

# **Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus? A Debate between William Lane Craig and Bart D. Ehrman**

College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts  
March 28, 2006

Copyright 2006 William Lane Craig and Bart D. Ehrman. All Rights Reserved.

## **Introduction**

Students, faculty, and staff, and guests from the Worcester-area community, I am delighted to welcome you to the Hogan Campus Center at the College of the Holy Cross. My name is Charles Anderton and I am a professor of economics here at Holy Cross. On behalf of the sponsoring organizations – the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture and the Campus Christian Fellowship – I warmly welcome you to this evening’s debate. The question before us tonight is one of enduring interest for Christians and many non-Christians: Is there historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus? Supporting the affirmative position will be Dr. William Lane Craig, Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California. Supporting the opposing position will be Dr. Bart Ehrman, James A. Gray Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

During the debate, I ask that you respectfully consider the viewpoints of the debaters. Please refrain from any applause, comments, or actions of support or criticism. A question-and-answer session will follow the formal part of the program and provide an opportunity for interaction between the debaters and the audience. Please note that the debate and the question and answer session will be audio- and video-taped. I also ask that you please turn off your cell phones.

The moderator for this evening’s debate is Dr. William Shea, Director of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture here at Holy Cross. Dr. Shea received his Ph.D. in 1973 from the Columbia University School of Philosophy. He has taught at Catholic University of America, the University of South Florida, and Saint Louis University. He has also served as president of the College Theology Society. Dr. Shea has published more than 50 essays and articles in scholarly journals and he has written and edited numerous books including: *Naturalism and the Supernatural*; *The Struggle Over the Past: Religious Fundamentalism in the Modern World*; *Knowledge and Belief in America: Enlightenment Traditions and Modern Religious Thought*; *Trying Times: Essays on Catholic Higher Education in the 20th Century*; and most recently his book, *The Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in America*. Please welcome Dr. William Shea.

## **Moderator’s Remarks**

Good evening. Debate is an ancient form of discourse that combines elements of information, education, hoped-for conversion, and entertainment. The Greek philosophers, the “sophists,” were accomplished at debate, and the Platonic dialogues and Aristotelian dialectics were refined literary forms of debate. The Christians took over the literary form of debate and debated

philosophical and theological issues without end. The medieval universities were crowded with students and professors who wanted to argue. Some medieval Christians thought that if only they could best spokespersons from the Jewish community in debate, that they would convert the masses of Jews to the Christian Gospel. At one famous debate in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain, a Dominican friar challenged a noted Rabbi to debate whether or not Jesus was the messiah. The Rabbi hesitated to debate, knowing that if he won the debate by giving good reasons why Jesus was NOT the messiah, he and his fellow Jews would lose anyway, and that is exactly what happened: the Rabbi won the debate, the Friar lost, and Christians burned Jewish homes and businesses. I hope that after tonight's debate none of you will burn down Talbot Divinity School or the University of North Carolina.

My personal favorite debate took place in Cincinnati in 1834 when Alexander Campbell, the founder of the Protestant denomination The Disciples of Christ, debated the Catholic bishop of Cincinnati, John Purcell, on the question whether the Catholic Church was the anti-Christ and the Beast from the Sea. That debate lasted for six days, and took six hours each day and was printed in a volume covering 500 pages of closely printed text. Both of those men lived many years and neither one of them ever stopped talking. You are safe tonight, I hasten to add, because we are working tonight under very tight talk-guidelines. And here they are:

Professor Victor Matheson will time the speakers by holding up cards.

Each speaker will make a 20 minute opening statement

Each speaker gets 12 minutes for a first rebuttal.

Each speaker gets an 8 minute second rebuttal.

Each speaker draws a conclusion in 5 minutes.

Then you may applaud – and not before.

You may then ask questions of each speaker, for a total of 30 minutes.

We may then applaud again.

Dr. Anderton will make a final statement.

We applaud again, and then go to our homes peacefully, burning nothing on the way.

The two speakers do not know one another except by name and reputation. They have not practiced with one another. This is a serious argument; it is not a meeting of the World Wrestling Federation. They are debating a serious question, namely, just what kind of literature are the New Testament books and to what uses can they be put? They are both well established scholars, authors and speakers.

William Lane Craig has a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Birmingham and a doctorate in theology from the University of Munich. He studied at the Catholic University of Louvain for seven years. He has been research professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology for the past ten years. He has written and edited over thirty books, including one titled *Assessing the NT Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, and two volumes of previous debates, one with Gerd Lüdemann of Göttingen University in Germany and one with John Dominic Crossan of DePaul University.

Bart Ehrman is James Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina. He received his doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1985, and he

has been at North Carolina since 1988. He has written 19 books, of which my favorites are his introductions to the New Testament and early Christian Literature, and his recent book on the DaVinci Code.

Dr. Craig will make the first statement, followed by Dr. Ehrman.

## **Dr. Craig's Opening Statement**

Good evening! I want to say how grateful I am for the invitation to participate in tonight's debate. I've really been looking forward to discussing the issues with Dr. Ehrman this evening.

In preparing for this debate, I had quite a surprise. I was amazed to discover how much our life stories are alike: as slightly marginalized teenage boys with some passing acquaintance with Christianity, both of our lives were turned upside down when at the age of 15 or 16 we each experienced a spiritual rebirth through personal faith in Christ. Eager to serve him, we both attended the same college in Illinois, Wheaton College, where we both even studied Greek under the same professor. After graduation we both went on to pursue doctoral studies.

Thereafter our paths radically diverged. I received a fellowship from the German government to study the resurrection of Jesus under the direction of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Ferdinand Hahn at the University of Munich and at Cambridge University. As a result of my studies, I became even more convinced of the historical credibility of that event. Of course, ever since my conversion, I believed in the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of my personal experience, and I still think this experiential approach to the resurrection is a perfectly valid way to knowing that Christ has risen. It's the way that most Christians today know that Jesus is risen and alive. But as a result of my studies, I came to see that a remarkably good case can be made for Jesus' resurrection historically as well, and I hope to show tonight that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of certain well-established facts about Jesus.

Sadly, Dr. Ehrman came to radically different conclusions as a result of his studies. In his most recent book he poignantly describes how he came to lose his teenage faith. I'm not sure, based on Dr. Ehrman's writings, whether he still believes in Jesus' resurrection or not. He never denies it. But he does deny that there can be historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. He maintains that there *cannot* be historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Now this is a very bold claim, and so naturally I was interested to see what argument he would offer for its justification. I was stunned to discover that the philosophical argument he gives for this claim is an old argument against the identification of miracles which I had studied during my doctoral research and which is regarded by most philosophers today as demonstrably fallacious. So as not to steal Dr. Ehrman's thunder, I'll wait until he's presented his argument before I show where the fallacy lies.

For now, I want to sketch briefly how a historical case for Jesus' resurrection might look. In constructing a case for Jesus' resurrection, it's important to distinguish between the *evidence* and the best *explanation* of that evidence. This distinction is important because in this case the evidence is relatively uncontroversial. As we'll see, it's agreed to by most scholars. On the other hand, the explanation of that evidence is controversial. That the resurrection is the best

explanation is a matter of controversy. Now although Dr. Ehrman says that there cannot be any historical evidence for the resurrection, we'll see that what he really means is that the resurrection cannot be the best explanation of that evidence, not that there is no evidence.

That leads me, then, to my first major contention, namely:

**(I) There are four historical facts which must be explained by any adequate historical hypothesis:**

- Jesus' burial
- the discovery of his empty tomb
- his post-mortem appearances
- the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection.

Now, let's look at that first contention more closely. I want to share four facts which are widely accepted by historians today.

**Fact #1: After his crucifixion Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb.**

Historians have established this fact on the basis of evidence such as the following:

1. Jesus' burial is multiply attested in early, independent sources.

We have four biographies of Jesus, by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which have been collected into the New Testament, along with various letters of the apostle Paul. Now the burial account is part of Mark's source material for the story of Jesus' suffering and death. This is a very early source which is probably based on eyewitness testimony and which the commentator Rudolf Pesch dates to within seven years of the crucifixion. Moreover, Paul also cites an extremely early source for Jesus' burial which most scholars date to within five years of Jesus' crucifixion. Independent testimony to Jesus' burial by Joseph is also found in the sources behind Matthew and Luke and the Gospel of John, not to mention the extra-biblical Gospel of Peter. Thus, we have the remarkable number of at least five independent sources for Jesus' burial, some of which are extraordinarily early.

2. As a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be a Christian invention.

There was an understandable hostility in the early church toward the Jewish leaders. In Christian eyes, they had engineered a judicial murder of Jesus. Thus, according to the late New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, Jesus' burial by Joseph is "very probable," since it is "almost inexplicable" why Christians would make up a story about a Jewish Sanhedrist who does what is right by Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1994), 2: 1240-1.

For these and other reasons, most New Testament critics concur that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb. According to the late John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge University, the burial of Jesus in the tomb is “one of the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

**Fact #2: On the Sunday after the crucifixion, Jesus’ tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.**

Among the reasons which have led most scholars to this conclusion are the following:

1. The empty tomb is also multiply attested by independent, early sources.

Mark’s source didn’t end with the burial, but with the story of the empty tomb, which is tied to the burial story verbally and grammatically. Moreover, Matthew and John have independent sources about the empty tomb; it’s also mentioned in the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles (2.29; 13.36); and it’s implied by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthian church (I Cor. 15.4). Thus, we have again multiple, early, independent attestation of the fact of the empty tomb.

2. The tomb was discovered empty by women.

In patriarchal Jewish society the testimony of women was not highly regarded. In fact, the Jewish historian Josephus says that women weren’t even permitted to serve as witnesses in a Jewish court of law. Now in light of this fact, how remarkable it is that it is women who are the discoverers of Jesus’ empty tomb. Any later legendary account would certainly have made male disciples like Peter and John discover the empty tomb. The fact that it is women, rather than men, who are the discoverers of the empty tomb is best explained by the fact that they *were* the chief witnesses to the fact of the empty tomb, and the Gospel writers faithfully record what, for them, was an awkward and embarrassing fact.

I could go on, but I think enough has been said to indicate why, in the words of Jacob Kremer, an Austrian specialist on the resurrection, “By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements concerning the empty tomb.”<sup>3</sup>

**Fact #3: On different occasions and under various circumstances different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.**

This is a fact which is virtually universally acknowledged by scholars, for the following reasons:

1. Paul’s list of eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection appearances guarantees that such appearances occurred.

---

<sup>2</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Kremer, *Die Osterevangelien–Geschichten um Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), pp. 49-50.

Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to his chief disciple Peter, then to the inner circle of disciples known as the Twelve; then he appeared to a group of 500 disciples at once, then to his younger brother James, who up to that time was apparently not a believer, then to all the apostles. Finally, Paul adds, “he appeared also to me,” at the time when Paul was still a persecutor of the early Jesus movement (I Cor. 15.5-8). Given the early date of Paul’s information as well as his personal acquaintance with the people involved, these appearances cannot be dismissed as mere legends.

2. The appearance narratives in the Gospels provide multiple, independent attestation of the appearances.

For example, the appearance to Peter is attested by Luke and Paul; the appearance to the Twelve is attested by Luke, John, and Paul; and the appearance to the women is attested by Matthew and John. The appearance narratives span such a breadth of independent sources that it cannot be reasonably denied that the earliest disciples did have such experiences. Thus, even the skeptical German New Testament critic Gerd Lüdemann concludes, “It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’ death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally,

**Fact #4: The original disciples suddenly and sincerely came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every predisposition to the contrary.**

Think of the situation the disciples faced following Jesus’ crucifixion:

1. Their leader was dead.

And Jewish Messianic expectations had no idea of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel’s enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal.

