The Historicity of Jesus' Resurrection

The Debate between Christians and Skeptics

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About This Document

This is the Beta-release of my undergraduate thesis. It was originally composed in Microsoft Word for Windows 6.0, and converted to HTML for the World Wide Web using Microsoft Internet Assistant. I have not "cleaned it up" since converting it to HTML format, so some things may look differently on the Web page than they would in print.

This thesis will be done on Tuesday, May 30th. I will post the final draft here when finished.
I am an agnostic at a Christian university.

Since enrolling at Seattle Pacific University, I have been challenged by several of my Christian friends to investigate the historical evidence for Christianity. In particular, they challenged me to investigate the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, as a historical event. Although I was initially reluctant to do so, finally in August 1993 I decided to investigate for myself.

At that time, I had just completed a massive personal study on the evolution and creationism controversy. I had debated a pastor in high school on evolution before a crowd of 100 people, and would soon appear on talk radio on a Christian radio station defending evolution against an army of callers who strongly disagreed with me. And I had recently joined the National Center for Science Education, an organization strongly opposed to scientific creationism.

My opinion of scientific creationists was so low that if they endorsed one position, I would seriously consider supporting the other, just so that I could disagree with the scientific creationists. "If scientific creationists say X, then X must be wrong," I would reason. When my friends challenged me, as a debater, to investigate the evidence for the resurrection in the same fashion that I would investigate a topic for debate, I used this same line of reasoning. "If the scientific creationists believe Jesus rose from the dead, then the resurrection must be just as ridiculous as the Genesis flood." Or so I thought.

I remember when the famous Christian apologist Josh McDowell came to SPU and spoke in chapel on the evidence for the resurrection. I don't remember his exact words, but he said something like, "You know, I wish more people would try to disprove the resurrection! You know why? Because then we'd have more Christians!" I remember thinking to myself that if I took the time to investigate the resurrection, I could make anyone who believed it look like a fool. Or so I thought.

Then I remember a friend loaning me some cassettes of the Craig-Zindler Debate on the existence of God. I was very interested in these tapes, for two reasons. First, as a former high school debater, I've always enjoyed listening to a good debate. Secondly, I was a huge fan of American Atheists representative Frank Zindler. At this time, I had already read transcripts of his successful debates against well-known scientific creationist authors Duane Gish and John Morris. Considering how easily he defeated his opponents in those debates, I figured this "William Lane Craig guy" would be an easy win, too. Or so I thought.
As it turns out, however, Craig won the debate, hands down. One of Craig's arguments for the existence of God was the resurrection of Jesus, and Zindler was simply unable to knock down any of Craig's evidence for the resurrection.

"Did Jesus rise from the dead?", I asked myself. Josh McDowell, the Craig-Zindler Debate, and the fact that my Christian friends always talked about it (I didn't understand its importance at this point), all had me wondering.

Eventually I decided to investigate for myself. As I began to survey the secular literature for critical information on the resurrection of Jesus, I was completely surprised by what I found. Or, more accurately, what I didn't find. I was used to the evolution and creationism controversy, where it was extremely easy to find information critical of the scientific creationists. When it came to the resurrection of Jesus, I found that it was extremely difficult to find anything in the freethought literature about the historicity of the resurrection.

I remember when I finally began to understand the importance of the resurrection. I reread one of the most popular essays in skeptical circles, Bertrand Russell's Why I Am Not a Christian, and noticed for the first time that Russell did not once used the word "resurrection" anywhere. I found this fact rather strange, considering that the whole purpose of Why I Am Not a Christian was to refute Christianity. I was beginning to understand why Christian apologists complain that most skeptics fail to deal with the resurrection.

Gradually, out of sheer frustration with the shortage of material critical of the McDowell school of apologetics, I started seeking information on the Internet about McDowell. One thing led to another, and I am now the editor of The Jury Is In: The Ruling on Josh McDowell's "Evidence", an on-line refutation of Josh McDowell's Evidence That Demands a Verdict. I am also now the moderator of the MCDOWELL email list, a list dedicated to critical discussion of Josh McDowell's apologetics. As I began to work on Jury, I began to find more and more information that refuted McDowell's arguments.

Just as I was about to discard the resurrection of Christ as "another illogical religious belief," I was reintroduced to another Christian apologist, whose apologetic for the resurrection I found extremely difficult to deal with as a critic.

William Lane Craig, who in my opinion is the best Christian apologist today, is a top-notch scholar, and a highly competitive debater to boot (the same Craig who defeated Zindler). He has written several books on the Christian faith in general and the historicity of the resurrection in particular, at both the popular and scholarly levels, including Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus, Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection: Our Response to the Empty Tomb, Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics, and The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus. In my opinion, Craig makes a very strong case for the historicity of the resurrection, a case which I don't think the secular literature has given serious consideration.

In this essay, I want to discuss why I think the resurrection is an important historical issue that needs to be addressed by both Christians and skeptics. Next I examine the whole question of miracles, and the implications for this debate. Then I want to give brief overview of popular and scholarly arguments for and against the resurrection, and outline the strengths and weakness of both sides.

But before we dive head-first into the contemporary debate over the resurrection, I think we should first
consider why the resurrection is worth discussing. Let us therefore turn our attention to the importance of the resurrection now.
The Importance and Nature of the Resurrection

Christians universally agree that the resurrection of Jesus is central to their faith. Popular apologist Josh McDowell wrote, "The resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together" (1982, p. 179). Terry Miethe, a Christian professor of philosophy at Oxford, has maintained that "Did Jesus rise from the dead?" is the most important question regarding the claims of the Christian faith?" (p. xi, emphasis in original). Indeed, one cannot be a Christian unless one believes that God raised Jesus from the dead. For Paul, the earliest of the New Testament writers, the resurrection was central to his message. In a passage that is arguably the most important passage in the entire New Testament concerning the resurrection, he wrote,

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God.... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile (1 Cor. 15:14-17).

However, while Christians may agree on the importance of the resurrection, they do not agree on the meaning of the resurrection. For example, was the resurrection an event in space and time? Could it have been captured on videotape? Was it bodily in nature? Must it be a bodily, physical resurrection in order to retain its importance? The Christian community is divided. By briefly considering the debate within the Christian community over the nature of the resurrection, we will be able to put into proper perspective the twentieth-century debate between skeptics and Christians over the resurrection.

Resurrection vs. Resuscitation

However, before I discuss the alternative interpretations of the resurrection, I want to make it very clear that resurrection does not mean resuscitation, the reanimation of a corpse that will die again someday. As Marcus Borg wrote (p. 15),

Whatever happened at Easter, it was not resuscitation. Easter does not mean that Jesus resumed his previous life as a finite person. Rather, resurrection means that he entered another kind and level of existence, "raised to the right hand of God."

It is important to note that while there are other individuals in the Bible who "came back to life," so to speak, there is a fundamental difference between their experiences and that of Jesus. With the exception
of Enoch and Elijah (who were translated), the rest of those people died again. In contrast, Jesus was raised from the dead, never to die again. The New Testament makes a clear distinction between Jesus' pre-resurrection body and his post-resurrection body. Jesus' pre-resurrection body was ordinary: fully human and therefore completely mortal. However, after the resurrection, his body was transformed and made immortal.

If resurrection does not mean resuscitation, then what does it mean? Two types of answers are possible. The first view, which I shall refer to as non-material resurrection, is the belief that Jesus' corpse need not come back to life in order for the resurrection to be significant. The second and opposing view, material resurrection, is the doctrine that the resurrection body must be a material body, if the resurrection is to have any meaning whatsoever. Let us consider each understanding of the resurrection in turn.

**Non-Material Resurrection**

I must confess that, prior to investigating the resurrection for myself, I had not considered the possibility that one could deny the material nature of Jesus' resurrection yet still be a Christian. However, since beginning my investigation, I have become acquainted with several scholars (Küng, Rahner, Borg, et al) who deny (or at least do not feel they must affirm) the material nature of Jesus' resurrection, but claim to be Christians. A careful description and consideration of their views is therefore in order.

