

Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ

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The Strategy: Five Possible Theories

We believe Christ's resurrection can be proved with at least as much certainty as any universally believed and well-documented event in ancient history. To prove this, we do not need to presuppose anything controversial (e.g. that miracles happen). But the skeptic must also not presuppose anything (e.g. that they do not). We do not need to presuppose that the New Testament is infallible, or divinely inspired or even true. We do not need to presuppose that there really was an empty tomb or post-resurrection appearances, as recorded. We need to presuppose only two things, both of which are hard data, empirical data, which no one denies: The existence of the New Testament texts as we have them, and the existence (but not necessarily the truth) of the Christian religion as we find it today.

The question is this: **Which theory about what really happened in Jerusalem on that first Easter Sunday can account for the data?**

There are five possible theories: Christianity, hallucination, myth, conspiracy and swoon.

1	Jesus died	Jesus rose	Christianity
2	Jesus died	Jesus didn't rise—apostles deceived	Hallucination
3	Jesus died	Jesus didn't rise—apostles myth-makers	Myth
4	Jesus died	Jesus didn't rise—apostles deceivers	Conspiracy
5	Jesus didn't die		Swoon

Theories 2 and 4 constitute a dilemma: if Jesus didn't rise, then the apostles, who taught that he did, were either deceived (if they thought he did) or deceivers (if they knew he didn't). The Modernists could not escape this dilemma until they came up with a middle category, myth. It is the most popular alternative today.

Thus either (1) the resurrection really happened, (2) the apostles were deceived by a hallucination, (3) the apostles created a myth, not meaning it literally, (4) the apostles were deceivers who conspired to foist on the world the most famous and successful lie in history, or (5) Jesus only swooned and was resuscitated, not resurrected. All five theories are logically possible, and therefore must be fairly investigated—even (1) ! They are also the *only* possibilities, unless we include really far-out ideas that responsible historians have never taken seriously, such as that Jesus was really a Martian who came in a flying saucer. Or that he never even existed; that the whole story was the world's greatest fantasy novel, written by some simple fisherman; that he was a literary character whom everyone in history mistook for a real person, including all Christians *and* their enemies, until some scholar many centuries later got the real scoop from sources unnamed. If we can refute all other theories (2-5), we will have proved the truth of the resurrection (1). The form of the argument here is similar to that of most of the arguments for the existence of God. Neither God nor the resurrection are directly observable, but from data that *are* directly observable we can argue that the only possible adequate explanation of this data is the Christian one. We shall take the four non-believing theories in the following order: from the simplest, least popular and most easily refuted to the most confusing, most popular and most complexly refuted: first swoon, then conspiracy, then hallucination and finally myth.

Refutation of the Swoon Theory: Nine Arguments

Nine pieces of evidence refute the swoon theory:

- (1) Jesus could not have survived crucifixion. Roman procedures were very careful to eliminate that possibility. Roman law even laid the death penalty on any soldier who let a capital prisoner escape in any way, including bungling a crucifixion. It was never done.
- (2) The fact that the Roman soldier did not break Jesus' legs, as he did to the other two crucified criminals (Jn 19:31-33), means that the soldier was sure Jesus was dead. Breaking the legs hastened the death so that the corpse could be taken down before the sabbath (v. 31).

(3) John, an eyewitness, certified that he saw blood and water come from Jesus' pierced heart (Jn 19:34-35). This shows that Jesus' lungs had collapsed and he had died of asphyxiation. Any medical expert can vouch for this.

(4) The body was totally encased in winding sheets and entombed (Jn 19:38-42).

(5) The post-resurrection appearances convinced the disciples, even "doubting Thomas," that Jesus was gloriously alive (Jn 20:19-29). It is psychologically impossible for the disciples to have been so transformed and confident if Jesus had merely struggled out of a swoon, badly in need of a doctor. A half-dead, staggering sick man who has just had a narrow escape is not worshiped fearlessly as divine lord and conquerer of death.

(6) How were the Roman guards at the tomb overpowered by a swooning corpse? Or by unarmed disciples? And if the disciples did it, they knowingly lied when they wrote the Gospels, and we are into the conspiracy theory, which we will refute shortly.

(7) How could a swooning half-dead man have moved the great stone at the door of the tomb? Who moved the stone if not an angel? No one has ever answered that question. Neither the Jews nor the Romans would move it, for it was in both their interests to keep the tomb sealed, the Jews had the stone put there in the first place, and the Roman guards would be killed if they let the body "escape."

The story the Jewish authorities spread, that the guards fell asleep and the disciples stole the body (Mt 28:11-15), is unbelievable. Roman guards would not fall asleep on a job like that; if they did, they would lose their lives. And even if they did fall asleep, the crowd and the effort and the noise it would have taken to move an enormous boulder would have wakened them.

Furthermore, we are again into the conspiracy theory, with all its unanswerable difficulties (see next section).

(8) If Jesus awoke from a swoon, where did he go? Think this through: you have a living body to deal with now, not a dead one. Why did it disappear? There is absolutely no data, not even any false, fantastic, imagined data, about Jesus' life after his crucifixion, in any sources, friend or foe, at any time, early or late. A man like that, with a past like that, would have left traces.

(9) Most simply, the swoon theory necessarily turns into the conspiracy theory or the hallucination theory, for the disciples testified that Jesus did not swoon but really died and really rose.

It may seem that these nine arguments have violated our initial principle about not presupposing the truth of the Gospel texts, since we have argued from data in the texts. But the swoon theory does not challenge the truths in the texts which we refer to as data; it uses them and explains them (by swoon rather than resurrection). Thus we use them too. We argue from our opponents' own premises.