2. Jewish beliefs about the afterlife precluded anyone’s rising from the dead to glory and immortality before the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world.

Nevertheless, the original disciples suddenly came to believe so strongly that God had raised Jesus from the dead that they were willing to die for the truth of that belief. But then the obvious question arises: What in the world caused them to believe such an un-Jewish and outlandish thing? Luke Johnson, a New Testament scholar at Emory University, muses, “Some sort of powerful, transformative experience is required to generate the sort of movement earliest Christianity was.”<sup>5</sup> And N. T. Wright, an eminent British scholar, concludes, “That is why, as an

---

<sup>4</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 136.

historian, I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity unless Jesus rose again, leaving an empty tomb behind him.”<sup>6</sup>

In summary, there are four facts agreed upon by the majority of scholars: Jesus’ burial, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples’ belief in his resurrection.

Now in his early published work Dr. Ehrman expressed skepticism about these facts. He insisted that we cannot really affirm these facts.<sup>7</sup> Why not? Well, he gave two reasons:

First, he said, historians cannot say that a miracle probably occurred. But here he was obviously confusing the evidence for the resurrection with the best explanation of the evidence. The resurrection of Jesus is a miraculous explanation of the evidence. But the evidence itself is not miraculous. None of these four facts is any way supernatural or inaccessible to the historian. To give an analogy, did you know that after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, there was actually a plot to steal his body as it was being transported by train back to Illinois? Now the historian will obviously want to know whether this plot was foiled or not. Was Lincoln’s body missing from the train? Was it successfully interred in the tomb in Springfield? Did his closest associates like Secretary of War Stanton or Vice-President Johnson claim to have seen appearances of Lincoln alive after his death, and so on? These are questions any historian can investigate. And it’s the same with the four facts about Jesus.

But Professor Ehrman had a second reason why he thought the historian cannot affirm these facts: the Gospel accounts of these events are hopelessly contradictory. But the problem with this line of argument is that it assumes three things: (i) that the inconsistencies are irresolvable rather than merely apparent; (ii) that the inconsistencies lie at the heart of the narrative rather than just in the secondary, peripheral details; and (iii) that all of the accounts have an equal claim to historical reliability, since the presence of inconsistencies in a later, less reliable source does nothing to undermine the credibility of an earlier, more credible source. In fact, when you look at the supposed inconsistencies, what you find is that most of them—like the names and number of the women who visited the tomb—are merely apparent, not real. Moreover, the alleged inconsistencies are found in the secondary, circumstantial details of the story and have no effect at all on the four facts as I’ve stated them.

So most historians haven’t been deterred by these sorts of objections. And in fact Dr. Ehrman has himself come to re-think his position on these issues. Inconsistencies in the details notwithstanding, he now recognizes that we have “solid traditions,” not only for Jesus’ burial, but also for the women’s discovery of the empty tomb, and therefore, he says, we can conclude with “some certainty” that Jesus was in fact buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb and that three days later the tomb was found empty.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, “The New Unimproved Jesus,” *Christianity Today* (September 13, 1993), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Bart Ehrman, “The Historical Jesus,” (The Teaching Company, 2000), Part II, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Bart Ehrman, “From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity,” Lecture 4: “Oral and Written Traditions about Jesus” (The Teaching Company, 2003).

When I discovered that Professor Ehrman had reversed himself on this question, my admiration for his honesty and scholarly objectivity shot up. Very few scholars, once they've gone into print on an issue, have the courage to re-think that issue and admit that they were wrong. Dr. Ehrman's reversal of his opinion on these matters is testimony, not merely to the force of the evidence for these four facts, but also to his determination to follow the evidence wherever it leads. What this means is that my first contention is not an issue of disagreement in tonight's debate. The whole debate will therefore turn upon Dr. Ehrman's response to my second contention, namely:

**(II) The best explanation of these facts is that Jesus rose from the dead.**

This, of course, was the explanation that the eyewitnesses themselves gave, and I can think of no better explanation. The Resurrection Hypothesis passes all of the standard criteria for being the best explanation, such as explanatory power, explanatory scope, plausibility, and so forth. Of course, down through history various alternative naturalistic explanations of the resurrection have been proposed, such as the Conspiracy Hypothesis, the Apparent Death Hypothesis, the Hallucination Hypothesis, and so on. In the judgment of contemporary scholarship, however, none of these naturalistic hypotheses has managed to provide a plausible explanation of the facts. Nor does Dr. Ehrman support any of these naturalistic explanations of the facts.

So why, we may ask, does Dr. Ehrman not accept the resurrection as the best explanation? The answer is simple: the resurrection is a miracle, and Dr. Ehrman denies the possibility of establishing a miracle. He writes, "Because historians can only establish what probably happened, and a miracle of this nature is highly improbable, the historian cannot say it probably occurred."<sup>9</sup> This argument against the identification of a miracle is an old one, already refuted in the 18th century by such eminent scholars as William Paley and George Campbell, and is rejected as fallacious by most contemporary philosophers as well. Now I've promised to say more about this later; but for now, let me simply say that in the absence of some naturalistic explanation of the facts, Dr. Ehrman's hesitancy about embracing the resurrection of Jesus as the best explanation is really quite unnecessary. Dr. Ehrman would be quite within his rational rights to embrace a miraculous explanation like the resurrection—and so would we.

In conclusion, then, I think that there is good historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Specifically, I've staked out two basic contentions for discussion tonight:

**I. There are four historical facts which must be explained by any adequate historical hypothesis:** Jesus' burial, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the very origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection, and

**II. The best explanation of these facts is that Jesus rose from the dead.**

---

<sup>9</sup> Ehrman, "Historical Jesus," Part II, p. 50.



## Dr. Ehrman's Opening Statement

I would like to thank Bill for that highly impressive opening statement. I've heard over the years that Bill is a skilled debater and rhetorician, and now I've seen for myself why the evangelical Christians that he speaks for are so proud of his abilities.

In my opening speech here I will not be dealing directly with the many, many points Bill has already raised. I will instead lay out my own case, which, by the way, is not exactly that case that he said I was going to make, although there are some points of similarity. I'll lay out my own case, and in my next speech I'll show why, in my opinion, the position that he has just staked out is so problematic.

I want to say at the outset something similar to what he said at the beginning of his speech. I used to believe absolutely everything that Bill just presented. He and I went to the same evangelical Christian college, Wheaton, where these things are taught. Even before that I went to a yet more conservative school, Moody Bible Institute, where "Bible" is our middle name. We were taught these things there even more avidly. I used to believe them with my whole heart and soul. I used to preach them and try to convince others that they were true. But then I began studying these matters, not simply accepting what my teachers had said, but looking at them deeply myself. I learned Greek and started studying the New Testament in the original Greek language. I learned Hebrew to read the Old Testament. I learned Latin, Syriac, and Coptic to be able to study the New Testament manuscripts and the non-canonical traditions of Jesus in their original languages. I immersed myself in the world of the first century, reading non-Christian Jewish and pagan texts from the Roman Empire and before, and I tried to master everything written by a Christian from the first three hundred years of the church. I became a historian of antiquity, and for twenty-five years now I have done my research in this area night and day. I'm not a philosopher like Bill; I'm a historian dedicated to finding the historical truth. After years of studying, I finally came to the conclusion that everything I had previously thought about the historical evidence of the resurrection was absolutely wrong.

Let me begin by explaining in simple terms what it is that historians do. Historians try to establish to the best of their ability what probably happened in the past. We can't really know the past because the past is done with. We think we know that past in some instances because we have such good evidence for what happened in the past, but in other cases we don't know, and in some cases we just have to throw up our hands in despair.

It is relatively certain that Bill Clinton won the election in 1996. It may be somewhat less clear who won the election next time. It's pretty clear that Shakespeare wrote his plays, but there's considerable debate. Why? It was hundreds of years ago, and scholars come up with alternative opinions. It's probable that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, but we don't have a lot of eyewitness testimony. Historians try to establish levels of probability of what happened in the past. Some things are absolutely certain, some are probable, some are possible, some are "maybe," some are "probably not."

What kinds of evidence do scholars look for when trying to establish probabilities in the past? Well, the best kind of evidence, of course, consists of contemporary accounts; people who were

close to the time of the events themselves. Ultimately, if you don't have a source that goes back to the time period itself, then you don't have a reliable source. There are only two sources of information for past events: either stories that actually happened based on, ultimately, eyewitness accounts or stories that have been made up. Those are the only two kinds of stories you have from the past – either things that happened or things that were made up. To determine which things are the things that happened, you want contemporary accounts, things that are close to the time of the events themselves, and it helps if you have a lot of these accounts. The more the merrier! You want lots of contemporary accounts, and you want these accounts to be independent of one another. You don't want different accounts to have collaborated with one another; you want accounts that are independently attesting the results. Moreover, even though you want accounts that are independent of one another, that are not collaborated, you want accounts that corroborate one another; accounts that are consistent in what they have to say about the subject. Moreover, finally, you want sources that are not biased toward the subject matter. You want accounts that are disinterested. You want lots of them, you want them independent from one another, yet you want them to be consistent with one another.

What do we have with the Gospels of the New Testament? Well, unfortunately we're not as well off as we would like to be. We'd like to be extremely well off because the Gospels tell us about Jesus, and they are our best sources for Jesus. But how good are they as historical sources? I'm not questioning whether they're valuable as theological sources or sources for religious information. But how good are they as historical sources? Unfortunately, they're not as good as we would like. The Gospels were written 35 to 65 years after Jesus' death—35 or 65 years after his death, not by people who were eyewitnesses, but by people living later. The Gospels were written by highly literate, trained, Greek-speaking Christians of the second and third generation. They're not written by Jesus' Aramaic-speaking followers. They're written by people living 30, 40, 50, 60 years later. Where did these people get their information from? I should point out that the Gospels say they're written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But that's just in your English Bible. That's the title of these Gospels, but whoever wrote the Gospel of Matthew didn't call it the Gospel of Matthew. Whoever wrote the Gospel of Matthew simply wrote his Gospel, and somebody later said it's the Gospel according to Matthew. Somebody later is telling you who wrote it. The titles are later additions. These are not eyewitness accounts. So where did they get their stories from?

After the days of Jesus, people started telling stories about him in order to convert others to the faith. They were trying to convert both Jews and Gentiles. How do you convert somebody to stop worshipping their God and to start worshipping Jesus? You have to tell stories about Jesus. So you convert somebody on the basis of the stories you tell. That person converts somebody who converts somebody who converts somebody, and all along the line people are telling stories.

The way it works is this: I'm a businessman in Ephesus, and somebody comes to town and tells me stories about Jesus, and on the basis of these stories I hear, I convert. I tell my wife these stories. She converts. She tells the next-door neighbor the stories. She converts. She tells her husband the stories. He converts. He goes on a business trip to Rome, and he tells people there the stories. They convert. Those people who've heard the stories in Rome, where did they hear them from? They heard them from the guy who lived next door to me. Well, was he there to see these things happen? No. Where'd he hear them from? He heard them from his wife. Where did

his wife hear them from? Was she there? No. She heard them from my wife. Where did my wife hear them from? She heard them from me. Well, where did I hear them from? I wasn't there either.