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**Non-Material Understanding of the Resurrection**

Not in History (Not in Space and Time)

A Different Body
An Immaterial Body
Does Not Depend on the Empty Tomb
Not in the Flesh

First, non-materialists emphasize that the resurrection was not a historical event. As Borg writes, "Speaking as a Christian, I regard these stories not as straightforward events that you could capture on video" (Ibid., p. 49.). The Jesuit Karl Rahner once wrote, "it is obvious that the resurrection of Jesus neither can be nor intends to be a `historical' event" (p. 277). Hans Küng makes essentially the same point, but in greater detail (p. 349-350):

Since according to New Testament faith the raising is an act of God within God's dimensions, it can not be a historical event in the strict sense: it is not an event which can be verified by historical science with the aid of historical methods. For the raising of Jesus is not a miracle violating the laws of nature, verifiable within the present world, not a supernatural intervention which can be located and dated in space and time. There was nothing to photograph or record.... But neither the raising itself nor the person raised can be apprehended, objectified, by historical methods. In this respect the question would demand too much of historical science - which, like the sciences of chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology or theology, never sees more than one aspect of the complex reality - since, on the basis of its own premises, it deliberately excludes the very reality which alone comes into question for a resurrection as also for creation and consummation: the reality of God.

This is a very significant passage, because if Küng is correct, then much of the debate between skeptics
and Christians is irrelevant to the Easter message. If the Easter event did not occur in space and time, then historical questions about the empty tomb and Jesus' appearances after his death are at best peripheral issues.

I should make it clear however, that when Küng says that the resurrection is not a "historical event," he does not mean in any way that the resurrection is not real. For example, I think that Küng, Rahner, Borg, et al would agree that the early Christians' experiences of the risen Lord are events in space and time. For these Christians, though, the question, "so what happened to Jesus' body after his death?" is ultimately not that important.

The second important feature of non-materialists is that they do not think Jesus' resurrected body is the same body. Küng (p. 351) argues that there is "no continuity of the body: questions of natural science, like that of the persistence of molecules, do not arise." Likewise, they do not necessarily consider the resurrection body a material body. Rahner once said, "We miss the meaning of `resurrection' in general and also of the resurrection of Jesus to begin with if our original preconception is the notion of a resuscitation of a physical, material body" (p. 266). And Borg writes, "Resurrection could, but need not mean that the corpse had been affected; a corpse coming to life is not the point" (p. 15, emphasis added).

This distinction is also significant because it is hardly ever even considered by skeptics who argue about the resurrection. As we will see in chapter 4, both sides tacitly assume that resurrection involves a material body, which is interesting when scholars like Borg claim that "the point" does not depend on the the raising of a corpse. (Of course, materialists would respond that "the point" may depend on the raising of a corpse.) But more about that later.

If the resurrection body need not be material, then what do non-materialists make of the empty tomb? They clearly do not regard it as necessary for Easter faith. For example, the Late Revd Dr. David Walker wrote that, "The corporality of the resurrection does not require the tomb to be empty" (p.173). Rahner says, "An empty tomb as such and by itself can never testify to the meaning and to the existence of a resurrection" (p. 267). Küng argues that if the empty tomb story is true, "faith in the risen Christ would not be made any easier and for some people today it would even become more difficult" (p. 365).

Conversely, if the empty tomb story is unhistorical, that in no way would discredit the resurrection. As Walker states (Ibid.), "It is quite possible to affirm unambiguously that Christ rose from the dead while either denying the historicity of the empty tomb or being agnostic about the precise connection between it and Jesus` `rising."

Walker outlines at least two ways in which the Easter tomb story is theologically significant, even if it is not historical. First, he says, "belief in the empty tomb reinforces significance of Easter for a holistic view of human salvation" (Ibid.). Every aspect of human nature is redeemed by Jesus in the resurrection. Second, "belief in the empty tomb reinforces the significance of Easter for a cosmic view of salvation" (p. 366). According to this view, then, the empty tomb story is significant because it affirms the risen Christ as "the supreme instance of natural order as God intends it to be" (Ibid.)

Material Resurrection

However, there is another group of Christians who claim that Jesus' resurrection body was - and had to be - a material body. According to leading inerrantist Norman L. Geisler, "The logic is clear: If Jesus rose bodily from the dead in the same body in which He died, and if this body was a physical, material body, then it follows that the resurrection body was a physical, material body" (p. 27). (Of course, the
physical body might have been transformed in some way, but nevertheless, according to this view, it was still a physical body.) This view, it seems, is the belief held by virtually all of Christian apologists who are in dialogue with the skeptical community.

A fundamental concept for this understanding of the resurrection is that the resurrection occurred in history. That is to say, when Jesus rose from the dead, he did so in space and time. Concerning this, Josh McDowell claims that "the resurrection of Christ is an event in history wherein God acted in a definite time-space dimension" (1972, p. 185). Likewise, the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg says, "Whether the resurrection of Jesus took place or not is a historical question, and the historical question at this point is inescapable. And so the question has to be decided on the level of historical argument" (quoted in McDowell 1972, p. 188). Or consider the words of Norman Geisler (p. 26), who said the resurrection "was a chronologically datable event in history. It was not a super-historical event beyond space and time. Rather, it was an empirical event in real history."

They also contend that Jesus' post-resurrection body was the same body as his pre-resurrection body, and therefore that it was a material body. Geisler writes, "the Bible declares that the same body placed in Jesus' tomb on Good Friday emerged from it on Easter Sunday" (p. 26). Furthermore, "the resurrection body is described as a material body" (Ibid.). According to this view, "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39), the crucifixion scars (John 20:27), eating (Luke 24:42-43), and touching the risen Jesus (Matt. 28:9) are all understood as material phenomenon.

What about the empty tomb? Proponents of a material resurrection consider a historical empty tomb essential to their understanding of Easter. If the empty tomb story is historically reliable, they contend this is strong evidence for the truth of the resurrection; but if the empty tomb tradition is not trustworthy, this casts enormous doubt on their whole superstructure of belief.

**Conclusion**

My goal here has not been to take sides and say that one understanding of the resurrection is right and the other is wrong; rather, my purpose is simply to acknowledge that such differences exist. I think this is important to understand when talking about the resurrection debate between skeptics and Christians, so that we can place the debate in its proper perspective. As we shall see, the debate has almost exclusively assumed that the material view of the resurrection is a proper understanding of what the issues are, without even acknowledging the non-material position. But before we can examine the arguments advanced by both sides, we need also to consider one other crucial issue: the problem of miracles. In the next chapter, I will consider the whole question of whether miracles are possible and, if so, what would constitute reasonable for them.
The Miracle of the Resurrection

Before we can even examine the evidence to determine whether the resurrection is a historical event, we must first deal with the problem of whether such an event is possible in the first place. We need to confront the problem of miracles.

More skeptics reject the resurrection because of its miraculous nature than for any other reason. If the resurrection is historical, then something truly extraordinary has occurred: the raising of Jesus from the dead. But many people find it difficult to believe that an event of this type has occurred. Even the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, was so offended by the gospel miracles that he literally used scissors to cut out all of the "miraculous" passages in his Bible, and published the emasculated remains as *The Jefferson Bible*. The French skeptic Ernest Renan, in his *Life of Jesus*, also questioned the gospel miracles.

Likewise, some theologians have been so embarrassed by the miraculous nature of the gospels that many of them, following the lead of Rudolf Bultmann, have striven to demythologize the New Testament. According to Bultmann, "no one who uses the radio or electric lights should be expected to believe in the mythological world view of the Bible in order to become a Christian" (paraphrased in Craig 1994, 128).

Now I definitely think that the historicity of Jesus' resurrection can be challenged by disputing the alleged historical evidence for it. I consider such evidence in the next two chapters. Here, however, I would like to note that the background probability of a claim is just as important to determining the reliability of testimony when it comes to ascertaining the credibility of a claim. This is especially true of the resurrection, since our only alleged evidence for the event is testimony. Let me give an example to illustrate why the background probability of a claim must be considered.

Suppose someone that was presumably reliable and trustworthy claimed they had just flown over a lake by flapping their arms. Surely no rational person would take such a claim seriously (at least initially; although we might change our minds if this event could be repeated). We would reject such a claim because it goes against everything which we know about the powers of the human mind, modern physics, etc. Apart from the testimony of such an event, we would rate the prior probability of such a claim so infinitesimally low that it would invalidate the testimony and make the claim unbelievable.
**Background Probability and Atheists**

For an atheist, the background probability of the resurrection is as low as the background probability of human flight via arm-flapping. From the atheist point of view, what applies to miraculous claims of teleportation equally applies to the claim that a dead person - especially one that has been dead for three days and nights - can come back to life. Everything we know about what happens to the body at death (rigormortis, organic decomposition, etc.) plus the universal experience of humans throughout history (with the possible exception of the alleged eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection) indicates that the stinking dead stay dead (Parsons, 191). Thus the background probability of a resurrection is extremely low.

Moreover, if an event is a miracle, then it must have taken place contrary to a law of nature. For those who deny the existence of God to say that an event "violates the laws of nature" means that it must have a background probability that is very, very low. Therefore, for an atheist to be justified in believing a miracle on the basis of testimony, the possibility that the testimony is false would have to be a greater miracle than if the alleged event actually occurred (Hume, 32).

