

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection, and the Case Against It

by Richard Whiting

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. May be reproduced in whole, with attribution. See full notice at the end of this document.

Contents

I. The Question, Honestly Framed

II. The Skeptic's Case, at Full Strength

III. A Creed Older Than the Gospels

IV. The Empty Tomb

V. The Appearances

VI. The Origin of the Belief

VII. The Alternatives, Each in Turn

VIII. Hume's Bar, Reconsidered

IX. Did Jesus Even Exist?

X. What Follows

Endnotes

I. The Question, Honestly Framed

Christianity makes one claim on which it has agreed, from the beginning, to stand or fall. Paul states the terms himself: "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain," and again, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17). This is not a claim about values or meaning, of the kind that cannot in principle be checked. It is a claim that something happened, at a nameable place, within living memory of the people to whom the words were first written. That makes it the natural ground on which believer and skeptic can actually meet, because both sides can look at evidence.

It is worth being clear about how much of that evidence is not in dispute. The scholars most skeptical of the resurrection—and the field contains many—generally grant that

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified under Pontius Pilate; that his followers, very shortly afterward, had experiences they took to be encounters with him alive; that they proclaimed his resurrection in Jerusalem, where the claim was most easily checked; and that the tradition Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 15 is far older than the letter that preserves it. Bart Ehrman, perhaps the best-known skeptical New Testament scholar now writing, holds all of this and remains an agnostic: in his view the historian, restricted to natural explanations, simply cannot conclude that a miracle occurred, however good the testimony. The dispute, in other words, is rarely about the data. It is about what may be inferred from them, and that is where this essay will spend its effort.

II. The Skeptic's Case, at Full Strength

The skeptical case deserves its strongest statement, and its strongest statement is old. David Hume argued in 1748 that no testimony could ever establish a miracle: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws," the proof against a miracle is as complete as any proof from experience can be. His conclusion has become the skeptic's standard: "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish." However improbable it is that the witnesses lied or erred, it is always less improbable than a dead man rising.

The modern historian's version softens the metaphysics and keeps the conclusion. History, on this account, deals only in probabilities, and a miracle is by definition the least probable explanation of any datum; therefore no historical argument can ever reach one. Ehrman has pressed this form in debate for years. A popular version does the same work in a slogan—extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence—and the evidence of ancient partisan documents, it is said, is ordinary at best.

Beneath the in-principle objection stand the particular ones. The accounts are late, written decades after the events, in a language most eyewitnesses did not speak. They disagree with one another in detail: how many women at the tomb, how many angels, Galilee or Jerusalem. The earliest gospel, Mark, ends in its oldest manuscripts with an empty tomb and frightened women, and no appearance of the risen Jesus at all. Paul, our earliest witness, never describes the tomb, and includes his own visionary experience in the same list as the others', inviting the thought that all of them were experiences of the same visionary kind—grief-born hallucinations of a beloved dead teacher, of the sort bereavement psychology knows well. And legends grow: given sixty years between event and text, the marvelous details had time to accumulate. None of these objections is frivolous, and a case that ignores them persuades no one.

Take the growth-of-legend reading first. It reads the four Gospels in canonical order and watches the risen body grow more solid from Mark to John. But legends grow in time, and the texts refuse the timeline: the earliest resurrection text of all, the creed of 1 Corinthians 15, already lists more appearances than any Gospel—to Peter, to the Twelve, to five hundred at once—within a few years of the event, while Mark, written decades later, narrates none. If physicality were legend accreting, the leanest account should be the oldest; instead the fullest is. And Mark's spare ending knows what it is not narrating: "he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Mark 16:7). The short ending is a literary fact about one book, not an early stage of a growing story.

The discrepancies—how many women, how many angels, Galilee or Jerusalem—are real, and they are the ordinary signature of independent testimony. Witnesses who agree in every detail have compared notes; witnesses who differ in the seams while agreeing on the event have not. Every strand has the tomb found empty, found by women, on the third day, with appearances following—and the variations sit precisely where honest memories vary. Galilee and Jerusalem is not even a contradiction: forty days leave room for both, and the accounts place appearances in both. A Church editing freely would have smoothed all this; that nobody did is why the seams still show.