Refutation of the Conspiracy Theory: Seven Arguments

Why couldn't the disciples have made up the whole story?

(1) Blaise Pascal gives a simple, psychologically sound proof for why this is unthinkable:

The apostles were either deceived or deceivers. Either supposition is difficult, for it is not possible to imagine that a man has risen from the dead. While Jesus was with them, he could sustain them; but afterwards, if he did not appear to them, who did make them act? The hypothesis that the Apostles were knaves is quite absurd. Follow it out to the end, and imagine these twelve men meeting after Jesus' death and conspiring to say that he has risen from the dead. This means attacking all the powers that be. The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery. One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more because of possible imprisonment, tortures and death, and they would all have been lost. Follow that out. (Pascal, *Pensees* 322, 310)

The "cruncher" in this argument is the historical fact that no one, weak or strong, saint or sinner, Christian or heretic, ever confessed, freely or under pressure, bribe or even torture, that the whole story of the resurrection was a fake a lie, a deliberate deception. Even when people broke under torture, denied Christ and worshiped Caesar, they never let *that* cat out of the bag, never revealed that the resurrection was their conspiracy. For that cat was never *in* that bag. No Christians believed the resurrection was a conspiracy; if they had, they wouldn't have become Christians.

(2) If they made up the story, they were the most creative, clever, intelligent fantasists in history, far surpassing Shakespeare, or Dante or Tolkien. Fisherman's "fish stories" are never that elaborate, that convincing, that life-changing, and that enduring.

(3) The disciples' character argues strongly against such a conspiracy on the part of all of them, with no dissenters. They were simple, honest, common peasants, not cunning, conniving liars. They weren't even lawyers! Their sincerity is proved by their words *and* deeds. They preached a resurrected Christ and they lived a resurrected Christ. They willingly died for their "conspiracy." Nothing proves sincerity like martyrdom. The change in their lives from fear to faith, despair to confidence, confusion to certitude, runaway cowardice to steadfast boldness under threat and persecution, not only proves their sincerity but testifies to some powerful cause of it. Can a lie cause such a transformation? Are truth and goodness such enemies that the greatest good in history—sanctity—has come from the greatest lie? Use your imagination and sense of perspective here. Imagine twelve poor, fearful, stupid (read the Gospels!) peasants changing the hard-nosed Roman world with a lie. And not an easily digested, attractive lie either. St. Thomas Aquinas says:

In the midst of the tyranny of the persecutors, an innumerable throng of people, both simple and learned, flocked to the Christian faith. In this faith there are truths proclaimed that surpass every human intellect; the pleasures of the flesh are curbed; it is taught that the things of the world should be spurned. Now, for the minds of mortal men to assent to these things is the greatest of miracles....This wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian faith is the clearest witness....For it would be truly more wonderful than all signs if the world had been led by simple and humble men to believe such lofty truths, to accomplish such difficult actions, and to have such high hopes. (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 6)

(4) There could be no possible motive for such a lie. Lies are always told for some selfish advantage. What advantage did the "conspirators" derive from their "lie" ? They were hated, scorned, persecuted, excommunicated, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, crucified, boiled alive, roasted, beheaded, disemboweled and fed to lions—hardly a catalog of perks!

(5) If the resurrection was a lie, the Jews would have produced the corpse and nipped this feared superstition in the bud. All they had to do was go to the tomb and get it. The Roman soldiers and their leaders were on their side, not the Christians'. And if the Jews couldn't get the body because the disciples stole it, how did they do that? The arguments against the swoon

theory hold here too: unarmed peasants could not have overpowered Roman soldiers or rolled away a great stone while they slept on duty.

(6) The disciples could not have gotten away with proclaiming the resurrection in Jerusalem—same time, same place, full of eyewitnesses—if it had been a lie. William Lane Craig says,

The Gospels were written in such a temporal and geographical proximity to the events they record that it would have been almost impossible to fabricate events....The fact that the disciples were able to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem in the face of their enemies a few weeks after the crucifixion shows that what they proclaimed was true, for they could never have proclaimed the resurrection (and been believed) under such circumstances had it not occurred. (*Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection*, chapter 6)

(7) If there had been a conspiracy, it would certainly have been unearthed by the disciples' adversaries, who had both the interest and the power to expose any fraud. Common experience shows that such intrigues are inevitably exposed (Craig, *ibid*).

In conclusion, if the resurrection was a concocted, conspired lie, it violates all known historical and psychological laws of lying. It is, then, as unscientific, as unrepeatably, unique and untestable as the resurrection itself. But unlike the resurrection, it is also contradicted by things we do know (the above points).

Refutation of the Hallucination Theory: Thirteen Arguments

If you thought you saw a dead man walking and talking, wouldn't you think it more likely that you were hallucinating than that you were seeing correctly? Why then not think the same thing about Christ's resurrection?

(1) There were too many witnesses. Hallucinations are private, individual, subjective. Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples minus Thomas, to the disciples including Thomas, to the two disciples at Emmaus, to the fisherman on the shore, to James (his "brother" or cousin), and even to five hundred people at once (1 Cor 15:3-8). Even three different witnesses are enough for a kind of psychological trigonometry; over five hundred is about as public as you can wish. And Paul says in this passage (v. 6) that most of the five hundred are still alive, inviting any reader to check the truth of the story by questioning the eyewitnesses—he could never have done this

and gotten away with it, given the power, resources and numbers of his enemies, if it were not true.