Thus, virtually every naturalistic scenario, no matter how far-fetched, must seem a priori more plausible to the atheist, than something as miraculous as the resurrection. Therefore Christian apologists' arguments against rationalistic explanations like the swoon theory, the theft theory, etc. miss the point. As long as such explanations do not require a violation of the laws of nature, for the atheist they are automatically more probable than a miracle like the resurrection.

This has enormous implications for the debate between Christians and skeptics over the resurrection in twentieth-century America. The resurrection cannot be debated in a vacuum. If Christian apologists hope to convince skeptics of the resurrection, they will need to figure out a way to get skeptics to take it seriously. I remember the first time I heard a Christian apologist offer the resurrection as "proof" for the existence of God. I rejected his argument, not because of historical doubts or because of its miraculous nature per se, but because I didn't even take it seriously. I think that if Christian apologists discussed the resurrection with respect to its prior probability and theism (as I do below), skeptics would have much more respect for it.

**Background Probability and Theists**

But what if God does exist? What is the background probability of a miraculous event, like the resurrection, if God exists? I think that the theist can plausibly argue that the background probability is much improved, if not high, under such conditions. Given that God exists, there are good reasons to believe He will intervene.

First, if there is a God who is creator of the universe and the laws that govern it, then it seems reasonable to believe that He would be able to temporarily suspend the laws of nature. If God could create the universe ex nihilo, then surely a mere resurrection or levitation would pale in comparison. Indeed, in terms of its relative difficulty, one would think that the raising of Jesus from the dead would pale in comparison.

Second, as philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne argues (p. 551), there is good reason to believe that if God exists, He would reveal Himself through a divine miracle at some point in human history. People are capable of knowing that God exists, but obviously not all men come to believe in God. It
seems plausible that, given some people's failure to recognize the existence of God (assuming He exists), He might intervene in human history, and reveal His true purpose. Indeed, Swinburne goes on to argue (p. 544-52) that miracles might be especially useful for the purpose of *authenticating* a divine messenger or prophet.

For these two reasons alone, then, I think theists can plausibly argue that if God exists, the prior probability of the resurrection is high. Critics of the resurrection (or any other miracle, for that matter) would do well to consider this point, for it implies that Humean attacks on miracles miss the point. If one believes in God, one believes that certain types of miracles have a significant prior probability, i.e. they are what one would reasonably expect. Therefore, if a theist is going to reject the resurrection, they will need historical grounds for doing so.

With respect to the contemporary debate between Christians and skeptics over the resurrection, then, this implies that skeptics should not focus their arguments against the miraculous nature of the resurrection. By ignoring the background probability of miracles in general, and the resurrection in particular, their arguments are likely to fall on deaf ears.
Having now discussed the importance and meaning of the resurrection, as well as its background probability, I'd now like to briefly survey the contemporary debate and outline the major arguments by both sides, at both the popular and scholarly levels. Christian authors who address the resurrection are obviously very easy to come by. However, it is much more difficult to find secular apologists who even mention Jesus' resurrection, much less discuss it in detail. Nevertheless, there have been a few exceptions and I will highlight two such authors. But first, let us turn our attention to Christian apologetics for the resurrection.

Historical Background

Christian Defenses of the Resurrection

There is no shortage of Christian authors who have written in defense of the historicity of the resurrection: Collins, Craig, Geisler, Habermas, Lewis, McDowell, Montgomery, Morris, Story, et al. Space constraints will force me to limit my review to just two: Josh McDowell and William Lane Craig. However, I think these two particular writers are the best representatives for their particular style of apologetics. McDowell is easily the most popular Christian apologist who speaks to lay audiences. And when it comes to Christian scholars, no one has given a more formidable defense of a material resurrection in scholarly journals than Craig. Let us review now the arguments advanced by McDowell and Craig for a material resurrection.

Josh McDowell

Josh McDowell is without question one of the most popular Christian apologists ever. For example, according to the back cover of his book, *The Resurrection Factor*, "he has spoken to more students than anyone else lecturing in universities." He has authored over 26 books including, *Answers to Tough Questions*, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict (Volumes I and II)*, *More Than a Carpenter*, and *The Resurrection Factor*, to name just a few of his more famous titles.

McDowell makes several arguments for the resurrection. I will consider two. The first argument is the
famous "Lord, liar, or lunatic" trilemma. His second argument is an inference to the best explanation based on certain alleged facts.

The Trilemma - Lord, Liar, or Lunatic

Based on the argument originally developed by C.S. Lewis (40-41), McDowell developed his famous trilemma in order to refute the common assertion that Jesus was just a prophet or a great moral teacher, but not the Son of God. The argument may be formulated as follows:

1. Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord.
2. Jesus was neither a liar nor a lunatic.
3. Therefore, Jesus is Lord.

Thus, when we evaluate Jesus' claim to be God, we have three and only three possibilities: liar, lunatic, or Lord. However, McDowell argues, there are good reasons to reject the notion that Jesus was a liar. First, he has transformed lives throughout history (for the better). Second, it is unclear why Jesus would have preached his message in a country that was fiercely monotheistic, when nearby were larger, polytheistic nations that would have been more receptive to his message (1977, p. 30).

But, says McDowell, neither can Jesus be considered a lunatic. McDowell gives two reasons why Jesus could not be a lunatic. First, Jesus did not exhibit signs of abnormality and imbalance that are usually present when someone is deranged (Ibid., p. 31). And second, he "spoke some of the most profound sayings ever recorded" (Ibid.).

But if Jesus is not a liar or a lunatic, so the argument goes, then he must be Lord. McDowell concludes thus, "The evidence is clearly in favor of Jesus as Lord" (1972, p. 107).

"Facts to be Reckoned With"

McDowell claims there are several historical facts which speak in favor of the resurrection, including:

1. The empty tomb.
2. The burial.
3. The guard.
4. The disciples.
5. The post-resurrection appearances.
6. The enemies of Christ gave no refutation of the resurrection.

According to McDowell, these alleged facts "make it very difficult for critics to defend their position that Christ did not rise from the dead" (1981, p. 64).

William Lane Craig

Philosopher of religion William Lane Craig has developed a much more convincing apologetic for the resurrection. His apologetic rests upon three "great, independently established facts" (1994, p. 272): the empty tomb, Jesus' appearances after his death, and the origin of the Christian faith. Craig argues, "If these three facts can be established and no plausible natural explanation can account for them, then one is justified in inferring Jesus' resurrection as the most plausible explanation of the data" (Ibid.)
The Empty Tomb

According to Craig, eight lines of evidence support a historical empty tomb tradition:

1. The historical reliability of the story of Jesus' burial supports the empty tomb.
2. Paul's testimony implies the fact of the empty tomb.
3. The empty tomb story is part of Mark's source material and is therefore very old.
4. The phrase "The first day of the week" is very ancient.
5. The story is simple and lacks legendary development.
6. The tomb was probably discovered by women.
7. The earliest Jewish propaganda against the Christians presupposes the empty tomb.
8. The disciples could not have preached the resurrection in Jerusalem had the tomb not been empty.

But if this is the case, Craig asks, then what is the best explanation for the empty tomb? Craig argues that the conspiracy theory (the idea that the disciples stole the body), the apparent death theory (Jesus did not die on the cross), and the wrong tomb theory (the women went to the wrong tomb) are untenable in light of the historical evidence. Thus, the resurrection is the best explanation for the empty tomb.

The Resurrection Appearances

Craig approaches the resurrection appearances the same way he treats the empty tomb. That is to say, first he points to several alleged facts in support of the empty tomb, and then he argues that a material resurrection is the best explanation for these alleged facts. First, Craig offers three main lines of evidence for the resurrection appearances (Ibid., p. 281):

1. Paul's testimony proves the disciples saw appearances of Jesus.
2. The Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances are historically reliable.
3. The resurrection appearances were physical, bodily appearances.

Craig argues that if one denies that Jesus bodily rose from the dead, then one would have to believe that the appearances were hallucinations. However, he argues, the hallucination theory has several flaws. First, "the theory cannot account for the physicality of the appearances" (p. 287). Second, the number and various circumstances of the appearances suggest that the eyewitnesses were not hallucinating. Third, hallucinations would not have led to the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. And finally, the hallucination theory fails to explain away the empty tomb. Thus Craig rejects the hallucination theory.

