

Arguments For Christianity

Why This Religion, Among All the Religions of the World

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I. Why This Religion?

Suppose the case for God succeeds. A further question remains, and it is the one that decides everything practical: *why Christianity*, among all the religions of the world? Most of them are not in competition on the same ground. They offer a way of life, a metaphysics, a discipline. Christianity does that too, but it also does something unusual and dangerous: it stakes itself on a claim about something that either happened or did not happen, in a particular week, under a Roman governor whose name we know.

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified

of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

1 Corinthians 15:14–15, RSV

That is not a critic's objection. It is Paul, writing to his own converts about twenty-five years after the crucifixion, and conceding in advance the terms on which the whole thing can be refuted. If the resurrection did not occur, the preaching is empty, the faith is empty, and the apostles are liars about God. No other major religion has volunteered a condition like that. This essay therefore treats the resurrection as a historical question rather than a devotional one. The Christian case is that it should be settled by historical means: it does not begin from the trustworthiness of Scripture, since that would be circular against someone who denies it. It begins from a small set of facts that the large majority of critical scholars accept, including scholars who regard the conclusion as impossible, and asks which explanation accounts for all of them rather than some.

II. The Skeptic's Case, Fairly Stated

The skeptic's case deserves its full weight. The prior probability of a resurrection could hardly be lower: every human being who has ever died has stayed dead, and whatever the testimony amounts to, it is being weighed against the most thoroughly confirmed generalization we possess. The motif looks older than the story: dying and rising gods were said to be a commonplace of the ancient Mediterranean—Osiris, Adonis, Attis, Dionysus, the mysteries of Mithras—so a Jewish sect preaching a risen savior was arguably filling in a familiar form rather than inventing one. Grief produces visions: bereavement hallucinations are well documented, and devoted followers of an executed leader are exactly the population in which they occur. The documents are late, partisan and inconsistent: written decades afterward by unnamed authors, disagreeing about who came to the tomb and where the appearances happened, with the narratives growing more elaborate the later the source. Martyrdom proves sincerity, not truth: people die for false beliefs constantly, and the 9/11 hijackers were sincere. And every faith has its founding wonder—Islam its night journey, the Latter-day Saints their eleven signed witnesses to the golden plates—so if early, sincere, costly testimony settles the matter, it settles it for several incompatible religions at once.

III. What Is Granted

Much of that is simply correct, and the argument below concedes it. The Gospels were written decades after the events, by authors whose identities are attached by tradition rather than by the text. They differ in detail, including in the resurrection narratives, and Mark's ending at 16:8 is almost certainly the original. The prior probability of a

resurrection is as low as a prior gets, and saying so is not a concession dragged from a believer but the reason the event would mean anything if it happened. And sincerity is not truth: the argument below does not rest on the apostles having died bravely. Whether a rule of evidence can be built that excludes the question in advance is examined on the companion page on miracles; here the question is what the evidence, examined, actually supports.

IV. The Minimal-Facts Method

The method used here is the one associated with Gary Habermas and William Lane Craig, and it is designed precisely for a hostile audience: build only on facts accepted across the critical spectrum, established by ordinary historical criteria—multiple independent attestation, embarrassment, enemy attestation—and let every conclusion be tested against those facts alone. Four items pass that filter. Jesus of Nazareth was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. His followers had experiences shortly afterward which they were convinced were appearances of him alive. Paul, an active persecutor of the movement, was converted by what he believed was such an appearance. And James, a brother who during Jesus's lifetime did not believe in him, became a leader of the Jerusalem church and died for it.

The empty tomb is less unanimous but still commands a substantial majority, partly because the burial by Joseph of Arimathea (a member of the council that condemned Jesus) is an odd detail to invent, and partly because a movement preaching a risen body in Jerusalem could have been ended by producing one. These are the facts to be explained. Scholars who accept them include the field's most prominent skeptics—which is the method's point: nothing below depends on a Christian premise.