(2) The witnesses were qualified. They were simple, honest, moral people who had firsthand knowledge of the facts.

(3) The five hundred saw Christ together, at the same time and place. This is even more remarkable than five hundred private "hallucinations" at different times and places of the same Jesus. Five hundred separate Elvis sightings may be dismissed, but if five hundred simple fishermen in Maine saw, touched and talked with him at once, in the same town, that would be a different matter. (The only other dead person we know of who is reported to have appeared to hundreds of qualified and skeptical eyewitnesses at once is Mary the mother of Jesus [at Fatima, to 70,000]. And that was not a claim of physical resurrection but of a vision.)

(4) Hallucinations usually last a few seconds or minutes; rarely hours. This one hung around for forty days (Acts 1:3).

(5) Hallucinations usually happen only once, except to the insane. This one returned many times, to ordinary people (Jn 20:19-21:14; Acts 1:3).

(6) Hallucinations come from within, from what we already know, at least unconsciously. This one said and did surprising and unexpected things (Acts 1:4,9)—like a real person and unlike a dream.

(7) Not only did the disciples not expect this, they didn't even believe it at first—neither Peter, nor the women, nor Thomas, nor the eleven. They thought he was a ghost; he had to eat something to prove he was not (Lk 24:36-43).

(8) Hallucinations do not eat. The resurrected Christ did, on at least two occasions (Lk 24:42-43; Jn 21:1-14).

(9) The disciples touched him (Mt 28:9; Lk 24:39; Jn 20:27).

(10) They also spoke with him, and he spoke back. Figments of your imagination do not hold profound, extended conversations with you, unless you have the kind of mental disorder that isolates you. But this "hallucination" conversed with at least eleven people at once, for forty days (Acts 1:3).

(11) The apostles could not have believed in the "hallucination" if Jesus' corpse had still been in the tomb. This is a very simple and telling point; for if it was a hallucination, where was the corpse? They would have checked for it; if it was there, they could not have believed.

(12) If the apostles had hallucinated and then spread their hallucinogenic story, the Jews would have stopped it by producing the body—unless the disciples had stolen it, in which case we are back with the conspiracy theory and all its difficulties.

(13) A hallucination would explain only the post-resurrection appearances; it would not explain the empty tomb, the rolled-away stone, or the inability to produce the corpse. No theory can explain all these data except a real resurrection. C.S. Lewis says,

Any theory of hallucination breaks down on the fact (and if it is invention [rather than fact], it is the oddest invention that ever entered the mind of man) that on three separate occasions this hallucination was not immediately recognized as Jesus (Lk 24:13-31; Jn 20:15; 21:4). Even granting that God sent a holy hallucination to teach truths already widely believed without it, and far more easily taught by other methods, and certain to be completely obscured by this, might we not at least hope that he would get the face of the hallucination *right*? Is he who made all faces such a bungler that he cannot even work up a recognizable likeness of the Man who was himself? (*Miracles*, chapter 16)

Some of these arguments are as old as the Church Fathers. Most go back to the eighteenth century, especially William Paley. How do unbelievers try to answer them? Today, few even try to meet these arguments, although occasionally someone tries to refurbish one of the three theories of swoon, conspiracy or hallucination (e.g. Schonfield's conspiratorial *The Passover Plot*). But the counter-attack today most often takes one of the two following forms.

1. Some dismiss the resurrection simply because it is miraculous, thus throwing the whole issue back to whether miracles are possible. They argue, as Hume did, that any other explanation is always more probable than a miracle. For a refutation of these arguments, see our chapter on miracles (chapter 5).
2. The other form of counter-attack, by far the most popular, is to try to escape the traditional dilemma of "deceivers" (conspirators) or "deceived" (hallucinators) by interpreting the Gospels as myth—neither literally true nor literally false, but spiritually or symbolically true. This is the standard line of liberal theology departments in

colleges, universities and seminaries throughout the Western world today.

Refutation of the Myth Theory: Six Arguments

(1) The style of the Gospels is radically and clearly different from the style of all the myths. Any literary scholar who knows and appreciates myths can verify this. There are no overblown, spectacular, childishly exaggerated events. Nothing is arbitrary. Everything fits in. Everything is meaningful. The hand of a master is at work here.

Psychological depth is at a maximum. In myth it is at a minimum. In myth, such spectacular external events happen that it would be distracting to add much internal depth of character. That is why it is ordinary people like Alice who are the protagonists of extra-ordinary adventures like Wonderland. That character depth and development of everyone in the Gospels—especially, of course, Jesus himself—is remarkable. It is also done with an incredible economy of words. Myths are verbose; the Gospels are laconic (concise). There are also telltale marks of eyewitness description, like the little detail of Jesus writing in the sand when asked whether to stone the adulteress or not (Jn 8:6). No one knows why this is put in; nothing comes of it. The only explanation is that the writer saw it. If this detail and others like it throughout all four Gospels were invented, then a first-century tax collector (Matthew), a "young man" (Mark), a doctor (Luke), and a fisherman (John) all independently invented the new genre of realistic fantasy nineteen centuries before it was reinvented in the twentieth.

The stylistic point is argued so well by C.S. Lewis in "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism" (in *Christian Reflections* and also in *Fern-Seed and Elephants*) that we strongly refer the reader to it as the best comprehensive anti-demythologizing essay we have seen.