The Origin of the Christian Faith

According to Craig, "Even the most skeptical NT scholars admit that the earliest disciples at least believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead (Ibid., p. 288). However, if one denies the resurrection, then one must choose from three possibilities: that the disciples came to believe in Jesus' resurrection because of the influence of Christianity, pagan religions, or Jewish beliefs. Obviously, belief in the resurrection could not come from Christian influences because there was no Christianity yet. But according to Craig, neither can it be explained as the result of pagan influences on the disciples (Ibid., 289-90). First, he argues that the parallels between dying and rising savior gods in pagan religions are mere seasonal symbols. And second, there is little historical evidence of such cults in first-century
Palestine.

This leaves Jewish influences. Although the Jews did believe in resurrection, Craig suggests at least two differences between the Christian understanding of the resurrection, and the Jewish understanding of the resurrection. First, he says, "in Jewish thought the resurrection always occurred after the end of the world" (Ibid., p. 290). Second, the Jews always thought of resurrection as an event that happened to all of the righteous, not just an isolated individual.

Therefore, so the argument goes, since the origin of the disciples' belief cannot be explained in terms of Christian, pagan, or Jewish influences, Craig concludes that it must have been caused by the resurrection itself (Ibid., p. 293).

Secular Objections to the Resurrection

References to the resurrection are extremely rare in the skeptical literature. Many well-known atheists and agnostics do not even seem to understand its importance (Russell, O'Hair, Zindler, Stein, Fox), while others have chosen to ignore it (Mackie, Neilsen). Nevertheless, a few outspoken critics of Christianity have addressed the resurrection, including Dan Barker, G.A. Wells, Antony Flew, and Michael Martin. I'd like to examine the arguments made by Barker and Martin in detail.

Dan Barker

Out of all the numerous freethought works on my bookshelf, one of my absolute favorites is Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist, by Dan Barker. (So when I am commenting on Barker's work, I am writing as a fan of his, and what I consider to be constructive criticism.) Barker is an extraordinary and unique individual. A member of two IQ societies, Barker graduated from one of Seattle Pacific's sister schools, Azusa Pacific University, with a degree in religion. He then entered the ministry. In addition to his responsibilities as a preacher, Barker was also prominent in evangelical circles as a composer. Indeed, Martin reports (196) that he continues to receive royalties from the musicals he composed while a Christian. Eventually, Barker began to question more and more of his beliefs until eventually he discarded virtually all of them. Losing Faith in Faith is a fascinating account of how he went from being a bold proclaimer of the faith, to one of its most vocal critics. Barker is now a professing atheist and the Public Relations Director of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison, Wisconsin.

Because of his extensive Christian background, Barker understands full well the importance of the resurrection in Christianity. He not only denies the historicity of the resurrection, but the historical Jesus as well. In his chapter entitled, "Jesus: History or Myth?" (359-378), Dan Barker outlines why he does not think Jesus rose from the dead, or even existed, for that matter. As Barker writes, "I am now convinced that the Jesus story is just a myth" (360). Barker outlines four reasons why he does not consider Jesus historical (Ibid.):

1. There is no external historical confirmation of the New Testament stories.
2. The New Testament stories are internally contradictory.
3. There are natural explanations for the origin of the Jesus legend.
4. The miracle reports make the story unhistorical.

Based on these four factors, Barker not only doubts the historicity of the resurrection, but even the historicity of Jesus himself.
Barker claims there is no independent historical confirmation of the resurrection, or even of Jesus himself. He points out that the Roman historian Philo-Judaeus, who lived before, during, and after the time of Jesus, does not even mention Jesus, much less his resurrection. With respect to Book 18, Chapter 3 of Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, he argues that it is a Christian interpolation, and he gives six reasons why (*Ibid.*, p. 362). Likewise, he argues that the passage in Book 20, Chapter 9 is also unreliable (*Ibid.*, p. 363-64). Moreover, he claims that alleged references to Jesus in the books of Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, the letter of Mara Bar-Serapion, Lucian, Tertullian, Phlegon, and Justin Martyr are equally unconvincing. Barker seems to think that contemporary Jewish and Roman historians would have been interested in writing about a Palestinian cult leader, Jesus. The alleged lack of such external confirmation, argues Barker, is a solid historical foundation for rejecting both the resurrection and the historical Jesus.


I have an Easter challenge for Christians. My challenge is simply this: tell me what happened on Easter. I am not asking for proof. My straightforward request is merely that Christians tell me exactly what happened on the day that their most important doctrine was born.

According to Barker, historically reliable documents should not contain contradictions. However, he thinks there are several, non-trivial discrepancies in the gospels. Was the tomb open when the women arrived? Did the women tell what happened? Where did Jesus first appear to the disciples? Where did the ascension take place? Barker thinks there is no way these stories can be reconciled without omitting "one single biblical detail" (*Ibid.*, p. 179). More importantly, Barker implies that reliable historical documents should be inerrant.


I lay it down as a position which cannot be controverted. First, that the agreement of all the parts of a story does not prove that story to be true, because the parts may agree and the whole may be false; secondly, that the disagreement of the parts of a story proves that the whole cannot be true.

He then lists several alleged discrepancies in the resurrection accounts, including one relating to "What time did the women visit the tomb?" Barker therefore seems to think that historical documents have to be inerrant in order to be reliable.

But "if Jesus is a fable," asks Barker, "how did this story originate?" Barker notes that "it is not unfair challenge to ask skeptics to suggest an alternative to historicity" (*Ibid.*, p. 372). Barker outlines several options for the skeptic, more than can be discussed here. The important point to note here is that Barker seems to think that "the Jesus story is simply a fanciful patchwork of pieces borrowed from other religions." He cites numerous parallels between Jesus and pagan savior-gods like Attis, Mithra, Krishna, etc. After cataloguing eight different secular views of Christian origins, Barker writes, "prudent history demands that until all explanations for the origin of an outrageous tale are completely ruled out, it is irresponsible to hold to the literal, historical truth of what appears to be just another myth" (*Ibid.*, p. 376).

Barker's final objection entails the problem of miracles. Barker claims that "if a miracle is defined as some kind of violation, suspension, overriding, or punctuation of natural law, then miracles cannot be historical" (*Ibid.*, p. 377). Without this criteria, he argues, there would be no historical basis on which to
reject any miracles. Moreover, "if a miracle did happen, it would pull the rug out from history" (Ibid.). Since the New Testament accounts of the resurrection are highly miraculous, they "must be considered more mythical than historical" (p. 377).

**Michael Martin**

By far one of the greatest critiques of the resurrection by an atheist or agnostic philosopher comes from Michael Martin, professor of philosophy at Boston University and author of *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* and *The Case Against Christianity*. It would be well, then, for us to examine his arguments concerning the resurrection in extenso.

Martin notes that there is evidence from the New Testament and other historical sources that needs to be considered in assessing whether Jesus rose from the dead (76-77). Martin states that there are five factors that would affect the reliability and strength of this evidence:

1. the extent to which the author's purpose may have influenced his reliability
2. the consistency of the accounts
3. whether the accounts are based on eyewitness testimony
4. the known reliability (or unreliability) of the eyewitnesses
5. the extent to which the event is confirmed by independent testimony

According to Martin, each of these five factors undermines the weight of the New Testament evidence in favor of the resurrection.

**The Purposes of the Gospel Writers**

First, Martin cites the fact that "many biblical scholars have argued that the Resurrection story was shaped by the theological aims of the evangelists" (Ibid., p. 77). He seems to think this somehow makes the New Testament writers unreliable. It is difficult enough, he says, to determine the reliability of documents that are intended to be accurate. The suggestion seems to be that it is even more difficult to determine the reliability of documents with known biases. Therefore, in order "to overcome our initial suspicion they must meet strict historical standards" (Ibid.).

**The Inconsistency of the Resurrection Story**

Next, Martin notes the differences in the New Testament accounts of the resurrection. He divides the resurrection accounts into two parts: what happened at the tomb after Jesus' death, and what happened after the discovery of the empty tomb. With respect to the former, he concludes that the accounts "are either inconsistent or can only be made consistent with the aid of implausible interpretations" (p. 81). Concerning the latter, while admitting the accounts may not be contradictory, he argues that the accounts are nonetheless very different and hard to reconcile (Ibid.).

**The Lack of Eyewitnesses**

Martin's third source of doubt about the resurrection is the fact that there were no eyewitnesses to the event of the resurrection itself. He notes that Christians therefore must infer the resurrection based on two facts: the appearances of the risen Jesus, and the empty tomb. With respect to the appearances of the risen Jesus, Martin notes there are two kinds of appearances: those known from hearsay testimony, and
Paul's testimony. Martin dismisses Paul's sighting of the risen Jesus because it lacks historical details, and because Paul may not have believed in a material resurrection.