Nor is the resurrection one wonder-story among the world's many, to be credited or dismissed as a class: rival claims characteristically surface late, far from the events, in devotional literature, with no hostile audience to check them—this one was proclaimed within years, in the city, by named witnesses who could be questioned and were, and its earliest opponents conceded the empty tomb. That is the difference in kind.

III. A Creed Older Than the Gospels

The place to begin is the one piece of evidence that no dating argument can reach. In 1 Corinthians 15, written about AD 55, Paul writes:

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 demonstration that this is an older creed embedded in the letter goes back to Joachim Jeremias and is now common property of the discipline. And it can be dated. Paul was converted about AD 33; by Galatians 1:18 he

went up to Jerusalem three years later and spent a fortnight with Peter and James—two of the named witnesses—and probably received the formula then, if not before. As William Lane Craig puts it, “the list of witnesses goes back to within the first five years after Jesus’ death.” Whatever else may be said, the proclamation of the resurrection, with named and living witnesses, is not a legend that grew over generations. It is the founding announcement, and it was being recited while the people it names could still be asked.

Paul adds a detail whose force is easy to miss: of the five hundred, “most... are still alive.” The remark has a point only as an invitation—the witnesses are there to be questioned. A man fabricating, or passing on a private vision, does not direct his readers to a crowd of checkable witnesses in his own generation.

IV. The Empty Tomb

Was the tomb empty? The gospel narratives say so, and their account has features that are hard to explain as invention. The discoverers are women. In first-century Jewish culture a woman’s testimony carried little legal weight, and no early Christian inventing the scene would have chosen witnesses whose word discredited the story in advance; the detail is there, most probably, because that is what happened. The narrative in Mark is plain to the point of dryness—no appearance of the risen Christ, no theological embroidery, none of the apologetic flourish later apocryphal gospels supply. And behind Mark stands an older source still: the pre-Markan passion story refers to the high priest without naming him, as one speaks of an official currently in office, which places that source, as Craig argues, within the years of Caiaphas’s tenure—within seven years of the crucifixion.

Two further facts press the same way. The resurrection was first proclaimed in Jerusalem, minutes’ walk from the tomb, to audiences with every motive to refute it; the proclamation could not have survived a body. And the earliest Jewish polemic did not claim the body lay in its tomb. It claimed the disciples stole it—Matthew records the charge in order to answer it—and an accusation of theft concedes the one thing at issue: the tomb was empty. The argument between the first Christians and their first opponents was never over whether the body was gone, only over how.

V. The Appearances

The appearances resist reduction to a single visionary type. The early formula and the narratives together report appearances to individuals and to groups; indoors and outdoors; to women grieving and to men who had given the movement up; at least twice to enemies or outsiders—James, the Lord’s brother, who had not believed in him, and Paul, who was persecuting the church. The disciples’ own first response to the women’s

report is recorded without flattery: “these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11). These are not the portraits of men primed by expectation to see what they longed to see. They are portraits of men who required convincing, and said so afterward.

VI. The Origin of the Belief

The deepest historical puzzle is not the tomb or the appearances but the belief itself. N. T. Wright’s study of resurrection in ancient paganism and Judaism yields a double result. Paganism had no category for it: the ancient world knew ghosts, visions, and apotheoses, and held with one voice that dead men do not return in the body. Judaism had the category but not the timing: resurrection was what God would do for all the righteous together at the end of history, never for one man in the middle of it. Nobody, in other words, was expecting this. A crucified messiah was not a puzzle to be reinterpreted; he was a refuted claimant, as every other failed messianic movement of the period shows—the followers scattered, or found a new messiah in the family. What the movement did instead was proclaim, at once and in Jerusalem, that God had raised this one man within history. Beliefs that unprecedented do not simply condense out of grief. Something produced it, and the historian is obliged to ask what.