Let us be even more specific. Let us compare the Gospels with two particular mythic writings from around that time to see for ourselves the stylistic differences. The first is the so-called Gospel of Peter, a forgery from around A.D. 125 which John Dominic Crossan (of the "Jesus Seminar"), a current media darling among the doubters, insists is earlier than the four Gospels. As William Lane Craig puts it:

In this account, the tomb is not only surrounded by Roman guards but also by all the Jewish Pharisees and elders as well as a great multitude from all the surrounding countryside who have come to

watch the resurrection. Suddenly in the night there rings out a loud voice in heaven, and two men descend from heaven to the tomb. The stone over the door rolls back by itself, and they go into the tomb. The three men come out of the tomb, two of them holding up the third man. The heads of the two men reach up into the clouds, but the head of the third man reaches beyond the clouds. Then a cross comes out of the tomb, and a voice from heaven asks, 'Have you preached to them that sleep?' And the cross answers, 'Yes.' (*Apologetics*, p. 189)

Here is a second comparison, from Richard Purtill:

It may be worthwhile to take a quick look, for purposes of comparison at the closest thing we have around the time of the Gospels to an attempt at a realistic fantasy. This is the story of Apollonius of Tyana, written about A.D. 250 by Flavius Philostratus....There is some evidence that a neo-Pythagorean sage named Apollonius may really have lived, and thus Philostratus' work is a real example of what have thought the Gospels to be: a fictionalized account of the life of a real sage and teacher, introducing miraculous elements to build up the prestige of the central figure. It thus gives us a good look at what a real example of a fictionalized biography would look like, written at a time and place not too far removed from those in which the Gospels were written.

The first thing we notice is the fairy-tale atmosphere. There is a rather nice little vampire story, which inspired a minor poem by Keats entitled Lamia. There are animal stories about, for instance, snakes in India big enough to drag off and eat an elephant. The sage wanders from country to country and wherever he goes he is likely to be entertained by the king or emperor, who holds long conversations with him and sends him on his way with camels and precious stones.

Here is a typical passage about healing miracles: 'A woman who had had seven miscarriages was cured through the prayers of her husband, as follows. The Wise Man told the husband, when his wife was in labor, to bring a live rabbit under his cloak to the place where she was, walk around her and immediately release the rabbit;

for she would lose her womb as well as her baby if the rabbit was not immediately driven away.' [Bk 3, sec 39]

The point is that this is what you get when the imagination goes to work. Once the boundaries of fact are crossed we wander into fairyland. And very nice too, for amusement or recreation. But the Gospels are set firmly in the real Palestine of the first century, and the little details are not picturesque inventions but the real details that only an eyewitness or a skilled realistic novelist can give. (*Thinking About Religion*, p. 75-76)

(2) A second problem is that there was not enough time for myth to develop. The original demythologizers pinned their case onto a late second-century date for the writing of the Gospels; several generations have to pass before the added mythological elements can be mistakenly believed to be facts. Eyewitnesses would be around before that to discredit the new, mythic versions. We know of other cases where myths and legends of miracles developed around a religious founder—for example, Buddha, Lao-tzu and Muhammad. In each case, many generations passed before the myth surfaced.

The dates for the writing of the Gospels have been pushed back by every empirical manuscript discovery; only abstract hypothesizing pushes the date forward. Almost no knowledgeable scholar today holds what Bultmann said it was necessary to hold in order to believe the myth theory, namely, that there is no first-century textual evidence that Christianity began with a divine and resurrected Christ, not a human and dead one.

Some scholars still dispute the first-century date for the Gospels, especially John's. But no one disputes that Paul's letters were written within the lifetime of eyewitnesses to Christ. So let us argue from Paul's letters. Either these letters contain myth or they do not. If so, there is lacking the several generations necessary to build up a commonly believed myth. There is not even *one* generation. If these letters are *not* myth, then the Gospels are not either, for Paul affirms all the main claims of the Gospels.

Julius Muller put the anti-myth argument this way:

One cannot imagine how such a series of legends could arise in an historical age, obtain universal respect, and supplant the historical recollection of the true character [Jesus]....if eyewitnesses were still at hand who could be questioned respecting the truth of the recorded

marvels. Hence, legendary fiction, as it likes not the clear present time but prefers the mysterious gloom of gray antiquity, is wont to seek a remoteness of age, along with that of space, and to remove its boldest and most rare and wonderful creations into a very remote and unknown land. (*The Theory of Myths in Its Application to the Gospel History Examined and Confuted* [London, 1844], p. 26)

Muller challenged his nineteenth-century contemporaries to produce a single example anywhere in history of a great myth or legend arising around a historical figure and being generally believed within thirty years after that figure's death. No one has ever answered him.

(3) The myth theory has two layers. The first layer is the historical Jesus, who was not divine, did not claim divinity, performed no miracles, and did not rise from the dead. The second, later, mythologized layer is the Gospels as we have them, with a Jesus who claimed to be divine, performed miracles and rose from the dead. The problem with this theory is simply that there is not the slightest bit of any real evidence whatever for the existence of any such first layer. The two-layer cake theory has the first layer made entirely of air—and hot air at that.