With respect to the empty tomb, Martin offers three reasons for questioning the historical accuracy of that tradition. First, he claims that the alleged eyewitnesses to the empty tomb are unknown. Moreover, he writes, "there were no contemporaneous eyewitness accounts" (Ibid., p. 82). And finally, he suggests that the empty tomb tradition may be late, especially since Paul and the other early writers of the New Testament fail to mention it.

The Reliability of the Eyewitnesses, the Reports, and the Scribes

Martin claims we have no good reasons to believe that the eyewitnesses, the reporters, or the scribes, were reliable. The eyewitnesses were unreliable, he implies, because they were Jesus' followers and disciples. The reporters may or may not have been reliable, but as long as we don't know anything about them, that is enough for Martin to dismiss them entirely.

Lack of Independent Confirmation

Finally, Martin considers the lack of independent confirmation of the resurrection to be a major reason for rejecting it, especially considering its "high prior improbability" (Ibid., p. 84). It is important to understand what Martin means when he refers to "independent confirmation." He is not only referring to confirmation outside of the New Testament, but confirmation within the New Testament yet outside of the gospels. Thus, he argues that the Pauline and other epistles "provide no independent support for the empty tomb stories" (p. 85). "Moreover," he writes, "the Resurrection is not confirmed by Jewish or pagan sources" (Ibid.).

Assessment

Having now surveyed four different writers on the resurrection, I'd like to evaluate their arguments. In particular, I'd like to pay close attention to the assumptions each writer makes about the nature of the resurrection. And second, I'd like to expose (where necessary) the assumptions each writer makes about miracles.

McDowell's Arguments

The Trilemma

The trilemma is a flawed argument. First, it makes considerable assumptions about what Jesus supposedly claimed, and the accuracy of the reporting and interpretation of those claims. It requires that one grant the truth of the gospels, especially John, and furthermore requires a conservative interpretation of the gospels. That is to say, the argument presupposes that we agree that Jesus existed, that he taught a new faith representing a considerable modification of the Judaism of his time, and that he claimed to literally be the incarnation of God. These may all be reasonable assumptions on McDowell's part, but the point is that there are other logical possibilities besides "Lord, liar, or lunatic." And as long as these other alternatives have a significant probability, the trilemma is therefore an implausible argument.

Second, even if we grant that Jesus taught a new religion and claimed the authority as God incarnate to do so, the LLL argument is fallacious. True, if Jesus said those things, then they were either completely
and literally true, or they were not. If they were not true, then either he knew this or he didn't. The basic fallacy is proceeding from that dichotomy to the extremes of raving lunatic and pathological liar. As Jim Perry writes:

One can be sincerely deluded about certain specific things, and yet in other regards be functionally rational; it's a classic feature of paranoia that aside from the object of one's delusion, one can be quite rational, and even the delusion itself can be quite reasoned. So Jesus could have sincerely believed he was God incarnate come to teach a new religion, and thus been technically insane, and yet not have been obviously raving (he kept his claim of divinity, if any, mostly to himself), and capable of perfectly good teaching and thinking on other subjects, such as morality. The McDowell form of the argument is implicitly using the cultural presumption that Jesus was indeed a sound moralist to argue that a lunatic would have been so obviously insane as not to be credible as a moralist, nor in fact capable of sound moral reasoning, thus he must have been telling the truth. The Lewis form is similar, but on the surface omits the last part - he wants to discredit the claim that Jesus was morally good on the basis of a claim to be God (or, actually, the vaguer 'said the sort of things Jesus said'). There are good arguments to be made against the moral greatness of Jesus' supposed teachings, but the argument that some of his beliefs were based on delusion and therefore that his moral teachings can't be considered sound is simply wrong.

Again, this is all assuming that Jesus said "the sort of things that Jesus said," traditionally interpreted. That is assuming far more than many skeptics would be willing to grant, but even granting that, the argument is fallacious.

Therefore, if we were to eliminate the implicit assumptions in the trilemma, we would get a statement similar to the one derived by Jim Lippard:

He either said the words attributed to him, or he didn't. If he didn't, then they are legendary (or he was misquoted). (This is, in fact, a very common view among biblical scholars.) If he did, then he either meant what evangelical Christians think he did, or he didn't. (If he didn't, then he was misinterpreted or misunderstood.) If he meant what Christians think he did, then he was either a liar, a lunatic, or lord.

There are other problems with the trilemma as well. For example, Jesus seems to have incorrectly claimed (Matt. 10:23) that his second coming would occur during the lifetime of his followers. However, if we apply the logic of McDowell's trilemma in this situation, which assumes that if someone makes a claim about something they must be lying or insane, this means that Jesus was either a liar or a lunatic. Surely McDowell would not accept this conclusion. It is therefore unclear why we should apply this same logic to Jesus' claims to be God.

"Facts to be Reckoned With"

What about the evidence offered by McDowell for a material resurrection? Is the evidence so incontrovertible, as McDowell implies, that no rational person could reject it? As we shall see, I think there are good reasons to dispute much of McDowell's evidence, and thus cause a rational person to reject it.

The Empty Tomb

There are good reasons to doubt the empty tomb story. First, early Christian writers like Paul do not even presuppose or imply the empty tomb story. Had there actually been an empty tomb, Paul would have
likely mentioned it in 1 Corinthians 15 because he was trying to convince the people at Corinth that there was a resurrection from the dead. The empty tomb would have been excellent evidence for him to make his case. "Moreover," writers Marcus J. Borg, "the first reference to the empty tomb story is rather odd: Mark, writing around 70 CE, tells us that some women found the tomb empty but told no one about it. Some scholars think this indicates that the story of the empty tomb is a late development and that the way Mark tells it explains why it was not widely (or previously) known" (15).

Second, another argument against the empty tomb is the fact that none of the disciples or later Christian preachers bothered to point to it. If the empty tomb had actually existed, it would have been a powerful piece of evidence for the resurrection claim. We would expect the early Christian preachers to have said, "You don't believe us? Go look in the tomb yourselves! It's at the corner of 5th and Main, in the Golgotha Garden Memorial Cemetery, third sepulcher on the right." This is exactly what happened in Luke 24:24: two of the disciples ran to the tomb to verify the women's reports. Yet Peter doesn't mention the empty tomb in his preaching in Acts 2, nor does Paul mention it in his letters, nor do the gospels give a location. If even the disciples didn't think the empty tomb tradition was any good, why should we?

Finally, neither Jewish nor Pagan sources confirm the empty tomb. This objection does not in itself constitute grounds for rejecting the empty tomb story, but taken together these three objections suggest that the empty tomb tradition is not a reliable one.

The Guard

McDowell argues that the resurrection is the best explanation for the experience of the Roman guard sent by Pontius Pilate. (Pilate allegedly sent a Roman guard to Jesus' tomb.) However, there are good reasons to doubt the alleged fact of the Roman guard. First, McDowell relies heavily upon a literal reading of Matthew as his only source of evidence. This may be an apologetic legend. Second, it is unlikely the Roman soldiers would have gone to the Jewish authorities (as Matthew 28:11-15 reports) instead of the Roman governor, Pilate, to whom they were responsible. The Gospel of Peter (11:43-49) has the guard reporting to Pilate.

Third, Matthew's story about the guard is also unlikely because it states that the guard accepted a bribe from the Jews. However, given what we know about Roman soldiers, this is extremely unlikely. As Mattill (p. 273) writes:

It also seems most unlikely that soldiers could be persuaded by any amount of money to take the risk of death for falling asleep on guard. If they admitted their sleep they were as good as pronouncing their own death sentences. Besides that, if they had fallen asleep, they would not have known that the disciples had stolen the body. Thus it is an insult to the intelligence of the priests to attribute such a proposal to them.

Next, the phrase "to this very day" which appears in Matthew 28:15 suggests that the author was writing many years after the events he was describing. Thus there was sufficient time for the origin and growth of the legend of the guard (Mattill 273).

Finally, and perhaps the most serious objection that can be raised against the guard story is that if the disciples did not grasp the importance of the resurrection predictions, then the Jews, who had much less contact with Jesus, would not have grasped them either (Craig 1984, 277).

Even the conservative William Lane Craig was forced to admit (Ibid., 279) that "there are reasons to doubt the existence of the guard at the tomb." In fairness, I should mention that in that same article Craig
gives some strong arguments in defense of the guard story which lead him to conclude that "it seems best to leave it [the guard story] an open question" (Ibid.). However, I think that these four objections have a cumulative nature which are compelling and sufficient grounds for rejecting the guard story.