Stories are in circulation year after year after year, and as a result of that, the stories get changed. How do we know that the stories got changed in the process of transmission? We know the stories got changed because there are numerous differences in our accounts that cannot be reconciled with one another. You don't need to take my word for this; simply look yourself. I tell my students that the reason we don't notice there's so many differences in the Gospels is because we read the Gospels vertically, from top to bottom. You start at the top of Mark, you read through to the bottom, you start at the top of Matthew, read it through the bottom, sounds a lot like Mark, then you read Luke top to bottom, sounds a lot like Matthew and Mark, read John, a little bit different, sounds about the same. The reason is because we're reading them vertically. The way to see differences in the Gospels is to read them horizontally. Read one story in Matthew, then the same story in Mark, and compare your two stories and see what you come up with. You come up with major differences. Just take the death of Jesus. What day did Jesus die on and what time of day? Did he die on the day before the Passover meal was eaten, as John explicitly says, or did he die after it was eaten, as Mark explicitly says? Did he die at noon, as in John, or at 9 a.m., as in Mark? Did Jesus carry his cross the entire way himself or did Simon of Cyrene carry his cross? It depends which Gospel you read. Did both robbers mock Jesus on the cross or did only one of them mock him and the other come to his defense? It depends which Gospel you read. Did the curtain in the temple rip in half before Jesus died or after he died? It depends which Gospel you read.

Or take the accounts of the resurrection. Who went to the tomb on the third day? Was it Mary alone or was it Mary with other women? If it was Mary with other women, how many other women were there, which ones were they, and what were their names? Was the stone rolled away before they got there or not? What did they see in the tomb? Did they see a man, did they see two men, or did they see an angel? It depends which account you read. What were they told to tell the disciples? Were the disciples supposed to stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus there or were they to go to Galilee and see Jesus there? Did the women tell anyone or not? It depends which Gospel you read. Did the disciples never leave Jerusalem or did they immediately leave Jerusalem and go to Galilee? All of these depend on which account you read.

You have the same problems for all of the sources and all of our Gospels. These are not historically reliable accounts. The authors were not eye witnesses; they're Greek-speaking Christians living 35 to 65 years after the events they narrate. The accounts that they narrate are based on oral traditions that have been in circulation for decades. Year after year Christians trying to convert others told them stories to convince them that Jesus was raised from the dead. These writers are telling stories, then, that Christians have been telling all these years. Many stories were invented, and most of the stories were changed. For that reason, these accounts are not as useful as we would like them to be for historical purposes. They're not contemporary, they're not disinterested, and they're not consistent.

But even if these stories were the best sources in the world, there would still be a major obstacle that we simply cannot overcome if we want to approach the question of the resurrection

historically rather than theologically. I'm fine if Bill wants to argue that theologically God raised Jesus from the dead or even if he wants to argue theologically that Jesus was raised from the dead. But this cannot be a historical claim, and not for the reason that he imputed to me as being an old, warmed over 18<sup>th</sup> century view that has been refuted ever since. Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past. The problem with historians is they can't repeat an experiment. Today, if we want proof for something, it's very simple to get proof for many things in the natural sciences; in the experimental sciences we have proof. If I wanted to prove to you that bars of ivory soap float, but bars of iron sink, all I need to do is get 50 tubs of lukewarm water and start chucking in the bars. The Ivory soap will always float, the iron will always sink, and after a while we'll have a level of what you might call predicted probability, that if I do it again, the iron is going to sink again, and the soap is going to float again. We can repeat the experiments doing experimental science. But we can't repeat the experiments in history because once history happens, it's over.

What are miracles? Miracles are not impossible. I won't say they're impossible. You might think they are impossible and, if you do think so, then you're going to agree with my argument even more than I'm going to agree with my argument. I'm just going to say that miracles are so highly improbable that they're the least possible occurrence in any given instance. They violate the way nature naturally works. They are so highly improbable, their probability is infinitesimally remote, that we call them miracles. No one on the face of this Earth can walk on lukewarm water. What are the chances that one of us could do it? Well, none of us can, so let's say the chances are one in ten billion. Well, suppose somebody can. Well, given the chances are one in ten billion, but, in fact, none of us can.

What about the resurrection of Jesus? I'm not saying it didn't happen; but if it did happen, it would be a miracle. The resurrection claims are claims that not only that Jesus' body came back alive; it came back alive never to die again. That's a violation of what naturally happens, every day, time after time, millions of times a year. What are the chances of that happening? Well, it'd be a miracle. In other words, it'd be so highly improbable that we can't account for it by natural means. A theologian may claim that it's true, and to argue with the theologian we'd have to argue on theological grounds because there are no historical grounds to argue on. Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did.

I wish we could establish miracles, but we can't. It's no one's fault. It's simply that the canons of historical research do not allow for the possibility of establishing as probable the least probable of all occurrences. For that reason, Bill's four pieces of evidence are completely irrelevant. There *cannot* be historical probability for an event that defies probability, even if the event did happen. The resurrection has to be taken on faith, not on the basis of proof.

Let me illustrate by giving you an alternative scenario of what happened to explain the empty tomb. I don't believe this. I don't think it happened this way, but it's more probable than a miracle happening because a miracle by definition is the least probable occurrence. So let me

give you a theory, just one I dreamt up. I could dream up twenty of these that are implausible but are still more plausible than the resurrection.

Jesus gets buried by Joseph of Arimathea. Two of Jesus' family members are upset that an unknown Jewish leader has buried the body. In the dead of night, these two family members raid the tomb, taking the body off to bury it for themselves. But Roman soldiers on the lookout see them carrying the shrouded corpse through the streets, they confront them, and they kill them on the spot. They throw all three bodies into a common burial plot, where within three days these bodies are decomposed beyond recognition. The tomb then is empty. People go to the tomb, they find it empty, they come to think that Jesus was raised from the dead, and they start thinking they've seen him because they know he's been raised because his tomb is empty.

This is a highly unlikely scenario, but you can't object that it's impossible to have happened because it's not. People did raid tombs. Soldiers did kill civilians on the least pretext. People were buried in common graves, left to rot. It's not likely, but it's more likely than a miracle, which is so unlikely, that you have to appeal to supernatural intervention to make it work. This alternative explanation I've given you—which again is not one that I believe—is at least plausible, and it's historical, as opposed to Bill's explanation, which is not a historical explanation. Bill's explanation is a theological explanation.

The evidence that Bill himself doesn't see his explanation as historical is that he claims that his conclusion is that Jesus was raised from the dead. Well, that's a passive – “was raised” – who raised him? Well, presumably God! This is a theological claim about something that happened to Jesus. It's about something that God did to Jesus. But historians cannot presuppose belief or disbelief in God, when making their conclusions. Discussions about what God has done are theological in nature, they're not historical. Historians, I'm sorry to say, have no access to God. The canons of historical research are by their very nature restricted to what happens here on this earthly plane. They do not and cannot presuppose any set beliefs about the natural realm. I'm not saying this is good or bad. It's simply the way historical research works.

Let me give you an analogy. It's not bad that there can be no mathematical proof for the existence of an anti-Semitic polemic in *The Merchant of Venice*. Mathematics is simply irrelevant to purely literary questions. So too, historical research cannot lead to theological claims about what God has done.

To sum up, the sources we have are not as good as we would like. They're written many decades after the fact by people who were not there to see these things happen, who have inherited stories that have been changed in the process of transmission. These accounts that we have of Jesus' resurrection are not internally consistent; they're full of discrepancies, including the account of his death and his resurrection. But there's the problem with miracle. It's not the philosophical problem with miracle discussed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It's a historian's problem with miracle. Historians cannot establish miracle as the most probable occurrence because miracles, by their very nature are the least probable occurrence. Thank you!

## **Dr. Craig's First Rebuttal**

Well, thank you, Bart, I see we're in for a good debate this evening!

Now you'll recall that I laid out two basic contentions that I would defend tonight:

**I. There are four facts which any adequate historical hypothesis must account for.**

**II. The resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of those facts.**

Now I want to skip over that first contention for the time being and go straight to the second because this is the key issue dividing Dr. Ehrman and myself.

Dr. Ehrman maintains that we can never say that a miracle like the resurrection probably occurred because miracles by their very nature are inherently improbable. Now despite what he said, this argument is nothing new. It was already propounded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by David Hume in his essay "Of Miracles." Dr. Ehrman's argument is just a warmed-over version of Hume's reasoning. Now what do contemporary philosophers think of Hume's argument against the identification of miracles? Well, let me introduce you to another Earman, John Earman, Professor of Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh.

[Powerpoint slide shows the cover of John Earman's book, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*.]

This Professor Earman is not a Christian; in fact, he's an agnostic. He doesn't even believe God exists. Nevertheless, you see what he thinks of Hume's argument: it's not merely a failure, it is an abject failure. That is to say, it is demonstrably, irremediably, hopelessly fallacious.

Let me explain why.

When we talk about the probability of some event or hypothesis A, that probability is always relative to a body of background information B. So we speak of the probability of A on B, or of A with respect to B.

[Powerpoint slide shows formula  $Pr(A/B)$ .]

So in order to figure out the probability of the resurrection, let B stand for our background knowledge of the world apart from any evidence for the resurrection. Let E stand for the specific evidence for Jesus' resurrection: the empty tomb, the post-mortem appearances, and so on. Finally, let R stand for Jesus' resurrection. Now what we want to figure out is the probability of Jesus' resurrection given our background knowledge of the world and the specific evidence in this case.

### Calculating the Probability of the Resurrection

B = Background knowledge

E = Specific evidence (empty tomb, post-mortem appearances, etc.)

R = Resurrection of Jesus

Pr (R/B & E) = ?

5

Now probability theorists have developed a very complex formula for calculating probabilities like this, and I'm going to walk you through it one step at a time, so that you'll be able to get it.

The first factor that we need to consider is the probability of the resurrection on the background knowledge alone:

$$\text{Pr (R/B \& E)} = \frac{\text{Pr (R/B)}}{\text{-----}}$$

Pr (R/B) is called the *intrinsic probability* of the resurrection. It tells how probable the resurrection is given our general knowledge of the world.

Next we multiply that by the probability of the evidence given our background knowledge and the resurrection:

$$\text{Pr (R/B \& E)} = \frac{\text{Pr (R/B)} \times \text{Pr (E/B \& R)}}{\text{-----}}$$

Pr (E/B&R) is called the *explanatory power* of the resurrection hypothesis. It tells how probable the resurrection makes the evidence of the empty tomb and so forth. These two factors form the numerator of this ratio.

Now below the line, in the denominator, just reproduce the numerator. Just move everything above the line down below the line:

$$\text{Pr (R/B \& E)} = \frac{\text{Pr (R/B)} \times \text{Pr (E/B \& R)}}{\text{Pr (R/B)} \times \text{Pr (E/B \& R)}}$$

Finally, we add to that the product of two more factors: the intrinsic probability that Jesus did not rise from the dead times the explanatory power of the hypothesis of no resurrection:

$$\Pr(R/B \& E) = \frac{\Pr(R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& R)}{\Pr(R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& R) + \Pr(\text{not-}R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& \text{not-}R)}$$

Basically,  $\Pr(\text{not-}R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& \text{not-}R)$  represent the intrinsic probability and explanatory power of all the naturalistic alternatives to Jesus' resurrection.

