mathêtôn exetasai auton su tis ei eidotes hoti ho kyrios estin*). Why would they feel the need to ask him who he is, unless it was not obvious to them? The verb *tolmaô* means "be brave enough to, dare to" and this entails that they were afraid to ask, in other words afraid to gainsay their leader Peter, or Jesus' unnamed favorite. Perhaps

they went along out of compassion for this distraught man, or perhaps they were persuaded by his conviction, for they certainly did not see Jesus, or at least the account does not say so. The verb *oida* here, again, means to know (by having seen or understood), and so they may have understood the stranger to be Jesus even though it did not appear to be him. Ultimately, the way the passage is written is odd enough to cast great doubt on other interpretations.

### **What Good are "Anonymous" Eye-Witnesses Anyway?**

Now, this "beloved" disciple is reputedly the source for John's account (cf. 21.24), though it is highly unusual that John would not mention his name. It has been said that authors often omitted their names from what they wrote, but this is not true for any other complete ancient work that I know of. It is only true for forgeries and fictions--and the gospels, casting even greater suspicion on them. This is significant: for no ancient work I know of which claims to be factual and for which we have the complete text truly went unsigned. Someone has suggested that the *Gallic Wars* of Julius Caesar and the dialogues of Plato went unsigned. As for the *Gallic Wars*, many modern editions and translations make it seem as though the work is anonymous, particularly since Caesar writes in the 3rd person. But all pre-11th century *De Bello Gallico* manuscripts, and most from the post-11th century as well, begin *incipit liber gatii caesaris...* Later editions were altered by copyists to say *C. Iuli Caesaris commentariorum de bello gallico liber...* and this is how the standard Oxford critical edition begins, although the original beginnings are supplied in the apparatus beneath. Thus, it was not anonymous by any means. One should also not mistake writing in the 3rd person for "anonymous authorship."

As for Plato's works, they are all fictional dialogues, or forgeries (depending on how you interpret them). For example, the *Apology of Socrates* is written in 1st person and is portrayed as dictated by Socrates himself, a matter that is doubted, but possible. But at any rate it is still attributed to either its real or pseudonymous author (Socrates). On the other hand, all of Plato's dialogues traditionally begin with the *Euthyphro*, which in turn begins "Euthyphro, or On Holiness, a tentative work, in the artifice of a dialogue [between] Euthyphro and Socrates" where "in the artifice of" is *peirastikos*, meaning "mask" or "fictional pretense." Thus, Plato outright admits to this work being fiction, not fact, so it is irrelevant that he does not put his name to it. There were certainly many anonymous works of fiction. There are also works for which the inscription, sometimes along with the beginning of the work, is lost, leaving us to guess at the author, as is the case with certain rare works of Sophocles. But the gospels claim to be fact, and they are complete, yet they are all unsigned, making their anonymity unique and therefore suspicious.

### **Was Luke a Learned Man? Would That Even Matter?**

"What you can't dispute," a critic wrote to me some time ago, "is that the book of Luke was written by a learned man, a physician and historian. If Luke had written a 'secular' history book, nobody would dispute his accounts." But Luke was not a historian as far as we know. We know of no historical work written in the first two centuries by a Christian named Luke. Acts is not a history, for it is more in the genre of biography or personal narrative, such as those we find in the writings of Lucian, who was also not a historian in the specific sense. The first "historian" of Christianity is Eusebius, writing in the 4th century. Luke's being a doctor is also merely a

supposition. It can certainly be disputed. The physician companion of Paul may not be the author of Acts or the gospel attributed to him. We have no evidence, in fact, that he was. It was merely presumed by others, a century later. Luke doesn't sign either book, much less tell us his profession. His accounts are less fabulous, and thus show signs of an educated seriousness lacking in the other gospels, but these works display no details that would require him to have had an actual medical education. So we cannot know if he was a doctor.