VII. The Alternatives, Each in Turn

The naturalistic alternatives have been tried in turn for two centuries, and each fails at a specific joint. That the disciples stole the body founders on their transformation and their deaths: conspirators do not endure flogging and execution, one by one and in scattered places, for what they know to be a corpse in a ditch; and the theft charge, as we saw, was the opponents’ concession that the tomb was empty. That Jesus survived the cross—the swoon theory—asks a scourged, crucified, speared man, half-dead behind a rolled stone, to present himself to his followers as the conqueror of death; the theory died with David Friedrich Strauss, who pointed out that such an apparition would have moved the disciples to fetch a physician, not to worship. That the appearances were hallucinations fails three times over: hallucinations are private events and do not come to groups of five hundred; they strike the bereaved and expectant, not enemies like Paul or skeptics like James; and they leave tombs occupied. A vision of the dead, in a Jewish frame, would have meant precisely that the man was dead—exalted perhaps, vindicated perhaps, but not risen. And that the whole account is legend collides with the creed: five years is not enough time, and the witnesses were alive to object. Each theory can be patched by borrowing from the others, but a hypothesis assembled from four failed ones inherits their failures; it does not escape them.

VIII. Hume's Bar, Reconsidered

There remains Hume, standing at the door: grant every fact above, and is an unknown natural cause not still more probable than a resurrection? Two things should be said. First, Hume's argument, taken strictly, is not an argument from evidence but a rule for ignoring it: if no testimony can establish a miracle even in principle, then the verdict was reached before the witnesses spoke, and what looks like weighing is dismissal. Uniform experience that dead men stay dead is exactly what the Christian claim asserts too—that is what makes the event a sign rather than an oddity—and to invoke that uniformity as disproof assumes the very question at issue: whether this case had a cause the others lack.

Second, the probability of a resurrection is not a fixed number; it depends on what else is true. If the universe is a closed system with no one outside it, a resurrection is maximally improbable, and some version of Hume's verdict follows. But whether the universe is such a system is the very question argued across this section of the site—from its contingency, its order, its moral law. If there is a God of the kind that argument supports, then a resurrection is not a random violation by nature but a purposeful act within it, and its probability is no longer governed by the frequency of corpses reviving. Hume's own test, honestly applied, invites the comparison: which is more miraculous—that the tomb was emptied and the witnesses transformed by an act of God, or that a collective hallucination struck enemies and skeptics, coincident with a body's unexplained disappearance, and issued in a belief without precedent? The skeptic who answers "still the latter" is entitled to his answer. He is not entitled to present it as the neutral verdict of history. A hostile witness is worth calling here. Antony Flew — for half a century the world's foremost philosophical atheist, and a leading critic of miracle claims — never accepted the resurrection. But asked about its evidence, he answered: "The evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It's outstandingly different in quality and quantity, I think, from the evidence offered for the occurrence of most other supposedly miraculous events." The concession decides nothing by itself; unbelief remained Flew's verdict on this question. But it fixes the floor: the case examined in this essay is, by the estimate of its ablest opponent, the best-evidenced miracle claim in the history of religion.

IX. Did Jesus Even Exist?

A word is needed about a theory that flourishes online while commanding almost no support among scholars of any persuasion: that Jesus of Nazareth never existed. Tacitus, no friend of Christians, records that "Christus" was executed under Pontius Pilate; Josephus refers to Jesus twice, once in a passage whose core survives every critical pruning and once in passing, as the brother of James. The crucifixion is attested as securely as nearly anything in ancient history. Mythicism's refutation has come as

vigorously from the skeptical side of the discipline as from the believing one—Ehrman wrote a full book against it—and it is mentioned here not because it deserves a place in the argument but because a reader will meet it, and should know that the people best placed to judge, whatever they conclude about the resurrection, do not take it seriously.

X. What Follows

Where does the argument land? Not in a proof; history does not deal in proofs, and this essay has not pretended otherwise. It lands in a set of facts granted by nearly everyone who studies them—the death, the early creed, the empty tomb attested from multiple directions, the appearances to friend and enemy, the sudden and unprecedented belief—and in the failure, joint by joint, of every natural explanation yet proposed. The Christian explanation covers the facts without strain. The alternatives cover them only by multiplying improbabilities and, at the last, by appealing to a rule that no evidence could ever satisfy. A reader who concludes that God raised Jesus from the dead is not believing against the evidence. He is following it.