The skeptic's counter—that Rome denied the crucified honorable burial, so the Arimathea account is the invention—states the Roman norm and misses the Judean exception. Josephus records that Jews took the burial of the crucified seriously enough to bury them before sunset, as Deuteronomy 21:22–23 commands, and Jerusalem before the war was governed with that scruple in view. And as invention the story fails its purpose twice over: a church inventing a burier would not have invented a member of the very council that condemned him, and a church inventing a tomb in Jerusalem handed its enemies an address to check. The earliest polemic did not deny the tomb; it explained the emptiness (Matt. 28:11–15).

V. A Creed Older Than the Gospels

The legend theory needs time, and the evidence does not give it any. In his first letter to Corinth, written about A.D. 55, Paul quotes a formula he says he received and passed on:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

1 Corinthians 15:3–6, RSV

“Delivered” and “received” are the technical vocabulary of tradition: Paul is quoting a formula he was taught, not composing one. The vocabulary is not Paul’s ordinary Greek, and the structure is that of a memorized creed, a formula already in circulation when he learned it. The demonstration goes back to Joachim Jeremias and is now common property of the discipline, and the formula can be dated: Paul was converted about A.D. 33, and by his own account went up to Jerusalem three years later to spend a fortnight with Cephas and James—the first two names on the list. Critical scholars date the creed remarkably early. Gerd Lüdemann, who thinks the resurrection did not happen, places its formation within a few years of the crucifixion, and others put it earlier still.

That is not enough time for legendary development, and the point does not depend on Christian assumptions. The Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White argued from the classical sources that even two full generations is too short to erase a hard historical core—a judgment apologists have sometimes pressed further than he took it. The creed needs no such stretch: it is a fixed, public, list-of-witnesses claim inside a handful of years, in the city where it could be checked. Notice also what the formula does. It names witnesses, several of them still alive, and says how many. That is not the grammar of myth. It is the grammar of a man inviting his readers to go and ask. Luke’s preface makes the same gesture in narrative form—a writer who has “followed all things closely,” compiling what “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” delivered (Luke 1:1–4); and Paul before Agrippa appeals to the public record outright: “this was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26).

VI. The Dying-and-Rising Parallels Do Not Fit

The comparison to the dying-and-rising gods sounds strong until the sources are read. Osiris is not raised to life in this world; he is reassembled and reigns over the dead, which is the opposite of what the disciples claimed. Adonis and Attis belong to vegetation cycles: they die and return with the seasons, endlessly, which is a myth about the year rather than a report about last spring. The clearest Mithraic parallels postdate Christianity, so the borrowing, if any, runs the wrong way.

The category itself has largely collapsed in the scholarship, and the collapse was not the work of apologists. The parallels were popularized by Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and the

history-of-religions school around 1900; specialists have since concluded that the category was assembled by flattening very different myths into a pattern none of them individually shows—some of the gods do not die, some do not rise, and none of them does what the creed asserts. What the New Testament claims is different in kind: not a seasonal deity in *illo tempore* but a named man, executed on a datable Friday under a named official, raised bodily and once, within history and never repeated. First-century Jews had a doctrine of resurrection, and it was of everyone together at the end of the age. One man raised in the middle of history was not the expected thing. It was an embarrassment they had to explain—which is evidence that the belief arose from something that happened, not from something available in the culture.

VII. The Empty Tomb and the Women

Every Gospel agrees that the tomb was found empty by women, and the detail is best evidence precisely because of what first-century writers thought of it. A woman's testimony carried little weight in that world; Josephus reports the view that women were not acceptable witnesses. A community inventing its foundation story had every reason to put Peter or Joseph of Arimathea at the tomb first, and no reason at all to give the discovery to Mary Magdalene—a woman, and one out of whom, the tradition itself records, seven demons had gone. The criterion historians call embarrassment applies exactly: details that made the story harder to preach are kept because they were true. The same criterion protects Mark's report that the disciples fled, Peter's denial, and James's unbelief during Jesus's lifetime—the Gospels admit each against their own interest.