So the probability of Jesus' resurrection relative to our background information and the specific evidence is equal to this complicated ratio.

And now we're ready to see precisely where Dr. Ehrman's error lies. So in the grand tradition of Hume's Abject Failure, I give you: Ehrman's Egregious Error.

## Ehrman's Egregious Error

$$\Pr(R/B \& E) = \frac{\Pr(R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& R)}{[\Pr(R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& R)] + [\Pr(\text{not-}R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& \text{not-}R)]}$$

“Because historians can only establish what probably happened, and a miracle of this nature is highly improbable, the historian cannot say it probably occurred.” (*The Historical Jesus*, pt. II, p. 50)

7

He says,

“Because historians can only establish what probably happened, and a miracle of this nature is highly improbable, the historian cannot say it probably occurred.”

In other words, in calculating the probability of Jesus' resurrection, the only factor he considers is the intrinsic probability of the resurrection alone [ $\Pr(R/B)$ ]. He just ignores all of the other factors. And that's just mathematically fallacious. The probability of the resurrection could still be very high even though the  $\Pr(R/B)$  alone is terribly low. Specifically, Dr. Ehrman just ignores the crucial factors of the probability of the naturalistic alternatives to the resurrection [ $\Pr(\text{not-}R/B) \times \Pr(E/B \& \text{not-}R)$ ]. If these are sufficiently low, they outbalance any intrinsic improbability of the resurrection hypothesis.

And we can see this by looking at the form of the probability calculus. It has the form of



$$\frac{X}{X+Y}$$

because the numerator is reproduced in the denominator. Now notice that as Y tends toward zero, the value of this ratio tends toward 1, which in probability theory means absolute certainty. So what is really crucial here is the probability of Y, which represents the intrinsic probability and explanatory power of his naturalistic alternatives to Jesus' resurrection. So Dr. Ehrman can't just ignore these or present fanciful hypotheses. In order to explain that the resurrection is improbable, he needs not only to tear down all the evidence for the resurrection, but he needs to erect a positive case of his own in favor of some naturalistic alternatives.

But that's not all. Dr. Ehrman just assumes that the probability of the resurrection on our background knowledge [Pr(R/B)] is very low. But here, I think, he's confused. What, after all, is the resurrection hypothesis? It's the hypothesis that Jesus rose *supernaturally* from the dead. It is not the hypothesis that Jesus rose *naturally* from the dead. That Jesus rose naturally from the dead *is* fantastically improbable. But I see no reason whatsoever to think that it is improbable that God raised Jesus from the dead.

In order to show that that hypothesis is improbable, you'd have to show that God's existence is improbable. But Dr. Ehrman says that the historian *cannot* say anything about God. Therefore, he cannot say that God's existence is improbable. But if he can't say that, neither can he say that the resurrection of Jesus is improbable. So Dr. Ehrman's position is literally self-refuting.

But it gets even worse. There's another version of Dr. Ehrman's objection which is even more obviously fallacious than Ehrman's Egregious Error. I call it "Bart's Blunder."



## Bart's Blunder

- "Since historians can establish only what *probably* happened in the past, they cannot show that miracles happened, since this would involve a contradiction—that the most improbable event is the most probable."  
(*The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, p. 229)
- Confuses Pr (R/ B & E) with Pr (R/B)

Here it is:

“Since historians can establish only what probably happened in the past, they cannot show that miracles happened, since this would involve a contradiction—that the most improbable event is the most probable.”

In truth, there’s no contradiction here at all because we’re talking about *two different* probabilities: the probability of the resurrection on the background knowledge and the evidence [Pr(R/B&E)] versus the probability of the resurrection on the background knowledge alone [Pr(R/B)]. It’s not at all surprising that the first may be very high and the second might be very low. There’s no contradiction at all. In sum, Dr. Ehrman’s fundamental argument against the resurrection hypothesis is demonstrably fallacious.

Now Hume had an excuse for his abject failure: the probability calculus hadn’t yet been developed in his day. But today New Testament theologians no longer have any excuse for using such demonstrably fallacious reasoning. Now Dr. Ehrman has already shown himself to have the scholarly objectivity to reverse himself on the power of the empirical evidence. But in this case a reversal of his position is mathematically obligatory, and I hope that the same scholarly objectivity that led him to reverse himself with respect to those four facts will now also lead him to re-think his opposition to the resurrection hypothesis.

Now in my few remaining minutes let me return to that first contention and deal with Dr. Ehrman’s responses there.

He said that there is a sort of wish list that he would offer for historical sources and that the Gospels are not as good as we would want. Let me simply say that this wish list is so idealistic as to be practically irrelevant to the work of the practicing historian. The only purpose that it serves is a psychological purpose of a setting the bar so unrealistically high that the Gospels appear to fall short by comparison. In fact, however, no sources for ancient history measure up to this wish list, and the New Testament documents do, I think, fulfill four out of the six on his list unproblematically and the other two partially. So the real question is not, are they as good as we would like, but are they good enough to establish those four facts? And they certainly are.

What about all the inconsistencies? Well, remember I said you’d have to show three things to put this argument through. First, that they’re irresolvable. Second, that they lie at the heart of the narrative rather than in the details, which in fact they do. And thirdly, you’d have to show that all of the documents have an equal claim to historical credibility, since inconsistencies in a later, less reliable source don’t undermine the earlier, more credible source. So I don’t think that he has really shown that these inconsistencies invalidate the narratives.

In fact, when you look at them, the Gospels all agree that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in Jerusalem by Roman authority during the Passover feast, having been arrested and convicted on charges of blasphemy by the Jewish Sanhedrin and then slandered before the Roman Governor Pilate on charges of treason. He died within several hours and was buried Friday afternoon by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb, which was sealed with a stone. Certain women followers of Jesus, including Mary Magdalene, who is always named, having observed his interment, visited his tomb early Sunday morning, only to find it empty. Thereafter, Jesus appeared alive from the

dead to his disciples, including Peter, who then became proclaimers of the message of his resurrection.

All four Gospels attest to all of those facts. More details could be added simply by including facts mentioned in three of the Gospels, three out of the four. And, as I say, the bottom line is that Dr. Ehrman himself now admits, since 2003, that despite the inconsistencies those four facts are historical. In fact, N. T. Wright at the end of his massive study of the resurrection narratives, states that the empty tomb and appearances have an historical probability which is so high as to be “virtually certain,” like the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of the Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>10</sup> That is incredible!

So I think that the debate really isn't over these facts. The question is the best *explanation* of the facts. And the objection that Professor Ehrman offers is not the objection of the historian. This is not a historical argument; this is a philosophical argument, which is based on a misunderstanding of the probabilities involved. Once that is cleared up, I see no reason at all why one cannot infer on the basis of the historical evidence that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead.

### **Dr. Ehrman's First Rebuttal**

Thank you, Bill, for that impressive refutation! I do have to tell you that if you think I'm going to change my mind because you have mathematical proof for the existence of God, I'm sorry, but it ain't gonna happen! So I'm sorry I have only twelve minutes for refutation; I need about three hours, as I imagine Bill does, too.

Let me say again that I respect Bill's personal belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, but I find that his claim that this can be historically proven to be dead wrong. I'm going to break my response down into four dubious aspects of Bill's presentation, giving examples instead of trying to be exhaustive to cover the waterfront.

First, Bill makes dubious use of modern authorities. Bill constantly quotes modern scholars as if somehow that constitutes evidence for his point of view. As Bill himself knows, the fact that the majority of New Testament scholars would agree with his four points is not proof that they are right. For one thing, the majority of New Testament scholars are believers in the New Testament, that is, they're theologically committed to the text, so of course they agree on these points. I should note that the majority of historians do not agree with Bill's conclusion. Does that make those conclusions wrong? No. It simply means that his conclusions are not persuasive to most historians. Having said that, I'm surprised by some of his so-called authorities that Bill cites, for the reality is that the majority of critical scholars studying the historical Jesus today disagree with his conclusion that a historian can show that the body of Jesus emerged physically from the tomb. Bill might find that surprising, but that would be because of the context he works in – a conservative, evangelical seminary. In that environment, what he's propounding is what everyone believes. And it's striking that even some of his own key authorities don't agree. He

---

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 710.

quotes a number of scholars, whom I consider to be friends and acquaintances, and I can tell you, they don't agree with his views. Does that make him wrong? No, it simply means that his impressive recounting of scholarly opinion is slanted, lopsided, and fails to tell the real story, which is that he represents a minority opinion.

Second, Bill makes dubious use of ancient sources. Bill quotes the apostle Paul, just to pick an example, to indicate that already, just five years after Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus. Paul wasn't writing five years after the burial; he was writing 25 years later, and he never mentions Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph of Arimathea is not mentioned until you get to the Gospel of Mark, 35 or 40 years after the fact. When Paul indicates that Jesus was buried, he may just as well have meant that he was buried in a communal grave, which is what far more frequently happened with crucified criminals. Paul said he got buried; he may simply have been tossed into a communal grave. I should point out that in some of Bill's writings, he's quoted a lot of my writings, and he's taken them out of context, as I'll show in a few minutes, because what he's saying I've changed my mind to, I don't agree with. But in his own writings he indicates that Mark has a sparse narrative of Jesus' being buried and since it's an unembellished narrative, as he calls it, it's more likely than to be historical. I want to know if he still thinks that—that an unembellished tradition is more likely to be historical. Because if that is true, then I want him to tell us whether he thinks that Matthew's more embellished tradition is unhistorical. This is comparable to his comment a few minutes ago that the earliest traditions all agree on something, so we don't have to worry about the later ones. Well, then, tell us, do you think that the later ones are unhistorical?

Third, Bill makes dubious claims and assertions. For example, Bill asserts that the story of the women going to the tomb would never have been invented by the early Christians. I should point out, Paul never mentions the women at the tomb, only the later Gospels, Mark and following. But here the problem is one that's typical of much of Bill's position. His claim does not take seriously the nature of our sources. Anyone who's intimate with Mark's Gospel would have no difficulty at all seeing why, 35 years after the event, he or someone in his community might have invented the story. Mark's Gospel is filled with theological reflections on the meaning of the life of Jesus; this is Mark's Gospel. It's not a datasheet; it's a Gospel. It's a proclamation of the good news, as Mark saw it, of Christ's death and resurrection. One of Mark's overarching themes is that virtually no one during the ministry of Jesus could understand who he was. His family didn't understand. His townspeople didn't understand. The leaders of his own people didn't understand. Not even the disciples understood in Mark—especially not the disciples! For Mark, only outsiders have an inkling of who Jesus was: the unnamed woman who anointed him, the centurion at the cross. Who understands at the end? Not the family of Jesus! Not the disciples! It's a group of previously unknown women. The women at the tomb fit in perfectly with Mark's literary purposes otherwise. So they can't simply be taken as some kind of objective historical statement of fact. They too neatly fit the literary agenda of the Gospel. The same can be said of Joseph of Arimathea. Anyone who cannot think why Christians might invent the idea that Jesus had a secret follower among the Jewish leaders is simply lacking in historical imagination.