St. Augustine refutes the two-layer theory with his usual condensed power and simplicity:

The speech of one Elpidius, who had spoken and disputed face to face against the Manichees, had already begun to affect me at Carthage, when he produced arguments from Scripture which were not easy to answer. And the answer they [the Manichees, who claimed to be the true Christians] gave seemed to me feeble—indeed they preferred not to give it in public but only among ourselves in private—the answer being that the Scriptures of the New Testament had been corrupted by some persons unknown...yet the Manicheans made no effort to produce uncorrupted copies. (*Confessions*, V, 11, Sheed translation)

Note the sarcasm in the last sentence. It still applies today. William Lane Craig summarizes the evidence—the *lack* of evidence:

The Gospels are a miraculous story, and we have no other story handed down to us than that contained in the Gospels....The letters of Barnabas and Clement refer to Jesus' miracles and resurrection. Polycarp mentions the resurrection of Christ, and Irenaeus relates

that he had heard Polycarp tell of Jesus' miracles. Ignatius speaks of the resurrection. Quadratus reports that persons were still living who had been healed by Jesus. Justin Martyr mentions the miracles of Christ. No relic of a non-miraculous story exists. That the original story should be lost and replaced by another goes beyond any known example of corruption of even oral tradition, not to speak of the experience of written transmissions. These facts show that the story in the Gospels was in substance the same story that Christians had at the beginning. This means...that the resurrection of Jesus was always a part of the story. (*Apologetics*, chapter 6)

(4) A little detail, seldom noticed, is significant in distinguishing the Gospels from myth: the first witnesses of the resurrection were women. In first-century Judaism, women had low social status and no legal right to serve as witnesses. If the empty tomb were an invented legend, its inventors surely would not have had it discovered by women, whose testimony was considered worthless. If, on the other hand, the writers were simply reporting what they saw, they would have to tell the truth, however socially and legally inconvenient.

(5) The New Testament could not be myth misinterpreted and confused with fact because it specifically distinguishes the two and repudiates the mythic interpretation (2 Peter 1:16). Since it explicitly says it is not myth, if it *is* myth it is a deliberate lie rather than myth. The dilemma still stands. It is either truth or lie, whether deliberate (conspiracy) or non-deliberate (hallucination). There is no escape from the horns of this dilemma. Once a child asks whether Santa Claus is real, your yes becomes a lie, not myth, if he is not literally real. Once the New Testament distinguishes myth from fact, it becomes a lie if the resurrection is not fact.

(6) William Lane Craig has summarized the traditional textual arguments with such clarity, condensation and power that we quote him here at length. The following arguments (rearranged and outlined from *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection*) prove two things: first, that the Gospels were written by the disciples, not later myth-makers, and second, that the Gospels we have today are essentially the same as the originals.

(A) Proof that the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses:

1. Internal evidence, from the Gospels themselves:

a. The style of writing in the Gospels is simple and alive, what we would expect from their traditionally accepted authors.

- b. Moreover, since Luke was written before Acts, and since Acts was written prior to the death of Paul, Luke must have an early date, which speaks for its authenticity.
- c. The Gospels also show an intimate knowledge of Jerusalem prior to its destruction in A.D. 70. The Gospels are full of proper names, dates, cultural details, historical events, and customs and opinions of that time.
- d. Jesus' prophecies of that event (the destruction of Jerusalem) must have been written prior to Jerusalem's fall, for otherwise the church would have separated out the apocalyptic element in the prophecies, which makes them appear to concern the end of the world. Since the end of the world did not come about when Jerusalem was destroyed, the so-called prophecies of its destruction that were really written after the city was destroyed would not have made that event appear so closely connected with the end of the world. Hence, the Gospels must have been written prior to A.D. 70.
- e. The stories of Jesus' human weaknesses and of the disciples' faults also bespeak the Gospels' accuracy.
- f. Furthermore, it would have been impossible for forgers to put together so consistent a narrative as that which we find in the Gospels. The Gospels do not try to suppress apparent discrepancies, which indicates their originality (written by eyewitnesses). There is no attempt at harmonization between the Gospels, such as we might expect from forgers.
- g. The Gospels do not contain anachronisms; the authors appear to have been first-century Jews who were witnesses of the events.

We may conclude that there is no more reason to doubt that the Gospels come from the traditional authors than there is to doubt that the works of Philo or Josephus are authentic, *except* that the Gospels contain supernatural events.

2. External evidence:

- a. The disciples must have left *some* writings, engaged as they were in giving lessons to and counseling believers who were geographically distant; and what could these writings be if not the Gospels and epistles themselves? Eventually the apostles would have needed to publish accurate narratives of Jesus' history, so that any

spurious attempts would be discredited and the genuine Gospels preserved.

- b. There were many eyewitnesses who were still alive when the books were written who could testify whether they came from their purported authors or not.
- c. The extra-biblical testimony unanimously attributes the Gospels to their traditional authors: the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistle of Clement, the Shepherd of Hermes, Theophilus, Hippolytus, Origen, Quadratus, Irenaeus, Melito, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Dionysius, Tertullian, Cyprian, Tatian, Caius, Athanasius, Cyril, up to Eusebius in A.D. 315, even Christianity's opponents conceded this: Celsus, Porphyry, Emperor Julian.
- d. With a single exception, no apocryphal gospel is ever quoted by any known author during the first three hundred years after Christ. In fact there is no evidence that any inauthentic gospel whatever existed in the first century, in which all four Gospels and Acts were written.

(B) Proof that the Gospels we have today are the same Gospels originally written:

1. Because of the need for instruction and personal devotion, these writings must have been copied many times, which increases the chances of preserving the original text.
2. In fact, no other ancient work is available in so many copies and languages, and yet all these various versions agree in content.
3. The text has also remained unmarred by heretical additions. The abundance of manuscripts over a wide geographical distribution demonstrates that the text has been transmitted with only trifling discrepancies. The differences that do exist are quite minor and are the result of unintentional mistakes.
4. The quotations of the New Testament books in the early Church Fathers all coincide.
5. The Gospels could not have been corrupted without a great outcry on the part of all orthodox Christians.
6. No one could have corrupted *all* the manuscripts.
7. There is no precise time when the falsification could have occurred, since, as we have seen, the New Testament books are cited by the

Church Fathers in regular and close succession. The text could not have been falsified before all external testimony, since then the apostles were still alive and could repudiate such tampering.