One might argue that there is then no basis for *disputing* the notion that the author of Luke was a doctor, but if it were sensible to believe everything that we have "no basis for disputing" we would have a lot of very odd beliefs. Why, by that reasoning, Alexander the Great was a sausage seller and an acrobat, and a magician on Wednesdays. But we have positive reasons to doubt that Luke, the author, was Paul's companion, "Luke the doctor." First of all, Luke the author tells us the wrong stories about Paul's conversion, and gets many of Paul's ethical opinions wrong. His companion would not likely have made such mistakes. Luke also explains insanity as the product of demons, a very unmedical opinion of the matter, certainly showing that Luke was not a member of the Methodists or Empiricists, the only two schools of medicine with rational views about the world. Thus, if Luke was a doctor, he was a superstitious one, and no more reliable a witness to fact than any other superstitious man of his age.

It has also been lamely argued that if all we are left with is tradition, that will have to do until proof becomes available. But by that reasoning, Jesus wrote a letter to the King of Persia. For we have that letter: it is in Eusebius' history of the church, the same place where both Lukes are proclaimed the same. If you doubt the veracity of Eusebius in offering a letter as actually written by Jesus (and he displays absolutely no doubt in its authenticity), then you must doubt the veracity of his other claims to tradition, including the equation of the two Lukes.

The fact is that ancient history is replete with examples of assuming that two names refer to the same people simply because they are conceptually related. Thus it was long assumed that Origen the Platonist and Origen the Christian were the same man, and that the Celsus of Lucian's acquaintance was the Celsus who attacked Christianity in the "True Doctrine." In both cases, this was simply because they had the same name and lived in the same time and place. But they have been shown to be different men. This kind of mistake is so common that it is wiser to assume that this is one such mistake, unless we have any evidence suggesting otherwise. For example, Tertullian the Christian and Tertullian the Lawyer are reasonably believed to be the same (though this is still uncertain) because his writings show a competent and technical understanding of the law and the rhetorical and analytical techniques of Roman lawyers. We have no such clues allowing an equivalent observation in Luke's case, and even observations against it (like the attribution of insanity to demons). For instance, compare how two doctors report the miracles of Vespasian in Tacitus (Histories, 4.81). Nothing like that is in Luke or Acts.

Not that all this matters. Doctors could be just as superstitious as anyone else in antiquity, even employ magic in their healing practices (consider the medical writings of Theophrastus). And we are not told which school of medicine Paul's companion belonged to. Nor did being "learned" make one less gullible or more reliable. Herodian, a historian of the Roman Empire, is notoriously unreliable. And Pliny the Elder reports a lot of marvels as facts, and he was one of the most learned men in antiquity. Certainly the gospel author was educated. He could write, and

less than 10% of the population at the time could claim that. But was he "learned"? The only men whom we feel qualified to call learned are those who cite or quote many other ancient authorities--the definition of being learned is, after all, having read many authorities. Plutarch and Pliny were learned. I see not even a single piece of ancient source material even mentioned in Luke. So he does not qualify as learned--at least not on what we have of his work. And Luke proves a serious lack of academic skill in one respect that has already been noted: he appears to have not read Paul's letters--also a good reason to reject the claim that he was Paul's companion. He seems ignorant of many of Paul's theological positions, including his views on justification. And many other details, such as his account in Acts of Paul's conversion and travels, contradict many of Paul's own accounts (such as in Galatians).

One final word about "secular" history. It amazes me how Christians think us historians are all gullible dupes who "never" dispute anything an ancient historian writes. Indeed, I know of no ancient author, of any genre or subject, whom any modern historian completely trusts--and that even includes the most meticulous of them all, Polybius and Thucydides. The first thing we are taught as historians is not to trust any source. We are taught to find ulterior motives, weaknesses of evidence, the tendency to embellish and regard rumor and myth as fact, the attraction of amazing tales over sober reality (an attraction more than once explicitly stated, in even serious historians like Tacitus), as well as literary features such as redaction, propaganda, and agenda. And all these distortions find their way into all ancient sources, secular or otherwise.

Physical evidence is also essential to the reliability of many historical claims. Yet we have none to support the miracles of Jesus, yet plenty to "support" the healing miracles of Asclepius. Certainly, if amazing recoveries happened in the temples of a pagan god, there can be nothing divine about the same thing happening in the presence of a Jewish holy man. And if we can be told about giant ants by Herodotus, who treats this tall tale as if it were true, then the tall tale of the zombies in Matthew should not surprise us either. The same things can be said of every aspect of the gospel accounts, in Luke or otherwise.