Four, Bill draws dubious inferences from his claims. Bill infers that Paul must have believed in the empty tomb, because he talked about Christ's appearances. Christ appeared, so the tomb must be empty! This is a highly problematic view. For ancient people, as opposed to post-

Enlightenment thinkers like Bill, an appearance does not need to mean reanimation of the physical body. According to the Gospels, Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus, James, and John. Are we to believe that these men, Moses and Elijah, came back to life? That Moses' body was reconstituted and raised from the dead and that they appeared from heaven? Or was this a vision? Surely it was a vision; they disappear immediately. Ancient people had no trouble believing that bodies can be phantasmal, not physical. Evidence for this is found abundantly throughout all of our ancient sources – Jewish, pagan, and Christian. Pagan sources from the 8<sup>th</sup> century Homer to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Homeric hymns; from pagan myths to pagan novels to pagan poets to pagan philosophers, they're all replete with accounts of God appearing to humans in human form. But these are appearances, visions; they're not real human bodies. The pagan holy man, Apollonius of Tyana, appears to his followers after his death, but it's an appearance, a vision, not the reanimation of his body. Jewish texts are the same. For angels and archangels and demons and devils appear to people bodily, but they aren't real bodies.

In short, Bill makes the mistake by assuming that if the disciples claimed to see Jesus alive afterwards, they necessarily believed or knew that this was his actual physical body. That's a modern assumption, not an ancient one. The texts we're dealing with are ancient texts, not modern ones. Ancient people have no difficulty at all thinking that a divine appearance was not an actual physical appearance. A body could be buried and the person could appear alive afterwards without the body leaving the tomb. If Bill doubts this, then I suggest he read some more ancient texts to see how they talk about the matter. He might start with the Christian texts of the second century, such as the Acts of John or the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter or the Second Treatise of the Great Seth, or he might consider the arguments used by Basilides, who was the disciple of the follower of Peter. For ancient people, post-death appearance was not the same as the reanimation of the body.

Moreover, Jesus' body after the resurrection does things that bodies can't do. It walks into rooms that are behind locked doors. It ascends to heaven. Is Bill seriously going to argue on historical grounds that Jesus' resurrected body could do this? This is a theological claim about Jesus, not a historian's claim. Historians are unable to establish what God does. That's the work of the historian. So, too, with his concluding inference that God raised Jesus from the dead. This is a theological conclusion. It's not a historical one. It's a statement about God. If he wants to mount mathematical evidence for what God probably did in the world, I have to say it's not going to be convincing to most mathematicians and certainly to most historians. Historians have no access to God. The historian can say that Jesus died on the cross, but he cannot say that God accepted his death as an atonement. The historian can say that the apostle Paul claimed to have a vision of Jesus after his death; he cannot tell you that God raised him from the dead.

The payoff is this: We don't know if Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea. What we have are Gospel stories written decades later by people who had heard stories in circulation, and it's not hard at all to imagine somebody coming up with the story. We don't know if his tomb was empty three days later. We don't know if he was physically seen by his followers afterwards. Bill's going to come up here and tell me now that I've contradicted myself. But I want to point out that earlier he praised me for changing my mind!

I have three concluding questions for Bill. If Bill is claiming to be a historian, then I think it's important to evaluate his whole relationship to the historical documents that he's appealing to. Does Bill think that the Gospels he relies upon for all his information have any mistakes in them at all? If so, could he tell us two or three of those mistakes? If not, how does he expect us to believe he's holding to a historical evaluation of these sources? Based on his own previous assumptions, these texts *have* to be accurate.

Second question: Bill believes that Jesus can historically be shown to have been involved with miracles, especially his resurrection, but also his miracles of his life, no doubt. I'd like him to discuss the evidence of other miracle workers from Jesus' day outside the Christian tradition. Is he willing to admit on the same historical grounds that these other people also did miracles? I'm referring to the tradition of miracles done by Apollonius of Tyana, Hanina ben Dosa, Honi the Circle-Drawer, Vespasian. Is Bill willing to acknowledge that Apollonius appeared to his followers after his death or that Octavian ascended to heaven? Or he can pick any other miracle worker from the pagan tradition he chooses.

Third, and finally, if the only miracles that Bill allows of having happened all belong to the Judaeo-Christian tradition that he himself personally affirms, I'd like him to address the question of how that can be historically. How is it that the faith that he adopted as a teenager happens to be the only one that is historically credible? Is it just circumstance that he was born into a religious family or a religious culture that can historically be shown to be the only true religion?

### **Dr. Craig's Second Rebuttal**

Now in that last speech I think we heard a great deal of bluster, but there was, I think, a marked absence of substance. Let me turn first to that first contention about the four facts: the burial, the empty tomb, the appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith.

Now here Dr. Ehrman says that I have dubious use of modern authorities. I agree that the citation of modern authorities doesn't prove anything in and of itself. That's why I gave the *arguments* under each of the points. He has to deal with the arguments. He says that I represent a minority opinion. Not about those four facts! I said that it *is* controversial whether the resurrection of Jesus is the best *explanation* of those facts, but I can give him the names, the evidence, of people who hold to those four facts. That does represent the broad mainstream of New Testament scholarship. Insofar as Dr. Ehrman now chooses to deny the honorable burial, the empty tomb, the appearances, he is in the decided minority of New Testament scholarship with regard to those facts.

Secondly, he says that I have dubious use of ancient sources. For example, he says Paul was 25 years later, not as early as I have claimed. But surely Dr. Ehrman knows that Paul in I Corinthians 15:3-5 is quoting an ancient Christian tradition which he himself received and which goes back to within five years after the crucifixion. In fact James D. G. Dunn dates it

back to within 18 months of Jesus' death.<sup>11</sup> So we're relying on those pre-Pauline traditions here, not the date of Paul's actual letter.

He also says that perhaps Paul was talking about a communal burial. Not when you look at that four line formula in I Corinthians 15! It is like an outline of the events of the death of Jesus, the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, the empty tomb, and then the appearance narratives. Compared to the Acts of the Apostles on the one hand and the Gospels on the other hand, this summary in I Corinthians 15 is like an outline, which includes as the second line Joseph's burial of Jesus in the tomb.

Dr. Ehrman also says, "Is it true that unembellished narratives are more likely to be historical?" I would say yes. This is what his own wish list included, that the earlier the narrative the better. Similarly, the less embellished has a better claim to historical credibility.

Thirdly, he said that I made dubious assertions. For example, the women at the tomb: he says they're placed there by Mark because they are paradigmatic of outsiders. That's nonsense. These women are followers of Jesus; particularly Mary Magdalene is one of the disciples of Jesus. So you can't explain why they would appear in the narratives because of that. Moreover, as I said, this is *independently* attested. So he's assuming Mark is the only source; but we've got at least five independent sources for the empty tomb story and the women's involvement there. So that simply won't work. Same with Joseph of Arimathea; I am not inferring it on the basis of Paul. We have multiple, independent sources for Joseph's involvement with the burial. And Dr. Ehrman himself uses that criterion over and over again in his own work on the historical Jesus to establish historicity.

He says, number four, that I draw dubious inferences. For example, that because Paul says Jesus appeared, therefore there's an empty tomb. I never made such an inference either tonight or in my written work. Rather in my written work my argument was that when Paul says "and he was buried and he was raised," no first century Jew would wonder, "But was the body still in the grave?" For a first century Jew it is the remains of the person in the tomb that are raised to new life. Jewish belief in the afterlife was a physical belief in the resurrection of the body or the remains, primarily the bones. And that's why Jews preserved the bones of the dead in ossuaries for the resurrection at the end of the world. So it is that four-line formula that implies the existence of an empty tomb, and no first century Jew could have thought otherwise. But certainly just saying that Jesus appeared doesn't in and of itself mean that it was physical.

But notice that Paul did distinguish between the resurrection appearances of Jesus and mere visions of Jesus. And I would challenge Dr. Ehrman to give any explanation of the difference between a vision of Jesus, such as, say, what Stephen saw (Acts 7.56), and a genuine resurrection appearance of Jesus, other than the fact that the ones were extra-mental in the external world (physical) whereas the others (the visionary ones) are purely intra-mental.

---

<sup>11</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 855.

So the bottom line, I think, is that Dr. Ehrman has not been able to invalidate any of the arguments that I've given for those four facts. They're all established by the very criteria that Dr. Ehrman uses in his own work: multiple attestation from independent, early sources, and the criterion of dissimilarity or, better, embarrassment.

Now what about that second contention: the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation? He didn't respond to my argument other than just to say, in a sort of hand-waving way, that there's no mathematical evidence for what God does in the world. And, of course, that wasn't my point. My point was that he cannot say that the resurrection is improbable simply because miracles are improbable relative to the background information. You've got to look at the full scope of the probability calculus, and he has failed to do so. In particular, his view is self-contradictory because he says the historian can't make judgments about God, and if that's the case, then he cannot say the resurrection is improbable because the resurrection is the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Now he seems to suggest that the historian can't make these sorts of inferences because somehow God is inaccessible. Well, I have a couple of points I'd like to make here. First, you don't need to have direct access to the explanatory entities in your hypotheses. Think of contemporary physics, for example. Contemporary physics posits all sorts of realities to which the scientist has no direct access: strings, higher dimensional membranes, even parallel universes which are causally disconnected from ours. But they postulate such unobservable entities on the basis of the evidence that we have as the best explanation.

Secondly, notice that the historian doesn't have direct access to *any* of the objects of his study. As Dr. Ehrman says, the past is gone. It's no longer there. All we have is the residue of the past, and the historian infers the existence of entities and events in the past on the basis of the evidence. And that's exactly the move that I am making with respect to the resurrection of Jesus.

But, finally, number three, this isn't a debate about what professional historians are permitted to do. That would be a debate about methodology, about the rules of professional conduct. This is a debate about whether or not there is historical evidence for the resurrection. And even if the historian is professionally blocked by some methodological constraint from inferring the resurrection of Jesus, you and I aren't so blocked. We're not so constrained, nor, would I say, is the historian so constrained in his off-hours, so to speak. It would be a tragedy and a shame if we were to miss the truth about the past, about Jesus, simply because of some methodological constraint.

Finally, as for Apollonius of Tyana and Honi the Circle-Drawer, let me simply quote from Robert Yarbrough, who points out that these figures did not have any kind of evidence prior to the first century, the time of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Apollonius of Tyana is a third century figure who isn't even mentioned prior to the third century. Similarly with Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the Circle-

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, "The Power and Pathos of Professor Ehrman's *New Testament Introduction*," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27 (2004): 364.



Drawer: John Meier and Ben Witherington have shown these have little relevance to the first century situation of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> So these, I think, are simply invalid comparisons.

I would like to address those three questions that he gave me, but I see the time-keeper is holding up the Stop card! So perhaps I'll be able to get to those in the Q & A period.

## **Dr. Ehrman's Second Rebuttal**

I think I'm most struck by Bill's refusal to deal with the historical alternative that I've given to his claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. Bill understands that the idea of God raising from the dead is completely rational, that it makes sense. The reason it's rational and makes sense to Bill is because he's a believer in God, and so, of course, God can act in the world. Why not? God does things all the time, and so there's nothing implausible at all about God raising Jesus from the dead.

Well, that presupposes a belief in God. Historians can't presuppose belief in God. Historians can only work with what we've got here among us. People who are historians can be of any theological persuasion. They can be Buddhists, they can be Hindus, they can be Muslims, they can be Christians, they can be Jews, they can be agnostics, they can be atheists, and the theory behind the canons in historical research is that people of every persuasion can look at the evidence and draw the same conclusions. But Bill's hypothesis requires a person to believe in God. I don't object to that as a way of thinking. I object to that as a way of historical thinking, because it's not history, it's theology.