8. The text of the New Testament is every bit as good as the text of the classical works of antiquity. To repudiate the textual parity of the Gospels would be to reverse all the rules of criticism and to reject all the works of antiquity, since the text of those works is less certain than that of the Gospels.

Richard Purtill summarizes the textual case:

Many events which are regarded as firmly established historically have (1) far less documentary evidence than many biblical events; (2) and the documents on which historians rely for much secular history are written much longer after the event than many records of biblical events; (3) furthermore, we have many more copies of biblical narratives than of secular histories; and (4) the surviving copies are much earlier than those on which our evidence for secular history is based. If the biblical narratives did not contain accounts of miraculous events, biblical history would probably be regarded as much more firmly established than most of the history of, say, classical Greece and Rome. (*Thinking About Religion*, p. 84-85)

Conclusions: More Objections Answered

No alternative to a real resurrection has yet explained: the existence of the Gospels, the origin of the Christian faith, the failure of Christ's enemies to produce his corpse, the empty tomb, the rolled-away stone, or the accounts of the post-resurrection appearances. Swoon, conspiracy, hallucination and myth have been shown to be the only alternatives to a real resurrection, and each has been refuted.

What reasons could be given at this point for anyone who still would refuse to believe? At this point, general rather than specific objections are usually given. For instance:

Objection 1: History is not an exact science. It does not yield absolute certainty like mathematics.

Reply: This is true, but why would you note that fact now and not when you speak of Caesar or Luther or George Washington? History is not exact, but it is sufficient. No one doubts that Caesar crossed the

Rubicon; why do many doubt that Jesus rose from the dead? The evidence for the latter is much better than for the former.

Objection 2: You can't trust documents. Paper proves nothing. Anything can be forged.

Reply: This is simply ignorance. Not trusting documents is like not trusting telescopes. Paper evidence suffices for most of what we believe; why should it suddenly become suspect here?

Objection 3: Because the resurrection is miraculous. It's the content of the idea rather than the documentary evidence for it that makes it incredible.

Reply: Now we finally have a straightforward objection—not to the documentary evidence but to miracles. This is a philosophical question, not a scientific, historical or textual question. (See chapter five in this book for an answer).

Objection 4: It's not only miracles in general but this miracle in particular that is objectionable. The resurrection of a corpse is crass, crude, vulgar, literalistic and materialistic. Religion should be more spiritual, inward, ethical.

Reply: If religion is what we invent, we can make it whatever we like. If it is what God invented, then we have to take it as we find it, just as we have to take the universe as we find it, rather than as we'd like it to be. *Death* is crass, crude, vulgar, literal and material. The resurrection meets death where it is and conquers it, rather than merely spouting some harmless, vaporous abstractions about spirituality. The resurrection is as vulgar as the God who did it. He also made mud and bugs and toenails.

Objection 5: But a literalistic interpretation of the resurrection ignores the profound dimensions of meaning found in the symbolic, spiritual and mythic realms that have been deeply explored by other religions. Why are Christians so narrow and exclusive? Why can't they see the profound symbolism in the idea of resurrection?

Reply: They can. It's not either-or. Christianity does not invalidate the myths, it validates them, by incarnating them. It is "myth become fact," to use the title of a germane essay by C.S. Lewis (in *God in the Dock*). Why prefer a one-layer cake to a two-layer cake? Why refuse either the literal-historical or the mythic-symbolic aspects of the resurrection? The Fundamentalist refuses the mythic-symbolic aspects because he has seen

what the Modernist has done with it: used it to exclude the literal-historical aspects. Why have the Modernists done that? What terrible fate awaits them if they follow the multifarious and weighty evidence and argument that naturally emerges from the data, as we have summarized it here in this chapter?

The answer is not obscure: traditional Christianity awaits them, complete with adoration of Christ as God, obedience to Christ as Lord, dependence on Christ as Savior, humble confession of sin and a serious effort to live Christ's life of self-sacrifice, detachment from the world, righteousness, holiness and purity of thought, word and deed. The historical evidence is massive enough to convince the open-minded inquirer. By analogy with any other historical event, the resurrection has eminently credible evidence behind it. To disbelieve it, you must deliberately make an exception to the rules you use everywhere else in history. Now why would someone want to do that?

Ask yourself that question if you dare, and take an honest look into your heart before you answer.

Sources for Further Study:

- *Who Moved the Stone?* by Frank Morison (1930)
 - *The Son Rises* (Moody Press, 1981) *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection* (Servant Books, 1988) *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Moody Press, 1984) all three by William Lane Craig
 - *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Baker Books, 1980) *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* (Harper and Row, 1987) both by Gary Habermas (latter with atheist Antony Flew)
 - *Christian Apologetics* (Baker Books, 1976) by Norman Geisler
 - *Easter Enigma* (Academie Books, 1984) by John Wenham (on the consistency of the Gospel narratives)
 - *The Resurrection Report* (Broadman and Holman, 1998) by William Proctor (journalist)
-

Loving God, by Charles Colson
Chapter 6: “Watergate and the Resurrection”

Later on March 21 (the specific dates are important) Haldeman called Mitchell in New York and Mitchell, in turn, told Jeb Magruder, his campaign assistant, he would “assist” him if he went to jail. That was also the day \$75,000 in additional money was dispatched to Hunt for “lawyer’s fees.” The President conferred again with Haldeman and Ehrlichman and Dean. And that same evening the President, without disclosing anything that had gone on that busy day, called me at home for a thirty-one minute conversation.