The enemies of Christ gave no refutation of the resurrection

McDowell claims that the Romans and the Jews could not account for the empty tomb by producing the body or explaining where it went (1972, 226). Presumably, he thinks that if the Jewish or Roman authorities had produced the body, that would have stifled the resurrection message. However, as many authors (for example Martin, 91 and Bostock, 202-205) have pointed out, there are major flaws in this argument. First, this argument apparently never "occurred to Herod Antipas when he had cause to fear that John the Baptist had risen from the dead (Mt 14:2)." (Bostock, 204). Despite this objection however McDowell argues that the body could not have been removed by human means (because of the large stone, the Roman guard, etc.), and that this argument is a proof of the resurrection. I agree with Bolstock's refutation of this argument (Ibid.):

This argument however conveniently overlooks the fact that a production of the body would have involved the priestly party in taking serious the resurrection claims of the disciples, and with it the admission that they might have crucified God's Messiah. It would also have involved them in the admission that they had deliberately deceived Pontius Pilate, and that they were guilty of the heinous offence of despoiling a grave. Such a series of admissions would have been psychologically difficult and politically impossible. What is more there was no reason at all for them to produce the body until the time of Pentecost, when the disciples made the first public statement about the resurrection. By then, however, seven weeks had passed, and at that stage the corpse would not have been easily demonstrated to be the body of Jesus. The time-lag would have made the production of the body a futile exercise, even if its production could have proved anything of significance.

Second, as Michael Martin (89) proves, there is no evidence that the Jews or Romans were actively engaged in attempting to disprove the resurrection. "Now Jewish historians of the time, such as Josephus, do not even mention the Resurrection except in the clearly forged passage known as the Testimonium Flavium. This hardly suggests that Jewish leaders were actively engaged in attempting to refute the Resurrection story but failing in their efforts."

Summary

I think there are two main flaws in McDowell's approach. First, I think his approach to miracles is downright naive. McDowell seems to think that anyone who rejects the resurrection must have an "a priori" bias against the miraculous. However, as I showed in chapter 3, a rational person can reject the resurrection without having ruled out the miraculous. Indeed, one could be a declared supernaturalist and reject the material resurrection McDowell defends.

This leads to my second main criticism of McDowell. McDowell assumes, without so much as even acknowledging the other viewpoint, the "material" understanding of the resurrection. But as I showed in chapter 1, there are two possible ways to understand the resurrection. Even if all of McDowell's historical arguments are correct, and there was an empty tomb, protected by a Roman guard, etc., that would do little to bolster the Easter faith for those in the Christian community who do not believe the resurrection body was/is a material body.
Perhaps what is most disturbing about McDowell's entire approach to apologetics is his flippancy. I remember when McDowell spoke in chapel at SPU and he made the following statement:

You know, I wish more people would try to disprove the resurrection! You know, because then we'd have more Christians, and they'd know why they believe what they believe.

McDowell is making a strong apologetic for the resurrection. That is to say, he believes that any rational person would agree with his conclusions. However, as Christian philosopher of religion Stephen T. Davis wrote, "disbelief in the resurrection does seem to be a rational position" (1984, p. 158).

Craig's Arguments

So much for McDowell's arguments. But are there any historical grounds on which a rational person can disagree with a heavy-weight like Craig? Let's consider each of his three alleged facts - the empty tomb, the appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith - in turn.

The Empty Tomb

Many New Testament scholars (for example Borg, Crossan, Fuller, Küng, Marxsen, et al) do not consider the empty tomb story historical, for several reasons. First, the earliest and most prolific New Testament writer, Paul, says nothing about it. Paul, of course, does refer to the resurrection - he makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 15 that it is central to his teaching - but he never mentions an empty tomb. Even in 1 Corinthians, when he is trying to convince people of the resurrection, he "never mentions either the witnesses of the empty tomb or the empty tomb itself" (Küng, p. 363).

Craig, of course, claims that Paul implies the empty tomb story in two places. According to Craig (1988, p. 274), the phrase 'he was buried' followed by the expression 'he was raised' implies the empty tomb, but this assumes that Paul believed the burial tradition of the gospels. Unless Craig can prove that Paul believed that Jesus was buried in a tomb, there is no reason to assume the phrase "he was buried" implies an empty tomb. Craig also claims (Ibid.) that the expression 'on the third day' points to the discovery of the empty tomb, but as New Testament scholar Reginald Fuller points out (p. 23), the phrase "on the third day" is tied to the expression "he was raised," and not to the discovery of the empty tomb. Moreover, there are good reasons to doubt that Jesus was ever buried in a tomb at all. According to John Dominic Crossan, the Romans usually denied burial to victims of crucifixion, as the last means of humiliation. Crossan suggests that Jesus may have been buried in a common grave.

In addition, the earliest reference to the empty tomb, which was written in Mark around 70 CE, tells us that some women discovered the empty tomb but told "no one." Thus, presumably "no one" heard the tale of the empty tomb until some time had passed. Some scholars (Borg, p. 15) think this suggests that the empty tomb story arose after a belief in the resurrection rather than vice versa. Since Mark ended his gospel at verse 8 with the women running away and telling no one what they had seen, this could easily be interpreted as an attempt on Mark's part to present a plausible reason why there had been no early tradition of an empty tomb. The women were so afraid that they didn't tell anyone what they had seen; hence, that would be why the early tradition didn't develop. No one knew about it because of the silence of the women who had seen the empty tomb. And even if one could show that the women claimed the tomb was empty, one would still need to prove that the women were reliable witnesses. It is unclear how this is possible given what little we know of them.
Finally, as Küng notes, "The disciples never appeal to the evidence of the empty tomb in order to strengthen the faith of the Church or to refute and convince opponents" (p. 366). If the disciples did not consider the empty tomb as evidence for the resurrection, it is therefore unclear why anyone else should, either.

Because of these reasons (and others), serious Christian scholars like Borg, Bostock, and Crossan have been forced to dismiss the empty tomb story, while still trying to affirm the Easter event. As Christian philosopher James A. Keller wrote (p. 48), "Given this diversity of expert opinion, we cannot with any confidence use the empty tomb stories as a basis for concluding how those involved in the Easter event understood the resurrection."

However, even if the above reasoning is incorrect and the empty tomb is historical, an empty tomb does not prove that a resurrection has occurred (Ranke-Heineman, p. 134; Kung, p. 365; et al). As Küng so eloquently writes (Ibid.), "The simple fact of the empty tomb provides no proof of the truth of the resurrection. As an argument it would beg the question. All that is conveyed by the empty tomb is: `He is not here.' We have to add: `He is risen.' And this is by no means self-evident." At any rate, we may reasonably conclude that Craig (1995, p. 9) is wrong, and that one can object to the empty tomb purely on historical grounds.

The Appearances

According to Craig, the second line of evidence for the resurrection is the various appearances of Jesus alive after his death. Like the empty tomb story, there are solid, historical grounds for rejecting the appearance stories. First, as countless scholars have pointed out (Keller, p. 47; Küng, p. 347; et al), there was not a single eyewitness to the resurrection itself. But the situation is even worse than that. We do not even have eyewitness accounts of the people who claimed to see Jesus after his death. As Keller writes, "All we have is other people's accounts of what the eyewitnesses purportedly saw, and these accounts are typically sketchy and were written many years later. Thus, the historian who wants to understand what the resurrection event was must use later, sketchy, second-hand accounts of what the eyewitnesses saw, and from these accounts he must try to determine what the resurrection event was" (p. 46).

Third, the numerous differences in the gospel accounts of the resurrection have led New Testament scholar Willi Marxsen to conclude "that not only would each be at best incomplete if it were intended as history, but that they cannot be harmonized in detail" (cited in Keller, p. 58). Fourth, the changes which Matthew and Luke made in Mark (which they knew) reveal that certain theological purposes shaped the narratives (Ibid.). Next, the post-resurrection accounts (like the rest of the gospels) were originally circulated as individual stories before they were gathered and put into written form, which may or may not be significant. The original manuscripts of Mark, which is considered by most critical Biblical scholars to be the earliest gospel, ends at 16:8 without the appearance story of the risen Jesus in 16:9-20, which was added later. That is to say, the earliest gospel accounts of the resurrection contained no appearance stories.

Finally, many of the specific appearances cited by Christian apologists may be disputed on purely historical grounds. For example, if the accounts in Acts of Paul's experience are accurate - a highly questionable assumption - then Paul did not see Jesus at all; all he saw was a light. Likewise, the appearance to 500 is rejected by several scholars as unhistorical because it is only mentioned by Paul. If such an event had actually happened, it would have been the strongest evidence the gospel writers would
have had for the resurrection. The fact that they did not mention it highly suggests that it did not happen.