I have been asked if physical evidence is really all that important, and the answer is often yes. If there is a reason to doubt the reality of a person, it is generally doubted without physical evidence. Historians doubted the existence of Alexander of Abonuteichos, whose account we only hear in Lucian, until we recovered evidence corroborating Lucian's account: coins and statues. Many of the people attested in early books of Livy are still dismissed as inventions simply because there is no physical evidence. Likewise the *Historia Augusta* is divided into "reliable" and "unreliable" halves, based on the observation that after a certain point the people it refers to are not attested anywhere else, whereas in the first half we have coins, inscriptions, and papyri (or other references) confirming their existence.

However, I do not dispute the existence of a man called Jesus. Nor do I think even physical evidence is a guarantee of truth. Although it is possible that "Jesus" was invented, this is not the most likely explanation of the facts. There were many men named Jesus, many of whom preachers of religious reform. His existence is plausible. What is in doubt is whether the miracles and other claims about Jesus are true. And whereas we have physical inscriptions of the miracles of Asclepius, we have none for Jesus, so that his miracles are even more doubtful than those of Asclepius. And although he is claimed to have had wealthy supporters (Joseph of Arimathea), by

whom he was supposedly believed to be the divine savior of all mankind--the most important person ever to have lived, God Incarnate--somehow no inscriptions of any kind were ever commissioned. But we have the Gospel of Epicurus on stone, commissioned by Diogenes of Oenoanda. He obviously cared more about his savior's message than Joseph did about that of Jesus. What does that tell you?

[See my review of *In Defense of Miracles* for a much more thorough discussion of this issue, especially my comparison of Julius Caesar with Jesus [within my review](#)]

### **Concluding Remarks in Support of the Unreliability of the Gospels**

There are many other details in the gospels which impugn their reliability, like the fact that Matthew dates the birth of Jesus to before 4 BC (the year Herod the Great died), whereas Luke dates it to 6 AD (the year of the first census under Quirinius), the fact that Matthew records a hoarde of zombies descending on Jerusalem after the death of Jesus, the blatant and repetitive account of demon possession as an explanation for insanity, the fact that none of the miracles of healing defy natural causes (no missing limbs are ever regrown, no one is resurrected from ashes), and so on. But I have concentrated on three aspects of only one detail, and yet I have shown by more than enough evidence that the Resurrection as Miracle From God is unbelievable, even improbable, and that is sufficient grounds to reject the Christian faith. All the other reasons one could add to this also add to the crushing weight of conviction that Christianity is an old superstition, dusty with time, outdated, outmoded, and better replaced by a new world view. The best discussion of the evidential reliability of the New Testament can be found in the very excellent article by [Richard Packham](#).

Still, there are those who think Christianity itself is so unique and thus so improbable that it must be inspired by God. In particular, some have claimed that the idea of a personal rather than a general resurrection, as well as of a "crucified messiah" would have been rather absurd to people in the time of Jesus. But crucified deities were not absurd to the Sumerians, who worshipped the crucified Innana (cf. Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, 3rd. revised ed., 1981, pp. 154ff.). The Greeks had Prometheus, who suffered a similar fate, and the very popular religion of Cybele had Attis, a castrated deity whose male priests castrated themselves in their god's honor. Clearly absurdity was no barrier to devotion. So what is really absurd is to look at all of human history and still think it is a reasonable argument that because something is absurd or distasteful, no one will do it. It is even more absurd when the thing in question is saddled inside a very attractive, pleasing, and useful package. Who cares if your god was crucified, so long as you will live forever by believing it? Fear of death is a far more serious motivator than distaste for absurdity, and a man who has been persuaded that if he loses his body, his soul will live forever, will be happy to die for any number of absurd ideas, as history has proven.