Though I had officially left his staff, it was not surprising to receive a call from the President; he had told me he wanted to continue to call on me for advice. What was surprising was the President’s impatient, almost distracted voice. I had spent countless hours across a desk from him or on the phone and could almost always read his mood. When big issues were on his mind, like Vietnam bombings or dealings with China, the President was remarkably cool. When little things came to his attention, like sniping in the press, he seemed the most unnerved.

The evening of March 21 he quickly dispensed with small talk and plunged into Watergate.

“What’s your judgment as to what ... what ought to be done now ... whether, uh, there should be, uh, a uh, report made or something, you know, or just hunker down and take it or what?”

The official transcripts show my reply. “The problem I foresee in this is not what has happened so far—that is, the mystery of the Watergate. I don’t know whether somebody else higher up in the Committee for the Re-election is gonna get named or not but, uh, to me that isn’t of very great consequence to the country if it happens. The thing that worries me is that, is the possibility of somebody, uh, charging an obstruction of justice problem — in other words that the subsequent actions would worry me more than anything.”

I then went on to suggest that the President remove Dean and appoint an independent Special Counsel to handle Watergate for him. Though I wasn’t aware then of earlier meetings with Dean and the others, it was, as hindsight confirms, good advice. But those chilling words “obstruction of justice” must have made the President’s day. No wonder he didn’t call me again for two weeks!

After March 21 everything changed—it was all downhill, and fast. Conversations grew thick and heavy the next week: talk of perjury, “stonewalling,” obstruction of justice, the kind of stuff that gives grown men weak knees and sweaty palms. On March 23 Judge Sirica released a letter from one of the Watergate burglars who had made a deal; he would tell all in exchange for a lighter sentence. That afternoon Haldeman called me with a series of questions: Had I promised clemency to Howard Hunt? Had I urged the campaign people to get intelligence on the Democrats? Bob’s voice was cool, as always, but from the way he repeated my answers, I was certain someone else was in the room with him—the President. His questions also revealed what was happening behind the massive iron gates of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The occupants were stocking the bunkers for what they now realized would be a bloody siege. Increasingly distrustful of my colleagues and sensing that all was not well, I dictated a memorandum of our conversation as soon as I hung up the phone.

Thinly disguised panic began to sweep the plush offices of the stately old building that houses the most influential and powerful men in the world. Events escalated so fast there was no way to keep track of them. As the press bannered allegations that campaign officials had ordered the break-in, Dean rushed off to Camp David to write a “report.”

On March 26 the grand jury reconvened to hear new charges from one of the original burglars. That same day Dean called Magruder and taped his conversation. On March 27 Haldeman and Ehrlichman discussed the crisis for two and a half hours with the President. Also, Mitchell met with Magruder to discuss clemency, while Mitchell’s wife, Martha, made one of her legendary calls to the New York Times, charging that someone was trying to make a “goat” out of her husband.

While at Camp David on March 25, John Dean had secretly contacted an old law school classmate for advice on the best criminal lawyer he could hire. Five days later he retained a tough ex-Kennedy administration prosecutor, Charles Schaeffer. Then on April 8, 1973, Dean met with Watergate prosecutors to bargain his testimony for immunity and save his own hide, as he acknowledged with refreshing candor in his memoirs.¹

Within hours the cover-up collapsed. Magruder, already in contact with the prosecutors, began negotiations in earnest. Dave Shapiro, sensing it was now “every man for himself,” coaxed me into

taking a lie detector test to establish my innocence, then gave the results to the New York Times. The prosecutors called me; I offered to testify.

The White House was like a frontline command post under heavy shelling. Though men like Ehrlichman and Haldeman put on a brave front, they trusted no one and were taping every phone conversation.

Daily headlines fed the public fresh tidbits, mostly from stories leaked by aides or their lawyers seeking to clear their skirts or entice the prosecutors into a better deal. Meanwhile, the prosecutors were so busy with White House officials offering testimony that they couldn't handle the traffic in and out of their offices. Suddenly Watergate was a three-ring circus.

History reveals that after the criminal investigation of the White House began—as it did with Dean's April 8 meeting with the prosecutors—the end of Mr. Nixon's presidency was only a matter of time. The cover-up was discovered—and doomed—and this is why the dates are so important. For though the cover-up technically dated back to the June, 1972, break-in, the serious cover-up—the part everyone knew or should have known was criminal—really began March 21, 1973. And it ended April 8, 1973.

With the most powerful office in the world at stake, a small band of hand-picked loyalists, no more than ten of us, could not hold a conspiracy together for more than two weeks.

Think of what was at stake: Each of us involved—Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Mitchell, and the rest—believed passionately in President Nixon. To enter government service for him we had sacrificed very lucrative private law practices and other endeavors; we had sacrificed our family lives and privacy; we had invested our whole lives in the work, twenty-four hours a day if necessary. Only a few months earlier the President had been re-elected in a historic landslide victory; the ugly Asian war was finally over; we were riding the crest in every way.

Think of the power at our fingertips: a mere command from one of us could mobilize generals and cabinet officers, even armies; we could hire or fire personnel and manage billions in agency budgets.