It should be noted that none of these reasons assume naturalism, and that several New Testament scholars (Marxsen, Kümmel, Anderson, Fuller, et al) question the historical reliability of the appearance stories yet claim to be Christians. As we have seen in chapter two, for some Christians these stories convey religious truth without being empirically verifiable or falsifiable.

The Origin of the Christian Faith

Craig's third and final line of evidence for the resurrection is the very origin of the Christian faith. According to Craig, "Even the most skeptical NT scholars admit that the earliest disciples at least believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In fact, they pinned nearly everything on it" (p. 288). According to Craig, this belief cannot be explained in terms of Christian influences (they didn't exist yet), Pagan influences (contemporary scholarship has rejected this argument), or Jewish influences (the Jewish concept of resurrection was radically different from Jesus' resurrection). Craig concludes thus, "The origin of the Christian faith is therefore inexplicable unless Jesus really rose from the dead" (p. 293).

This line of evidence is itself an inference to the best explanation. If alternative hypotheses are equally plausible with the resurrection, then Craig's inference to "Jesus really rose from the dead" is weakened. Do plausible alternatives to the resurrection exist?

Before suggesting what I consider plausible explanations for the origin of the disciples' belief, let me make it clear which hypotheses I reject. First, I do not hold to the old Swoon theory (either as originally formulated by Venturini or more recently by Hugh Schoenfield in The Passover Plot), the hypothesis that Jesus did not die but merely "lost consciousness" on the cross, and later revived. Nor do I believe that the resurrection accounts are deliberate lies by eyewitnesses of the crucifixion who concocted resurrection stories they knew to be false. Nor I do I reject the historical existence of Jesus. None of these explanations seem particularly compelling.

However, I do think that there are at least two factors which may have led to the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. First, as G.A. Wells points out, Jewish Wisdom literature influenced the earliest Christian thinking on the resurrection (p. 48):

Proverbs 3:19 and 8:22-36 represent Wisdom as a supernatural personage, created by God before he created heaven and earth, mediating in this creation and leading man into the path of truth. In the Wisdom of Solomon (from the Old Testament apocrypha) Wisdom is the sustainer and governor of the universe who comes to dwell among men and bestows her gifts on them, although most of them reject her. 1 Enoch tells that, after being humiliated on earth, Wisdom returned to heaven. It is thus obvious that the humiliation on earth and exaltation to heaven of a supernatural personage, as preached by Paul and other early Christian writers, was well represented in the Jewish background. And it is not just that such ideas could have influenced Paul; they obviously did, for statements made about Wisdom in Jewish literature are made of Jesus in the Pauline letters. 1 Corinthians 1:23-5 comes very near to expressly calling the supernatural personage that had become man in Jesus 'Wisdom'.

Second, Wells cites the Jewish apocalyptic expectation as another source of the disciples' belief that Jesus has been raised from the dead (p. 49):

There is another factor. Paul uses the phrase 'first fruits' apropos of Christ's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20) and also of the gift of the spirit to the Christian community (Romans 8:23). Both Jews and early
Christians expected the end of the world to come quickly, and thought it would be presaged by a general resurrection and by the gift of the spirit. In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that some persons should, as Paul records, come forward with 'gifts of the spirit' and make ecstatic utterances. But if the presence of the spirit was a sign that the first fruits of the harvest and of the end-time had already been gathered, then the resurrection must also be nigh. It may have been partly on this basis that early Christians came to believe that Christ is risen, that resurrection had, to this extent, already begun; and that a pledge had thus been given that a general resurrection of mankind would shortly follow.

Taken together, I think these explanations have a cumulative nature that is at least equally plausible with the inference to the resurrection. Moreover, the problem of the origin of a belief is not unique to Christianity. The early followers of other religions, like Mormonism and Islam for example, were also convinced of the truth of their religion. Just because we may not completely understand how these beliefs came into existence does not mean these beliefs must be true. Likewise, even if the alternatives given above are wrong, that does not suddenly imply that the resurrection is true.

Summary

As we have seen, there are solid, historical grounds for rejecting the inference that Jesus rose from the dead, as understood in a materialist fashion. Such objections need not entail a Humean rejection of the miraculous. Many, if not most, scholars doubt the historicity of both the empty tomb and the appearances. This leaves only the origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection. However, as we've seen, there are alternative explanations for their belief that are at least as plausible as the resurrection.

Barker's Arguments

Now despite my respect for Barker, nonetheless I have serious doubts about some of his arguments. Let me explain why.

The Lack of Historical Confirmation of the NT

Concerning the lack of external historical confirmation for the New Testament, I don't think this is a convincing argument against the historicity of Jesus. Even if we grant that there are no reliable, contemporary historical mentions of Jesus, independent of the New Testament, we still nevertheless have the New Testament itself. The New Testament, in at least the four gospels, does attest to a historical Jesus, and in my opinion Barker never really explains this away. He does mention the inconsistencies in the New Testament, which I will deal with in a moment, but my point here is that I think it is unreasonable to argue that Jesus did not exist simply on the basis of the inconsistencies.

New Testament Contradictions

I'm not particularly concerned with the whole "contradictions" debate anymore, so I don't want to spend too much time on this point. However, I will say that I think Barker's treatment of the material is as good as any I've seen anywhere in the atheistic literature. My only criticism would be his failure to note conservative Christian attempts to harmonize the accounts. In a couple of places, he does deal with possible objections from believers, but he does not deal with harmonizations in any systematic manner. I think this is a minor criticism on his part since his purpose was merely to provide an introduction to the issue, and not a scholarly one at that.
The Miracles Make the Stories Unhistorical

Barker correctly points out that the miracles of the New Testament should not be rejected *a priori* (Ibid., p. 376-77). But then he makes the comment, "After all, there might be future explanations for the stories, perhaps something that we yet do not understand about nature" (Ibid., p. 377). While I agree with the comment, Barker seems to imply that this is the *only* reason we should not *a priori* reject the miraculous. But that seems to be a contradiction. If the only reason we should not *a priori* reject miracles is because they might be explainable by undiscovered facts about nature, that would imply that miracles cannot, under any circumstances, be brought about by God. Thus Barker implicitly assumes the position which he claims to reject, and therefore has contradicted himself.

Indeed, Barker's very understanding of miracles makes them impossible, by definition. "What skeptics say is that if a miracle is defined as some kind of violation, suspension, overriding, or punctuation of natural law, then miracles cannot be *historical*" (Ibid.). Perhaps Barker should say that "then history cannot prove that miracles have occurred." If miracles cannot be historical, then miracles cannot occur, by definition. When we speak of a "historical" event, presumably we are referring to an event that has occurred (or we believe has occurred). However, just because an event is historical does not imply that this fact is knowable. Indeed, with respect to the resurrection, it may be the case that Jesus bodily rose from the dead, but history cannot establish this fact. This view is, in fact, endorsed by even some Christian scholars (for example Keller).

Moreover, Barker seems to ignore the concept of prior probability, from a theistic world view. Barker compares the gospel miracles - including the resurrection - to the claim that when he went to the zoo, a donkey spoke to him in perfect Spanish, saying "Alá es el único Dios verdadero" (Ibid., p. 376). He notes that the Bible records a similar miracle (Numbers), but then implies the only reason that Christians believe the Biblical miracle (and reject his example) is because the former is in the Bible, but the latter not. While that may in fact be true of many Christians, Barker fails to realize that, even for a Christian, the background probability of donkey speaking to him in perfect Spanish is very low. As Craig would say, the "religio-historical context" is lacking. Whereas from a Christian world view, the prior probability of the Biblical miracle is not low. Barker's arguments against miracles therefore miss the mark. In this context, he either needs to convince theists that their belief in God is irrational (which would affect the prior probability of all miracles), or raise historical objections.

**Summary**

I think that Barker's overall strategy is unwise. Although I once held Barker's view that Jesus did not exist, I think that many readers will be put off by just the sheer radicality of his hypothesis. It is unfortunate that many, if not most, of the vocal, secular critics of the resurrection portray denying the historicity of the resurrection as synonymous with the denying the historical Jesus. The radical nature of the Jesus myth hypothesis, in the minds of many, only strengthens the conviction that Jesus rose from the dead. (If we have to choose between "Jesus did not exist" and "Jesus rose from the dead", I think that many people would be inclined to believe the proposition that "Jesus rose from the dead."). While it is certainly valid to argue that if Jesus did not exist there was no resurrection, there is no reason that a critic of the resurrection must argue that way. Indeed, many people who claim to be Christians (for example Küng, Spong, and Crossan) deny a bodily resurrection, but believe that Jesus was in fact a historical person. Critics like Barker would do well to attack the resurrection first, since it is the central tenet of the Christian faith, and then pursue the myth theory, if they must.
Martin's Arguments

While I agree in general with Martin's five factors for determining the reliability of the New Testament evidence for the resurrection, I think there are serious problems with Martin's approach in *The Case Against Christianity*. Let me briefly explain what I think these flaws are.