Bill claims that the best explanation of his four facts is that there is a miracle that happened. Hume, in fact, was not talking about what I'm talking about. Hume was talking about the possibility of whether miracle happens. I'm not talking about whether miracle can happen. I don't accept Hume's argument that miracles can't happen. I'm asking, suppose miracles do happen, can historians demonstrate it? No, they can't demonstrate it. If Bill wants to flash up his mathematical possibilities again, then I suggest that he plug in other historical options—for example, the one that I've already laid out that he's ignored, that possibly two of Jesus' family members stole the body and that they were killed and thrown into a common tomb. It probably didn't happen, but it's more plausible than the explanation that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Let me give you another explanation, just off the top of my head from last night, sitting around thinking about it. You know we have traditions from Syriac Christianity that Jesus' brothers, who are mentioned in the Gospel of Mark, one of whom was named Jude, was particularly close to Jesus and that one of these brothers, Jude, otherwise known as Judas Thomas, was Jesus' twin brother. Now I'm not saying this is right, but that is what Syrian Christians thought in the second and third centuries, that Jesus had a twin brother. How could he have had a twin brother? Well, I don't know how he could have a twin brother, but that's what the Syrian Christians said. In fact, we have interesting stories about Jesus and his twin brother in a book called the Acts of Thomas, in which Jesus and his twin brother are identical twins. They look just alike, and every now and

---

<sup>13</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 581-8; Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), pp. 108-12.

then Jesus comes down from heaven and confuses people: when they've just seen Thomas leave the room, there he is again, and they don't understand. Well, it's because it's his twin brother showing up. Suppose Jesus had a twin brother—nothing implausible! People have twins. After Jesus' death, Judas Thomas and all others connected with Jesus went into hiding, and he escaped from Judea. Some years later one of Jesus' followers saw Judas Thomas at a distance, and they thought it was Jesus. Others reported similar sightings. Word spread that Jesus was no longer dead. The body in the tomb by that time had decomposed beyond recognition. The story became more widely accepted that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and in the oral traditions more stories started up and told about the event, including stories about them discovering an empty tomb. That's an alternative explanation. It's highly unlikely. I don't buy it for a second, but it's more likely than the idea that God raised Jesus from the dead because it doesn't appeal to the supernatural, which historians have no access to.

Bill did not deal with the inconsistencies that I pointed out among our accounts. He simply said, "Well, earlier accounts are better than later accounts." If that's what he thinks, I want him to come clean and tell me, does he think that the later accounts are inconsistent and does he think there are errors in them—yes or no? Bill admits that unembellished accounts are more likely to be historical accounts. If that's what he thinks, I want him to answer my question, yes or no. Does that mean that the embellished accounts of the Gospels are not historical? You see, he can't have it both ways. He can't say that unembellished accounts like Mark's burial scene are probably historical because they're unembellished, and then say that John's account, which is embellished, is also historical. If both embellished and unembellished accounts are equally historical, then the criterion has no weight that says that unembellished accounts are more likely to be historical.

He asks, why would the women appear at the tomb? I made an argument for why Mark, or one in his community, may have invented the women. His response was, "Well Mary Magdalene was a follower of Jesus." Well, Mary Magdalene's very popular these days, since everybody's read *The DaVinci Code*, and if you haven't, it came out in paperback today, for the two of you who haven't read it yet. Yes, Mary Magdalene was a follower of Jesus, but his own argument was that nobody would invent the women because they were marginalized, because men didn't think highly of women. My response is, that's precisely why Mark would invent the tradition, because in Mark's Gospel, it's the marginalized who understand who Jesus is, it's not the male disciples. That's why you have the story of the women discovering the tomb.

Bill claims that no first century Jew would doubt that the body was missing from the grave if Jesus appeared. My only suggestion is that he read more first century Jewish sources, because it simply isn't true. I'll give you one. Read the second apocalypse of the Greek Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, a book that is thoroughly infused with Jewish views of the world, in which there is no doubt at all that the author understands that the body of Jesus was not located in just one place, but could be three places at once, and that the physical body wasn't the only body Jesus had, that he also had a phantasmal body.

Bill, of course, didn't answer my questions, and maybe in the question-answer period he will do so. If he is claiming to be a historian using these sources as historical sources, I want to know, does he think there can be mistakes in them? If he doesn't think there can be mistakes in them,

then I want to know how he can evaluate them as historical sources as a critical historian. He claims that Honi the Circle-Drawer, Hanina be Dosa, and Apollonius of Tyana, by the way, are third century people; they are not third century people, they were people who lived in the days of Jesus.

My final point is a very simple one. Even if we want to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, that belief is a theological belief. You can't prove the resurrection. It's not susceptible to historical evidence. It's faith. Believers believe it and take it on faith, and history cannot prove it.

### **Dr. Craig's Conclusion**

In my opening speech I remarked that there are really two avenues to knowledge of Jesus' resurrection: the historical and the experiential. And tonight we've been primarily preoccupied with the historical. I argued, first, that there are four historical facts which any adequate historical hypothesis must account for and that, second, the best explanation of those facts is that Jesus rose from the dead.

Now I don't think we've seen any of those four facts refuted today. The majority of scholars do agree with the arguments that I gave for Jesus' honorable burial by Joseph of Arimathea, for the fact that the tomb was found empty, for the early appearances of Jesus to various individuals and groups, and for the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. Dr. Ehrman dropped his argument based on the inconsistencies in the narratives, as I've shown that those lie in the peripheral details, not at the heart of the narratives and that we have a remarkably harmonious account of these four fundamental facts. His only point that remained in the last speech was with respect to the women's role, and again I would simply suggest that as women disciples of Jesus, who are faithful to Jesus and involved in his support and following him, they don't represent marginalized people. And besides that, this is independently attested. This is a not a Markan feature; remember: we have multiple, independent sources of the women's role in the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb.

So what about that second crucial contention that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation? I showed how the argument based on probability that he gives over and over again in his written work is fallacious. And he says, "Well, Hume isn't talking about my argument; he's talking about the impossibility of miracles." That is simply mistaken. Hume's argument is against the *identification* of miracles based upon their improbability. And that doesn't answer my fundamental point that he cannot say the resurrection of Jesus is improbable because he says the historian can't make judgments about that sort of thing. And even if it were improbable, he's got to consider all of the other evidence that would outbalance that.

Now he says, "Well, look at these other hypotheses. Perhaps, for example, family members of Jesus stole the body. Isn't that more probable?" I don't think so. Notice there's no motive in that case for stealing the body; the family members of Jesus didn't believe in him during his lifetime. Nobody else other than Joseph and his servants and the women disciples even knew where the body had been interred. The time was insufficient for such a conspiracy to be hatched and launched between Friday night and Sunday morning. Also the grave clothes in the tomb disprove the hypothesis of tomb robbery; nobody would undress the body before taking it away.

Conspiracies like this always come to light; his Roman guards would have been happy to inform the Jewish leaders of what had happened. And this hypothesis can't explain the appearances of Jesus or the origin of the Christian belief in his resurrection. So for all those reasons, that's an improbable hypothesis.

By contrast, I don't think he shows any improbability in saying God raised Jesus from the dead. All he says is that this appeals to God and that historians can't infer God. But remember, I gave three responses to that. First, as in physical science you don't have to have direct access to explanatory entities in order to infer them. Secondly, the historian's whole project is dealing with the inaccessible past, where you have to infer things based on present evidence, even though you don't have direct access. And thirdly, this isn't a debate about what historians can do professionally. It's a debate about whether there's historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection and the conclusions that we can draw. And even if a professional historian can't draw that conclusion in a historical journal or a classroom, he can draw it when he goes home to his wife. And *we* can draw it if we think the evidence is best explained in that way, too. In short, I don't think that there's any good reason for thinking that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is not best explained by the resurrection.

Finally, I want to conclude now just by saying something about that other avenue to a knowledge of the resurrection, the experiential approach. You see, if Christ is really risen from the dead as the evidence indicates, then that means that Jesus is not just some ancient figure in history or a picture on a stained glass window. It means that he is alive today and can be known experientially. For me, Christianity ceased to be just a religion or a code to live by when I gave my life to Christ and experienced a spiritual rebirth in my own life. God became a living reality to me. The light went on where before there was only darkness, and God became an experiential reality, along with an overwhelming joy and peace and meaning that He imparted to my life. And I would simply say to you that if you're looking for that sort of meaning, purpose in life, then look not only at the historical evidence, but also pick up the New Testament and begin to read it and ask yourself whether or not this could be the truth. I believe that it can change your life in the same way that it has changed mine.

### **Dr. Ehrman's Conclusion**

Well, I appreciate very much the personal testimony, Bill. I do think, though, that what we've seen is that Bill is, at heart, an evangelist who wants people to come to share his belief in Jesus and that he's trying to disguise himself as a historian as a means to that end. I appreciate that, but it's not just whether a professional historian can argue something, it's whether history can be used to demonstrate claims about God. I have, in fact, disputed the four facts that he continually refers to. The burial by Joseph of Arimathea I've argued could well be a later invention. The empty tomb also could be a later invention. We don't have a reference to it in Paul; you only have it later in the Gospels. The appearances of Jesus may just as well have been visions of Jesus as they were physical appearances of Jesus because people did and do have visions all the time.

And an earlier point that Bill made was that the disciples were all willing to die for their faith. I didn't hear one piece of evidence for that. I hear that claim a lot, but having read every Christian

source from the first five hundred years of Christianity, I'd like him to tell us what the piece of evidence is that the disciples died for their belief in the resurrection.

Going on to talk about why in fact my scenario doesn't work, he says it's more implausible that the family members stole the body than it would be to say that God raised Jesus from the dead. Why? They'd have no motive. Well, in fact, people act on all sorts of motives, and motive is one of the most difficult things to establish. Historically, maybe his family wanted him to be buried in the family tomb. No one knew where he was buried, he says. Well, that's not true; in fact the Gospels themselves say the women watched from afar, including his mother. There wasn't enough time for this to happen. It happened at night. How much time does one need? It doesn't explain the grave clothes. Well, the grave clothes are probably a later, legendary embellishment. It can't explain the appearances of Jesus. Yes, people have visions all the time. Once people come to believe Jesus' tomb was empty, they come to believe he's raised from the dead, and they have visions. I'm not saying I think this happened. I think that it's plausible. It could have happened. It's more plausible than the claim that God must have raised Jesus from the dead. That is not the most probable historical explanation. You will have noticed that Bill had five more minutes to answer my questions, and he refused to answer my questions, and one might ask why.

Let me conclude by telling you what I really do think about Jesus' resurrection. The one thing we know about the Christians after the death of Jesus is that they turned to their scriptures to try and make sense of it. They had believed Jesus was the Messiah, but then he got crucified, and so he couldn't be the Messiah. No Jew, prior to Christianity, thought that the Messiah was to be crucified. The Messiah was to be a great warrior or a great king or a great judge. He was to be a figure of grandeur and power, not somebody who's squashed by the enemy like a mosquito. How could Jesus, the Messiah, have been killed as a common criminal? Christians turned to their scriptures to try and understand it, and they found passages that refer to the Righteous One of God's suffering death. But in these passages, such as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 and Psalm 61, the one who is punished or who is killed is also vindicated by God. Christians came to believe their scriptures that Jesus was the Righteous One and that God must have vindicated him. And so Christians came to think of Jesus as one who, even though he had been crucified, came to be exalted to heaven, much as Elijah and Enoch had in the Hebrew scriptures. How can he be Jesus the Messiah though, if he's been exalted to heaven? Well, Jesus must be coming back soon to establish the kingdom. He wasn't an earthly Messiah; he's a spiritual Messiah. That's why the early Christians thought the end was coming right away in their own lifetime. That's why Paul taught that Christ was the first fruit of the resurrection. But if Jesus is exalted, he is no longer dead, and so Christians started circulating the story of his resurrection. It wasn't three days later they started circulating the story; it might have been a year later, maybe two years. Five years later they didn't know when the stories had started. Nobody could go to the tomb to check; the body had decomposed. Believers who knew he had been raised from the dead started having visions of him. Others told stories about these visions of him, including Paul. Stories of these visions circulated. Some of them were actual visions like Paul, others of them were stories of visions like the five hundred group of people who saw him. On the basis of these stories, narratives were constructed and circulated and eventually we got the Gospels of the New Testament written 30, 40, 50, 60 years later.