As to the "uniqueness" argument, that is also an absurd statement in light of fact. Based on the exact same reasoning, we should doubt that there has ever been a major religious innovation in all of human history. But until you can explain away Mormonism, Buddhism, Isidism, Islam, Transcendental Meditation, Taoism, Shintoism, the Korean Chondogyo (whose leader was also executed, yet the creed is going strong), and all other major religious innovations, which always, by definition, have included unique ideas, there will never be a more absurd argument than "they

wouldn't invent something much unlike anything they had been exposed to." This argument is further flawed by the fact that the authors of Christianity were exposed to a lot more than just Judaism, and just as the Jews adopted a unique concept of Hell by combining ideas from Persians and Greeks, it would be an easy thing to adopt from Greek individualism and theories of the soul (including Pythagorean reincarnation) the natural conclusion that if there can be a general resurrection in the flesh, there may instead be an individual resurrection of the spirit. Indeed, I have yet to see any attribute of Christianity that could not have been assembled from ideas already existing in the cultures that surrounded it. By all reasonable accounts, Christianity is a product of human history, not a product of a god.

### **The Two Lamest Arguments Ever Made**

"You are wrong because the Bible is infallible." Yes, this is a direct quote from a critic of the original version of this essay, and he was not alone. This is the lamest argument in the universe, but it has been made so many times I must say something about it here. Claiming that the Bible is true because it is infallible is like betting your life on the tautology "the bible is true because the bible is true." This is circular reasoning, a non-argument. If you wish to call a book infallible which claims the main character was born both before 4 BC (when Herod was king: Matt. 2:1) and in 6 AD (when there were no kings and the Romans took over: Luke 2:1-3, see elsewhere [The Date of the Nativity in Luke](#)), or that Darius was the son of Xerxes (Daniel 9.1: Xerxes is the Greek transliteration, Ahasuerus = Xerxes transliterated from Hebrew)--when in fact he was the father of Xerxes (and son of Hystaspes, see elsewhere my [note on Daniel](#))--then I can only offer an invitation for you to step into the real world, and hope you accept

Sensible people only regard as significantly certain those claims for which we can find no apparent motive to lie, for which we have the same account from reporters with opposing agendas, for which we have physical evidence to corroborate the written account, or other checks against deception and error. All other claims we judge with various degrees of uncertainty, according to the only ruler we have left: whether the account is plausible, fits the known facts, and is of such a nature that the author could have known what he reports. Of course, this ruler, when applied to miracle claims, destroys them all as implausible. This does not mean they are impossible, but it does mean that we cannot know if they are possible, since, just as Herodotus reporting the existence of giant ants is dismissed for the sole reason that it is implausible, so we must dismiss men walking on water. Lacking any reason to grant them more merit than none, this is the only sensible response.

Indeed, the Bible fails on one occasion or another every check against plausibility, and thus cannot be infallible. Not only does it fail by proposing absurd miracle accounts such as hoards of zombies walking in Jerusalem, three-hour-long eclipses, and massive rock-splitting earthquakes, which are attested nowhere else despite their awesome scale (cf. Matthew 27:45-53), or the attribution of insanity to possession by spirits, and the recording of demons entering and drowning a herd of pigs (Luke 8:26-33), but also in reports of events as factual that neither the author nor any friendly source could ever have witnessed (such as secret conversations of Jews and officials: Matt. 27:62-65; 28:11-15), and claims that do not fit the known facts, such as about when Jesus was born or the succession of Persian kings. In the end, the Bible is the furthest thing from infallible that anything of its kind can get, and to believe otherwise is to cling to a blind

faith indeed. A man who believes without thinking is no kin or kindred of mine, and he will have to excuse me for being inexorably different of mind and spirit in the profoundest of ways.

So alien are many Christians to my very being, that they do not even know they are being wicked when they are trying to be kind. "There will be a 'time'," one thoughtful would-be savior of mine wrote, "when we will all have all the 'evidence' we need to prove our beliefs correct or wrong. By then it may be too late." It surprises me that for all this man's devotion and sincerity, he somehow missed the most important lesson any man can learn: threats are the hallmark of a wicked creed.

### **Addenda to This Essay**

Many devout believers will take issue with what I have said. So far, they have yet to give any good reason to actually come to a different conclusion, although many good points have been made that I have been obligated to address in addenda, which have now all been incorporated into this new version. Any new attempts that have enough merit to deserve a response will be met here, in addenda appended to this essay.

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