The Purposes of the Gospel Writers

This seems to be the weakest of Martin's five factors. He writes, "if an author's purpose in writing a document leads us to believe that the document was not a reliable historical account, then this would lower the evidential weight of the document" (*Ibid.*). True, but it is unclear when we would know this to be the case. What type(s) of purposes would be convince Martin that a document was not a reliable historical account? How much would the account have to be shaped by said purpose? How would we know? And doesn't every author have biases? This criteria seems both vague and flimsy.

Martin fails to prove that the New Testament writers were unreliable because of their purpose. Martin seems to think that the New Testament writers were so incredibly biased by their theological purpose that they distorted facts as they felt necessary. However, he fails to give any examples of this. If their bias influenced their writings to such an extent, surely such examples would be easy for Martin to find. Without such examples, it is unclear what Martin thinks the writers' purpose was, or how their purpose distorted historical information, including facts concerning the resurrection.

The Inconsistency of the Resurrection Story

I think this factor is rather vague. What does it really mean to say that accounts are "consistent"? Can different accounts disagree on minor details while agreeing on the essentials, or do the accounts need to agree in every detail, no matter how small? Martin's comments elsewhere (*Ibid.*, p. 78-81) seem to imply that different accounts of an event should agree on every detail, or almost every detail. However, numerous Christians have claimed that all of the New Testament sources agree that Jesus died, was buried, and rose on the third day. If that is true, what should be the proper impact of Martin's "inconsistencies"? From what he has written, it is unclear whether we should accept such a minimal level of agreement as evidence of a historical event.

But let's assume for the sake of argument that the New Testament documents must be inerrant in order to be historical. Considering the importance of the inconsistencies argument to Martin's overall position, one would therefore expect him to deal with proposed harmonizations of the inconsistencies he mentions. However, Martin does no such thing. Entire works have been written specifically to address the problem of Bible difficulties in general, and the resurrection accounts in particular, most notably John Wenham's *Easter Enigma*. It was inexcusable for Martin to claim that "anyone who persists in the attempt [to harmonize the resurrection accounts] must alter the texts and declare the differences to be trivialities" (*Ibid.*, p. 81), but then not even address some of the attempts to harmonize the resurrection accounts. He doesn't even acknowledge such attempts in his bibliography!

The Lack of Eyewitnesses

Likewise, Martin's third factor for determining the reliability of eyewitness testimony is equally unclear. Martin writes, "eyewitness accounts are generally more reliable than accounts that are second or third hand. Consequently, if the accounts of the Resurrection were second or third hand, this would tend to
decrease their evidential weight" (77). However, many Christians claim that all of the resurrection accounts are eyewitness testimony, or were based on eyewitness testimony. For example, the author of Luke 1:1-4 claims that

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

If the author of Luke did write an historical account based on the eyewitness testimony that was available at the time, that would minimize the effect Martin's second factor would have on the reliability of the testimony. Moreover, a second hand writer like the author of Luke might be able to "compare" different historical traditions, and rely solely on the "more reliable" traditions. Theoretically speaking, then, second-hand testimony like Luke could therefore be more reliable than the exuberant accounts of the alleged eyewitnesses themselves.

The Reliability of the Eyewitnesses, the Reporters, and the Scribes

My response to this is, "Yes, but." While I agree with Martin that the reliability of the eyewitnesses, the reporters, and the scribes is unknown, it is unclear what he expects to accomplish with this argument. We have several other historical documents where the author is unknown, but we nonetheless tend to accept what was written, unless we have good reason to do otherwise. It is unclear why we should reject the New Testament as historical documents, simply because we do not know much about the eyewitnesses, the reporters, and the scribes.

It is important to note what Martin's argument assumes. Martin seems to assume that one of the reasons for doubting the resurrection stories is because they are based on the alleged eyewitness accounts of his followers. However, just because one is a follower of some leader does not mean they would start to believe that leader rose from the dead. Indeed, I can imagine a Christian response to Barker would be something like, "I have dead friends but I've never been inclined to say that they rose from the dead."

Lack of Independent Confirmation

I think this was one of Martin's strongest points. He even framed the discussion in the context of the background probability of the resurrection. He writes, "Given these problems and the fact that the Resurrection is understood as a miracle and although not impossible, has high prior improbability, it is extremely important that there be some independent confirmation before the Resurrection story is accepted" (Ibid., p. 84). Overall, though, I think he makes a strong argument here.

Conclusion

Both sides in the contemporary debate over the resurrection assume that the "material" interpretation of the resurrection is the only possible interpretation of the resurrection. Moreover, most participants avoid the issue of background probability, and make arguments about miracles that presuppose their world view. Finally, there are serious flaws in the arguments advanced by both sides. And even if those flaws were corrected, the arguments would still not constitute a strong apologetic for the resurrection. On the
basis of the available evidence (and the arguments I've seen), I conclude that a rational person may accept or reject the resurrection.
Conclusion

I think there are three distinctive characteristics about the contemporary debate between Christians and secularists over the resurrections. First, both sides tacitly assume that the material understanding of the resurrection is the proper understanding of the issues involved. Second, both sides fail to discuss the background probability of the resurrection from their critic's point of view. And third, both sides seem to think that a strong apologetic can be made for their particular position.

As we have seen, there are at least two major understandings of the nature of Jesus' resurrection. What is significant is that both Christian apologists and their secular critics agree that the material understanding of the resurrection is the correct one. For example, Stephen T. Davis, an evangelical philosopher at Claremont College, wrote (1993, p. ix):

... But I am convinced that the resurrection means little unless it really happened. If the resurrection for Jesus turns out to have been a fraud or a pious myth or even somehow an honest mistake, then there is little reason to think about it or see meaning in it. Perhaps it would provide some lessons about courageously facing death, but that would be about all.

In his view, the meaning of the resurrection is dependent upon the historicity of the event.

In similar fashion, in his opening remarks in his debate on the historicity of the resurrection with Gary Habermas, atheist philosopher Antony Flew made the following revealing comment (p. 3):

We [Habermas and I] both construe resurrection, or rising from the dead, in a thoroughly literal and physical way.... We are again agreed that the question whether, in that literal understanding, Jesus did rise from the dead is of supreme theoretical and practical importance. For the knowable fact that he did, if indeed it is a knowable fact, is the best, if not the only, reason for accepting that Jesus is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel....We are agreed both that that identification is the defining and distinguishing characteristic of the true Christian, and that it is scarcely possible to make it without also accepting that the Resurrection did literally happen. (emphasis added)

According to Flew, not only does the resurrection fail to have any significance apart from its empirical truth, but the historicity of Jesus' resurrection is the only way to know Christianity is true.

But how do atheists and Christian apologists determine the historicity of Jesus' resurrection? Since they believe Jesus' resurrection body was a material body and that the resurrection was an event in space and...
time, they believe the resurrection was a "violation" of the laws of the nature. Atheists are quick to ridicule the resurrection because of its miraculous nature; Christian apologists are quick to point out that an *a priori* rejection of the miraculous is unwarranted. As we have seen, from the atheist point of view, just about any explanation would be more plausible than the resurrection, since the background probability would be so low. Conversely, for theists, the background probability of miracles is significant, if not high, and thus the resurrection is a plausible explanation.

Both sides are correct within their worldview. But they have failed to argue outside of their worldview. Atheists should not be so quick to ridicule the miraculous and use a Humean attack on miracles to refute the resurrection. Unless atheists can demonstrate that theism is irrational or that the historical evidence for a material resurrection is lacking, they are unlikely to convince many theists to reject the resurrection. Similarly, Christian apologists need to recognize that, until atheists are shown that theism is plausible, atheists will continue to regard the resurrection as a highly implausible event.

This leads to my final observation: both sides seem to think that it is irrational to reject their position. In other words, they think a *strong* apologetic can be made for their side. However, I don't think is possible. That is to say, I think it is rational to both accept and reject the resurrection. I think there are strong historical arguments for the resurrection (*a lâ* Craig), but I also think there are good reasons to reject such arguments. I realize this may sound like a cop-out to some, but I think it is quite reasonable, especially when the issue of prior probability is taken into consideration.
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