## Question and Answer Session

**Question for Dr. Ehrman:** My question is for Dr. Ehrman. Thank you so much for your presentation! One of the comments you made is that historians can't presuppose the belief in God. I am an historian, and in fact I am doing my Ph.D. dissertation right now in historiography, and I agree with you that you can't presuppose belief in God. But you really can't presuppose belief in the past, period, or that we can even partially know it. We have to be able to back that up. So the historian can't have a presupposition; they have to back up whatever their metaphysical beliefs that they're going to bring to the table. And so if you're going to believe in God, like Dr. Craig, you have to justify that. But I don't see that as outside the realm of historians, since historians have to cross disciplines often. I'd like to see how you address that.

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** Well, thank you for the question! I don't believe that history is an objective discipline to start with. It sounded from your question that you agree with this, but we need to talk more about your take on postmodern theory. My view is that the historian does have to back up any presuppositions that he or she has. But my point is that for the historian to do his or her work, requires that there'd be certain shared assumptions. And it's fine to say what those assumptions are, but there are some assumptions that have to be agreed on by people of various theological persuasions. And they have to be assumptions that are rooted in things that can be observed. God can't be observed. So we might very well disagree on important historical events. There are people who, for example, in our world deny the holocaust, who say the holocaust never happened. Well, how does one demonstrate that the holocaust happened? Well, one gets together materials of eyewitness reports and photographs and movies, and you get information that historians agree is valid information, and you try to make a case. But it has to be the kind of information that historians of every stripe agree is valid information, such as eyewitness testimony. And appeals to the supernatural are not accepted in the historical community as being valid criteria on which to evaluate a past event. Part of the reason for that is because one could come up with alternative theological explanations. I see I'm out of time but I was going to give you an alternative theological explanation for the resurrection, but I'll save it for another time.

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** Dr. Ehrman's view seems to be that in order to do history you have to presuppose a kind of methodological atheism. And it seems to me that that's not only false, but, as I say, it is literally self-refuting. Because if it is true that the historian can make no judgment about God, then he cannot make the judgment that it's improbable that God raised Jesus from the dead. And therefore he cannot make any probability assessment of the resurrection on the background knowledge. This would be an inscrutable value. And if it's inscrutable, then he cannot make judgments about its comparative probability to these fanciful, naturalistic alternatives he's given us. So it seems to me that the historian has to be open, at least, methodologically. He can't be a methodological atheist. And in any case, again, it's not a debate about what historians can do. I, as a philosopher, I think, can certainly draw this inference on the basis of the historical evidence, and there's nothing illegitimate or illicit about doing that.

**Question for Dr. Craig:** Dr. Craig, we need to [bad reception of the microphone], which are: do you think there's any problems, mistakes, or errors in the New Testament documents? And second, he's suggesting that you say that because Mark is unembellished as a source, that

Matthew did embellish as a source and you said that you think later sources like Matthew are embellished. So you need to answer that.

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** O.K., Dr. Ehrman is trying to play a little debater's trick here on me, in which I simply refuse to participate. The criterion at issue is: if an account is simple, shows a lack of theological embellishment, and so forth, then it is more likely to be probable and credibly historical. And I think that's true. But this isn't a debate over biblical inerrancy. So my attitude toward whether I think there are any errors or mistakes in the Bible is irrelevant. That would be a theological conviction. Historically, I am using the same criteria that he is, and I am perfectly open to his showing that there are errors and mistakes in the narratives. That's not the issue tonight.

Biblical inerrancy is a big issue in his personal life that led him to abandon his Christian faith. But I am not presupposing any sort of doctrine of theological inerrancy or biblical inspiration—nor are those scholars who think these four facts are established by the criteria of authenticity that he himself champions. So my attitude theologically toward the reliability or the mistakes in the Bible is just irrelevant tonight. The question is, what can you prove positively using the standard criteria? And my argument is that when you use those criteria, you can prove positively those basic four facts about the fate of Jesus subsequent to his crucifixion.

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** So apparently it's O.K. to have theological assumptions about the resurrection, but it's not O.K. to have theological assumptions about the historical sources that the belief in the resurrection is based upon. If the belief in the resurrection is based on certain sources which are in the Bible and if these sources by their very nature have to be inerrant, then naturally you would conclude that the resurrection had to happen. But Bill refuses to tell us whether he thinks that the Bible has errors in it or not. He won't tell us that because he teaches at an institution which professors agree that the Bible is inerrant without any mistakes in all of its words. And so he cannot believe that the Bible has any mistakes. If he does think the Bible has mistakes, then I'd like him to tell us two or three of them. If he doesn't think the Bible has mistakes, I would like know how he can say how he's using the Gospels of the New Testament as historical sources. He can't critically evaluate these sources, and the one thing that historians have to do is be able to critically evaluate the sources that they base their claims on.

**Question for Dr. Ehrman:** Thank you, Dr. Ehrman! Do you believe that theology is in any sense a valid source of knowledge or do you believe in philosophical naturalism? [Bad reception on the microphone.]

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** I think the theological modes of knowledge are perfectly acceptable and legitimate as theological modes of knowledge. But I think theological claims have to be evaluated on a theological basis. For example, you know the idea that these four facts that Bill keeps referring to showed that God raised Jesus from the dead. You could come up with a different theological view of it. Suppose, for example, to explain those four facts that the God Zulu sent Jesus into the 12<sup>th</sup> dimension, and in that 12<sup>th</sup> dimension he was periodically released for return to Earth for a brief respite from his eternal tormentors. But he can't tell his followers about this because Zulu told him that if he does, he'll increase his eternal agonies. So that's another theological explanation for what happened. It would explain the empty tomb, it would

explain Jesus appearances. Is it as likely as God raised Jesus from the dead and made him sit at his right hand; that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has interceded in history and vindicated his name by raising his Messiah? Well, you might think no, that in fact the first explanation of the God Zulu is crazy. Well, yeah, O.K., it's crazy; but it's theologically crazy. It's not historically crazy. It's no less likely as an explanation for what happened than the explanation that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob raised Jesus from the dead because they're both theological explanations; they're not historical explanations. So within the realm of theology, I certainly think that theology is a legitimate mode of knowledge. But the criteria for evaluating theological knowledge are theological; they are not historical.

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** Theological hypotheses like that can certainly be evaluated by the sort of criteria that I evaluated the resurrection of Jesus by. In particular, a hypothesis such as has just been suggested is, I think, both enormously *ad hoc* and highly implausible, whereas given the religio-historical context in which Jesus' resurrection putatively occurs, I think it's extremely plausible to think that this is the God of Israel's vindication of Jesus of Nazareth's radical personal claims to be the Son of Man and the revelation of God the Father to mankind. So granted, a miracle apart from the religio-historical context is inherently ambiguous. When you give that context, I think that provides the key or the clue to the proper interpretation of the miracle. So I do think that we need to evaluate theological claims philosophically and according to those same sort of criteria that I propose we use in evaluating explanations of these facts.

**Question for Dr. Craig:** I am very interested in the probability equation you gave. To say it's probable that Jesus was resurrected, you must put numbers into that equation and get a answer greater than 0.5. I am very interested in what the actual number was and the margin of error for it. And how were the numbers for it determined?

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** Thank you for that question! Richard Swinburne, who's a professor at Oxford University, has written a book on incarnation and resurrection in which he actually uses the probability calculus that I have just given.<sup>14</sup> He comes up with an estimate of 0.97 for the resurrection of Jesus in terms of its probability, and you can look at his book for that. I myself don't use the probability calculus in arguing for resurrection of Jesus. The reason I brought it up is because of the response to the Humean sort of argument that Dr. Ehrman was offering, which I think is completely misconceived because he tries to say that the resurrection is improbable simply because of the improbability of the resurrection on the background information alone. In fact, I think that that probability is inscrutable, given that we're dealing with a free agent. I don't see how we can assess or assign specific numbers for those. So the way in which I argue for the resurrection is not by using the probability calculus. It's by using what's called "inference to the best explanation," which is the way historians normally work. That is to say, you assess competing historical hypotheses in terms of criteria like: explanatory power, explanatory scope, plausibility, degree of *ad hoc*-ness, concordance with accepted beliefs, and so on and so forth. And I'm prepared to argue that when you put the resurrection hypothesis next to naturalistic alternatives, you'll be able to show on balance that the resurrection hypothesis comes out far outstripping its rival naturalistic theories—unless you presuppose some sort of methodological

---

<sup>14</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).



atheism to bar this. I think that's what Dr. Ehrman does. In the same way that I am a believer and therefore find God's existence quite plausible, as an unbeliever I think he finds that this is just absurdly improbable. But he's not given us any reason to think either that God's existence is improbable or that it's improbable that God raised Jesus from the dead. In fact he *can't* give an assessment of that probability, given his claim about the limits on the historian.

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** I am sorry. I have trouble believing that we're having a serious conversation about the statistical probability of the resurrection or the statistical probability of the existence of God. I think in any university setting in the country, if we were in front of a group of academics we would be howled off the stage—

**Dr. Craig:** That's not true.

**Dr. Ehrman:** Well, it may not be true at the school you teach at, but at the research institution I teach at —

**Dr. Craig:** Well, what about Oxford University, where Professor Swinburne teaches?

**Dr. Ehrman:** Well, Swinburne has shown that there's 0.97 percent probability. And how many people has he convinced of this exactly? These are the kinds of arguments that are convincing for people who want to be convinced. They're not serious arguments to be taken by people so they can actually say, "Oh yes, now I am going to believe because there's 0.97 percent probability factor!" In fact that's nonsense; you can't demonstrate the existence of the supernatural by statistical models.

**Question for Dr. Ehrman:** What I wanted to ask is does the report of occurrence of miracles over time make the probability higher than the historians think?

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** Yes, that's a good question. The question is: does the report of occurrence of miracles over time increase the probability? I'd say the answer is probably "no" because in every single instance you have to evaluate whether it's a probable event or not. And it never can be a probable event. So that, if one thinks so, that it is a probable event, what I would like Bill to do is to tell us why he doesn't think that Muhammad did miracles because we certainly have reports of that. Why doesn't he think Apollonius of Tyana did miracles? He quoted Larry Yarbrough, who, in fact, probably has never read the Life of Apollonius. I know this because I had an argument with Larry Yarbrough about it. He has never read the texts. I don't know if Bill has read the texts. They're very interesting; they are Greek texts; they are widely available. They report Apollonius of Tyana did many of things that Jesus did; he could cast out demons, he could heal the sick, he could raise the dead, at the end of his life he ascended to heaven. And Apollonius of Tyana was just one of the hundreds of people about such things were said in the ancient world. So if we allow for the possibility of Jesus, how about allowing the possibility for Apollonius? Or Honi the Circle-Drawer or Hanina ben Dosa or the Emperor Vespasian? Or you could name the list as long as your arm of people. Now the reason we don't know about these people is because, of course, the only miracle-working Son of God we know about is Jesus. But in fact in the ancient world there are hundreds of people like this, with hundreds of stories told about them. We discount them because they're not within our tradition.