One question this essay has deliberately not argued is what the risen body was—how the thing raised is related to the thing buried. That is its own dispute, with its own opponent, and it is taken up in the companion essay on this site, *Raised a Spirit, or Raised Bodily?* The two questions support one another: the evidence that the tomb was empty is evidence about what rose, and the nature of the resurrection body explains why the appearances were what they were. But they are distinct, and a reader persuaded here has only begun.

And Paul's terms still stand. If Christ has not been raised, the faith is in vain, and this website with it. Christianity is the only religion that hands its critics, in its founding document, the sentence that would destroy it. That it does so is not proof. But it is the posture of a faith that believes its own account of the facts, and after twenty centuries the tomb has still not produced a body.

Endnotes

1. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Section X, "Of Miracles": "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws..."; "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish." Text as at davidhume.org (E 10.12–13).
2. Bart Ehrman's position—that the historian, restricted to natural causes, cannot in principle conclude that a miracle occurred—is stated across his debates and popular works, and is summarized here rather than quoted. His acceptance of the crucifixion, the

disciples' experiences, and the early date of the 1 Corinthians 15 tradition is likewise a matter of published record.

3. The slogan “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” was popularized by Carl Sagan; its ancestry runs back through Marcello Truzzi to Laplace. It is answered in section VIII: the extraordinariness of a claim is relative to background knowledge, which is precisely what is in dispute.

4. 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): “the list of witnesses goes back to within the first five years after Jesus' death.”

5. William Lane Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 39–67, available at reasonablefaith.org; the eight lines of evidence are summarized in section IV, including the dating of the pre-Markan passion source by the unnamed high priest to within Caiaphas's tenure (AD 18–37).

6. On the guard story and the history of Jewish-Christian polemic—assertion and counter-assertion, each side conceding the empty tomb—see William Lane Craig, “The Guard at the Tomb,” *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984), 273–81; cf. Matthew 28:11–15.

7. N. T. Wright, “Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins,” *Gregorianum* 83/4 (2002), 615–635, and at full length *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress, 2003): resurrection as bodily by definition in both pagan and Jewish usage; the double mutation in Jewish hope; the fate of comparable messianic movements.

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; the point is summarized here.

9. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3 (the Testimonium, in its critically pruned core) and 20.9.1 (“the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James”). Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* (HarperOne, 2012), argues the historicity of Jesus against the mythicists from the skeptical side.

10. The companion essay, *Raised a Spirit, or Raised Bodily?*, answers the Watchtower's teaching that Jesus was raised a spirit creature, and treats 1 Corinthians 15:35–50 in detail.

11. Antony Flew and Gary Habermas, “My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism,” *Philosophia Christi* 6, no. 2 (2004): 197–211, at 209; quoted exactly from the copy in the site's reference library. Flew, then newly a deist, is answering Habermas's direct question

and explicitly declines to affirm the resurrection in the same breath — which is what makes the estimate evidential rather than partisan.

For Further Reading

Contemporary Scholarship and the Historical Evidence for the Resurrection, by William Lane Craig—the early creed, the empty tomb, and the appearances in brief.

The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus, by William Lane Craig—the eight lines of evidence, in full scholarly dress.

Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins, by N. T. Wright—why the belief itself is the thing that needs explaining.

The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright—the full 800-page treatment of resurrection in the ancient world.

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, by David Hume—§X, “Of Miracles”: the case against, from its strongest advocate. Free online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm>.

Did Jesus Exist?, by Bart Ehrman—the field’s leading skeptic against the mythicists.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§638–658, “On the third day he rose from the dead”. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2/186/>.

My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism, Antony Flew and Gary Habermas, *Philosophia Christi* (2004).

Hume’s Abject Failure, by John Earman—a philosopher of science, no believer in miracles, dismantling Hume’s argument; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/humesabjectfailu0000earm>.

if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:14

* * *

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

*as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

Copyright and Distribution

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved.

This essay may be reproduced and distributed freely, in printed or electronic form, provided that it is reproduced in whole and without alteration, and that the author's name is retained. Excerpts may be quoted in reviews, scholarly works, or other writings consistent with fair use, with attribution.

A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the historical case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ*, 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.