The empty tomb also has enemy attestation of a backhanded kind: the earliest counter-explanation on record, that the disciples stole the body, concedes the vacancy it tries to explain. Nobody steals from, or explains away, a tomb with a body in it.

VIII. The Alternatives, Each in Turn

The naturalistic alternatives have been tried in turn for two centuries, and each fails at a specific joint. **The swoon:** Jesus survived the crucifixion and revived in the tomb. It was dispatched not by an apologist but by David Friedrich Strauss, the nineteenth century's great skeptical critic: a half-dead man, crawling from the grave in need of a physician, could not have convinced anyone he was the conqueror of death. Roman executioners, moreover, knew their trade. **The theft:** the disciples stole the body and preached what they knew was false. This is the fraud theory, and it collapses in Section IX. **The wrong tomb:** the women mistook the grave. The authorities then needed only to point to the right one, and the burial account names the tomb's owner—a member of the council—whose grave could be found by asking him. **Hallucination:** grief visions are real, and if the evidence were only that Peter had an overwhelming experience, the explanation would

be a good one. The difficulty is the rest of the list. Hallucinations are private events; they are not shared, and a group of people do not have the same one. The appearances are reported in varied settings, indoors and outdoors, to individuals and to groups, over a period of time, ending rather than fading.

More seriously, the hallucination theory has to explain the two conversions it cannot use. Grief hallucinations occur in the bereaved who long for the dead. Paul was not grieving; he was on the road to arrest Christians, and had every professional and religious motive to want the movement false. James had not believed in his brother during his lifetime, which the Gospels admit against their own interest. A theory built on the psychology of devoted mourners does not reach an enemy and a skeptic, and those are the two cases where the evidence is strongest. Nor does any hallucination, however vivid, move a body; the theory must be paired with a second, independent explanation for the empty tomb, and the explanations do not combine into anything simpler than the event they are replacing.

IX. What Martyrdom Does Show

The skeptic is right that dying for a belief does not make it true, and the Christian should stop claiming that it does. What it does establish is narrower and still worth something: these particular people were not knowingly lying.

The distinction is the one the comparison to modern martyrs misses. A man who dies for a doctrine he was taught shows that he trusts his teachers. The apostles were in a different position: they were claiming to report what they had personally seen. A person may sincerely die for a falsehood he received. He does not knowingly die for a story he made up himself, having gained nothing by it. So the deliberate-fraud theory, which was the earliest explanation offered and is still the popular one, is the least likely of the alternatives. The same distinction sorts the eleven witnesses to the golden plates: they attested an experience of seeing plates—some of them describing later a seeing by faith rather than by the natural eye—within a movement led by the one man who claimed to translate them. What they never offered was a public event, in a public place, checkable by enemies. The comparison fails not because Latter-day Saint witnesses were less sincere, but because the two claims are not the same kind of claim.

X. A Claim With Its Neck Exposed

Which brings the essay back to its title. The difference is not that Christians are more certain than other believers, or better people; they are demonstrably neither. It is that Christianity has made itself checkable in a way the others have not chosen to. Paul states

the falsification condition himself: if Christ was not raised, the preaching is empty and the apostles are liars about God (1 Cor. 15:14–15).

No comparable claim is on offer elsewhere. A private revelation to a single founder, whether in a cave or with a set of plates, cannot be investigated by anyone who was not there. A resurrection announced in a specific city, weeks after a public execution, to a hostile authority with every motive and opportunity to end the movement by producing a body, is a claim with a neck exposed. That is either recklessness or confidence, and the movement's survival in that city is at least evidence about which. And the exposure has never closed. Chesterton observed that the faith's whole history repeats the shape of its founding claim: "Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave." The Arian collapse, the Renaissance rot, the Enlightenment's confident obituaries — after each, the same faith is found converting the age again, "not as an old religion but as a new religion." A merely human movement gets one youth. This one keeps having them.