That's why my alternative explanation of Zulu sounded implausible to Bill because in his tradition it's the God of Jesus, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who must be involved in the world. And, of course, people from other religious traditions say other Gods are involved. So this isn't just a question about whether God is involved. Which God is involved? And as I pointed out earlier, it's just a very happy circumstance that it happens to be the God, the God that Bill can historically demonstrate its existence, who happens to be the God that he converted to when he was 16.

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** The reason that we don't believe in many other miracle claims is not because one is not open to them. On the contrary, I am completely open to the idea that God has done miracles apart from Jesus. But with respect, for example, to Muhammad, there isn't any evidence for such things. There's no claim in the Qur'an that Muhammad performed miracles. The first biography we have of Muhammad comes from at least 150 years after his death, and I am not sure that even there, there are miracle claims. With Apollonius of Tyana, these are myths and legends that have no historical value whatsoever. They are post-Christian inventions, where Apollonius is a figure that is deliberately constructed to compete with early Christianity. So the reason one doesn't believe in miracles in those cases is because there isn't any good evidence for it. But by contrast, most New Testament scholars, as Bart Ehrman knows, do believe that Jesus of Nazareth carried out a ministry of miracle-working and exorcisms. Whether you believe they're supernatural is an additional step. But there's no doubt today that Jesus of Nazareth was what he thought was a miracle worker.

**Question for Dr. Craig:** Dr. Craig, one of the points you made earlier on in considering the probabilities, you have to weigh the probabilities for the resurrection against other probabilities or other explanations you made that we have in the Gospels. And Prof. Ehrman has this story that he doesn't believe and he hinted what he does think happened. And so I just want to read a couple verses from the Gospel of Luke and open up a chance for you to potentially comment on these verses and say, based on what Prof. Ehrman said, did your view or did his view make better sense of these verses? So this is from Luke 24, and it's when Jesus appeared to the two men on the road to Emmaus and they don't recognize him. He's speaking to them, and they don't recognize him. And they just said that all these things have happened and we're confused and we don't know what's going on. And he said to them, "Oh, foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him saying, 'Stay with us for it is toward the evening and the day is now far spent.' So he went in to stay with them. While he was at the table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?'"

**Dr. Craig interjects:** And what is your question now about the passage? I am not clear what the question is.

**Question for Dr. Craig continued:** The question is: you know Prof. Ehrman has argued that these ancient documents aren't necessarily only for the purpose of establishing historical evidence for things, but they can be used more rhetorically. So the question is, could these verses be painting a picture of Christian origins whereby, as Dr. Ehrman argued, the early followers of Jesus opened the scriptures and find references to a suffering servant who is vindicated by God? Because if you notice from these verses, they didn't say our hearts burned within us because we touched his flesh and we really heard him and that means God performed a miracle and we have the evidence and we have to tell everyone. They said, our hearts burned within us when he opened the scriptures.

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** I think that that would be a plausible way of reading that passage, what you just suggested. But, of course, that isn't at the heart of my case this evening. I am not constructing the case that I've given tonight on the basis of passages that would be like that or that would be disputable. I am constructing it upon these four fundamental facts which are, I think, credibly attested by multiple, independent attestation and the criterion of embarrassment and which most New Testament scholars would agree with. So I am not staking anything I said tonight on the historicity of the appearance on the road to Emmaus or the interpretation that you've lent of it. That's just not part of my case.

Now in general, however, let me say with respect to this idea of turning to the scriptures and finding Jesus there, I think that the whole case that I laid out for the four facts is what invalidates that. We have got good, early, independent sources that in fact Jesus was buried by a Jewish Sanhedrist in a tomb, that that tomb was found empty on the Sunday morning after the crucifixion, that various individuals and groups of people had these appearances of Jesus, and that they then came to believe that he was risen from the dead. And these passages that are in the Old Testament are so obscure and so difficult to find that it is highly improbable that they are the source of the belief in the resurrection, as Dr. Ehrman thinks. Rather they can only be discovered *in hindsight*. Having come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, now you go searching in the scriptures to find the proof texts and the validation of that. But the opposite hypothesis is the old Bultmannian view that somehow by searching the scriptures, they came to believe in these things. But the problem with that is that these passages in the Old Testament just are too obscure, too ambiguous, for them to come up with the sort of resurrection belief on that basis. Jewish followers of a Messiah figure like Jesus, confronted with his crucifixion, would either go home or get themselves a new Messiah, but they wouldn't come to believe that he was risen from the dead.

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** Yes, Bill keeps talking about our good, early sources and keeps overlooking the facts that these good, early sources are 40, 50, 60 years later and that the place that these authors got their information from was the oral tradition that has been in circulation year after year after year when stories were being invented and stories were being changed. And so I don't think we need to rely too much just on those four facts. The idea that these passages were so obscure that nobody could possibly land upon them: these are passages from Isaiah and the Psalms. These are not passages hidden away in Malachi someplace. These passages are central passages to Jewish life and worship, and the followers of Jesus demonstrated that they went through the scriptures to understand what it all meant. This also, by the way, is found in

good and early sources that the followers of Jesus did exactly that. So I think that is a completely plausible explanation for how in fact Christians came to believe in the resurrection.

**Question for Dr. Ehrman:** I am glad I had this opportunity. I think we missed a few opportunities to applaud! Dr. Ehrman, can historians verify a miracle if there were eyewitnesses of evidence that a miracle took place? Given your historical method, has any miracle ever occurred, and if so, which ones? And if not, might it be that you willfully refuse to believe in miracles?

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** Good, good question! Thank you! Let me try it again. “Even if you have eyewitnesses”. Suppose from the 1850s, we have an account of a pastor of a church in Kansas who walked across this pond during the fourth of July on a celebration, and there were twelve people who saw him do it. The historian will have to evaluate this testimony and have to ask, did he probably do it or not? Now these eyewitnesses might have said that he did it. But there are other possibilities that one could imagine. There might be stones in the pond, for example. He might have been at a distance, and they didn’t see him. There were other things that you could think of. If you were trying to ask for probabilities, what is the probability that a human being can walk on a pond of water unless it’s frozen? The probability is virtually zero because in fact humans can’t do that. And if you think humans can do that, then give me one instance where I can see. None of us can do it. No one on the face of this planet can do it. Billions of people who have lived cannot do it. And so is the historian going to conclude that probably Joe Smith, the pastor of this church probably did it? I don’t think so. Historians aren’t going to conclude that because the miracle simply is a violation of the way nature typically works. And so you can’t ever verify the miracle on the basis of eyewitnesses. Let me say, secondly, though, we’re not talking about somebody in 1850s. We’re talking about somebody who lived 2000 years ago, and we don’t have eyewitness reports at all. And the reports we have are from people who believed in him. They’re not disinterested accounts. They’re contradictory accounts, and they’re accounts written 30, 50, 60 years later.

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** I agree that the resurrection of Jesus is *naturally* impossible. But that’s not the question. The question is, is it improbable that *God* raised Jesus from the dead? And Dr. Ehrman can’t even make that judgment because he claims that the historian cannot make statements about God. So he’s caught in a self-contradiction tonight. On the one hand, he wants to say the historian can say nothing about God, but on the other hand, he wants to say that it’s improbable that God raised Jesus from the dead; and that’s simply self-contradictory.

One of the embarrassments of Hume’s argument was that he held that a person living in the tropics should never accept testimonies from travelers that water could exist in the form of a solid, as ice. So that the man, based on the Humean argument, would be led to deny perfectly natural facts for which we would have abundant evidence simply because it contradicted what he knew. And in exactly the same way, this argument that he’s giving is one that really would be a positive impediment to science, if you say that we can never have enough testimony—enough evidence—to cause us to believe in something that contradicts the normal workings of nature.

**Question for Dr. Craig:** Thank you! We're talking about independent, unbiased disclosure of evidence here. So I wonder if both professors can find from outside of canonical Christian writings evidences that support their viewpoints.

**Answer from Dr. Craig:** The fact is we're not talking about disinterested sources. But you see, that's characteristic of all of ancient history. People in the ancient world didn't write disinterested stories; everyone had a point of view or an axe to grind. So the historian has to take that into account when he does his historical investigation. So scholars do that with respect to the Gospels. They ask, what is the credibility of these events given that they come from Christian believers? And one way to circumvent that problem is through multiple, independent attestation, because if a tradition or an event is independently and multiply attested in very early sources, then it's highly unlikely that it was made up because you wouldn't have it independently attested. And so scholars will typically accept an event that's attested by, say, two independent sources or three. But in the case of empty tomb and the burial, we've got like five or six independent sources for this. So apart from a prejudice against miracles, there's no good reason for denying the historical core to those narratives, especially when you remember that we're *not* talking about sources that are 30, 40, 60 years later. We're talking about traditions on which those are based that go back to within five or seven years after the crucifixion. Compared to the sources for Greco-Roman history, the Gospels stand head and shoulders above what Greco-Roman historians have to work with, which are usually hundreds of years after the events they record, usually involve very few eyewitnesses, and are usually told by people that are completely biased. And yet Greco-Roman historians reconstruct the course of history of the ancient world. And, as I said from N. T. Wright, he would say that the empty tomb and appearances of Jesus are just as certain as the death of Caesar Augustus in AD 14 or even the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. And even if you think that's an exaggeration, I think they are far better attested than many other events in ancient history which are commonly accepted as historical.

**Answer from Dr. Ehrman:** So you're asking for non-canonical sources. I think one reason Bill didn't want to answer is because the non-canonical sources don't bear out his position. The non-canonical pagan sources in fact never refer to the resurrection of Jesus until centuries later. Jesus actually never appears any non-canonical pagan source until 80 years after his death. So clearly he didn't make a big impact on the pagan world. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions Jesus but didn't believe in his resurrection. There are non-canonical Christian sources that talk about the resurrection, but unfortunately virtually all of them that narrate the event, although they are non-canonical Gospels, narrate the event in a way that disagrees with Bill's reconstruction. They don't believe that Jesus was physically, bodily raised from the dead. For evidence of that simply read the account of the Second Treatise of the Great Seth or read the account the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter; just go down the line. We do have one account in which Jesus comes out of the tomb. It's in the Gospel of Peter; it's an apocalyptic account. Jesus comes out of the tomb as tall as the skyscraper; following him is a cross which speaks to the heavens, clearly a legendary account of very little use to historians wanting to know what happened.

**Moderator:** We now may applaud!

**Close:** The time has come to close this evening's debate, and I would like to once again thank the sponsoring organizations—the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Culture and the Campus

Christian Fellowship—and our moderator, William Shea. You have been an outstanding audience with great questions, and we thank you for attending this evening. There is a book table in the back with some books from both of our speakers available as well as some other books available from the campus fellowship group. Finally, I would like to thank once again professors William Lane Craig and Bart D. Ehrman, for sharing their time and talents with us. Please join me in thanking them for being with us this evening.