XI. The Reply in Brief

The facts to be explained are agreed on by scholars who disagree about everything else: a crucifixion, a group convinced they had seen the man alive, a persecutor converted, a skeptical brother converted, and a movement proclaiming a bodily resurrection in the city where the body should have been. The legend theory founders on a creed dated within a few years of the events, naming living witnesses. The parallels dissolve when the sources are actually read. The hallucination theory explains the mourners and not the enemy. And the fraud theory requires men to die for something they knew they had invented.

None of this coerces, and it is not meant to. Historical arguments deal in what best accounts for the evidence, not in proof, and a person may weigh it and remain unconvinced. But the explanation the first witnesses gave has the unusual property of accounting for all of the evidence rather than some of it, and it is the only one of the explanations that was ever offered by anyone who was there.

Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.
2. The minimal-facts approach is set out in Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel, 2004), and in William Lane Craig's published work on the resurrection; the four facts used here, and the empty tomb's majority standing, follow Habermas's surveys of the critical literature.

3. Joachim Jeremias's demonstration that 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 is a pre-Pauline formula, and its dating through Galatians 1:18, are set out in William Lane Craig, "Contemporary Scholarship and the Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Truth* 1 (1985). Gerd Lüdemann's dating of the tradition to within a few years of the crucifixion is in *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology* (Fortress, 1994).
4. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford, 1963), on the tempo of legendary accumulation in classical sources; summarized here.
5. On the collapse of the dying-and-rising category, see Jonathan Z. Smith's treatment in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* ("Dying and Rising Gods") and T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection* (2001), whose qualified defense of the category still concedes that the alleged parallels differ fundamentally from the Christian claim; the point is summarized rather than quoted. The parallels were popularized by James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915).
6. On women as witnesses in the first century, see Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.8.15; the appearance of the women in all four Gospels, and the criterion of embarrassment, are treated in the standard discussions, including Craig's "The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985).
7. The theft explanation as the earliest counter-claim is reported at Matthew 28:11–15.
8. David Friedrich Strauss's dispatch of the swoon theory is in *A New Life of Jesus* (1865), vol. 1, §48; quoted in substance by nearly every subsequent treatment, and summarized here.
9. Gerd Lüdemann's vision hypothesis, resting on the psychology of grief and guilt in Peter and Paul, is in *The Resurrection of Jesus*; the standard reply—that hallucinations are private, and that Paul and James were not bereaved disciples—appears across the literature cited above.
10. On the witnesses to the golden plates, their signed statements, and their later accounts (including descriptions of seeing by faith rather than by the natural eye), see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Knopf, 2005); the parallel is pressed by Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Temple University Press, 1991), and answered in Section IX.
11. Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God* (HarperOne, 2014), ch. 5, presses the prior-probability objection; his acceptance of the crucifixion, the disciples' experiences, and the early date of the 1 Corinthians 15 tradition is a matter of published record. The in-principle question—whether testimony can ever establish a miracle—is treated on this site's companion page and essay *Can We Rationally Believe in Miracles?*

12. The resurrection is examined at greater length, against both the skeptical and the Watchtower alternatives, in the companion essays *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* and *Raised a Spirit, or Raised Bodily?*

13. G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (1925), Part II, ch. 6 (“The Five Deaths of the Faith”), quoted exactly from the copy in the site’s reference library.

For Further Reading

The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus, by Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona—the minimal-facts method.

The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright—resurrection belief in its Jewish and pagan setting.

Questions of Faith—A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity, by Peter L. Berger.

Uncertain Belief—Is It Rational to Be a Christian?, by David J. Bartholomew.

Warranted Christian Belief, by Alvin Plantinga.

To Everyone an Answer—A Case for the Christian Worldview, edited by Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland.

Reason for the Hope Within, edited by Michael J. Murray.

The Everlasting Man, by G. K. Chesterton (1925)—free at Project Gutenberg. Free online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/65688>.

How Jesus Became God, by Bart D. Ehrman—the opposing account these panels answer; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/howjesusbecamego0000ehrm>.

The Golden Bough, by James George Frazer—the dying-god parallels in their source; free at Project Gutenberg. Free online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3623>.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

1 Corinthians 15:3–4

* * *

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the historical case for Christianity in particular*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.