Think of the privileges: a call to the military aide's office would produce a limousine or jet airplane; the National Gallery delivered classic paintings to adorn our office walls; red-jacketed stewards stood in waiting to serve food and drink twenty-four hours a day; private phones appeared wherever we traveled; secret service men were always within sight—as many as we wanted.

Yet even the prospect of jeopardizing the President we'd worked so hard to elect, of losing the prestige, power, and personal luxury of our offices was not enough incentive to make this group of men contain a lie. Nor, as I reflect today, was the pressure really all that great; at that point there had certainly been moral failures, criminal violations, even perjury by some. There was certain to be keen embarrassment; at the worst, some might go to prison, though that possibility was by no means certain. But no one was in grave danger; *no one's life was at stake*.

Yet after just a few weeks the natural human instinct for self-preservation was so overwhelming that the conspirators, one by one, deserted their leader, walked away from their cause, turned their backs on the power, prestige, and privileges.

So what does all this have to do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Simply this:

Modern criticism of the historic truth of Christianity boils down to three propositions: first, that the disciples were mistaken; or second, that the disciples knowingly perpetrated a myth, intended as a symbol; or third, the eleven disciples conceived a "Passover plot"—spirited the body of Christ out of the tomb and disposed of it neatly—and to their dying breaths maintained conspiratorial silence.

Let's consider each.

The first is the shakiest. After all, a man being raised from the dead is a rather mind-boggling event—not the kind of thing people are likely to be vague or indecisive about. The Scriptures state very honestly that the disciples were so staggered by Jesus' reappearance that at least one demanded the tangible proof of fingering the wounds in His hands and side. Jesus knew human nature, knew they needed physical evidence. Luke says, "He showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days...."² The records of the event, written independently by various eyewitness reporters, belie the possibility that the disciples were mistaken.

But could it have been a myth? This second theory seems plausible at first since it was customary in the first century to convey religious truths through symbols. But this assumes that all the disciples understood that they were using a symbolic device. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals not allegory or fable, but a straightforward, narrative account. Moreover, Paul, an intimate associate of the original disciples, shatters the myth theory altogether

when he argues that if Jesus was not actually resurrected, Christianity is a hoax, a sham.³ Nothing in Paul's writings remotely suggests mythology.

The myth theory is even more untenable than the mistake theory. So if one is to assail the historicity of the Resurrection and therefore the deity of Christ, one must conclude that there was a conspiracy — a cover-up if you will—by eleven men with the complicity of up to five hundred others. To subscribe to this argument, one must also be ready to believe that each disciple was willing to be ostracized by friends and family, live in daily fear of death, endure prisons, live penniless and hungry, sacrifice family, be tortured without mercy, and ultimately die—all without ever once renouncing that Jesus had risen from the dead!

This is why the Watergate experience is so instructive for me. If John Dean and the rest of us were so panic-stricken, not by the prospect of beatings and execution, but by political disgrace and a possible prison term, one can only speculate about the emotions of the disciples. Unlike the men in the White House, the disciples were powerless people, abandoned by their leader, homeless in a conquered land. Yet they clung tenaciously to their enormously offensive story that their leader had risen from His ignoble death and was alive—and was *the* Lord.

The Watergate cover-up reveals, I think, the true nature of humanity. None of the memoirs suggest that anyone went to the prosecutor's office out of such noble notions as putting the Constitution above the President, or bringing rascals to justice, or even moral indignation. Instead, the writings of those involved are consistent recitations of the frailty of man. Even political zealots at the pinnacle of power will save their own necks in the crunch, though it may be at the expense of the one they profess to serve so zealously.

Is it really likely, then, that a deliberate cover-up, a plot to perpetuate a lie about the Resurrection, could have survived the violent persecution of the apostles, the scrutiny of early church councils, the horrendous purge of the first-century believers who were cast by the thousands to the lions for refusing to renounce the Lordship of Christ? Is it not probable that at least one of the apostles would have renounced Christ before being beheaded or stoned? Is it not likely that some "smoking gun" document might have been produced exposing the "Passover plot"? Surely one of the conspirators would have made a deal

with the authorities (government and Sanhedrin probably would have welcomed such a soul with open arms and pocketbooks!).

Blaise Pascal, the extraordinary mathematician, scientist, inventor, and logician of the seventeenth century, was convinced of the truth of Christ by examination of the historical record. In his classic *Pensees*, Pascal wrote: "The hypothesis that the apostles were knaves is quite absurd. Follow it out to the end and imagine these twelve [sic] men meeting after Jesus' death and conspiring to say that he had risen from the dead. This means attacking all the powers that be. *The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery.* One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more because of possible imprisonment, torture and death, and they would all have been lost."⁴

As Pascal correctly observes, man in his normal state will renounce his beliefs just as readily as Peter renounced Jesus *before* the Resurrection. But as the same Peter discovered *after* the Resurrection, there is a power beyond man that causes him to forsake all. It is the power of the God who revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

Take it from one who was inside the Watergate web looking out, who saw firsthand how vulnerable a cover-up is: Nothing less than a witness as awesome as the resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive and Lord.

This weight of evidence tells me the apostles were indeed telling the truth: Jesus did rise bodily from the grave; He is who He says He is. Thus, He speaks with the absolute authority of the all-powerful God. And that fact breaks what might otherwise be considered a circular argument.

Thus we can arrive at some crucial conclusions about Holy Scripture:

(1) The Bible is the Word of God. For the Son of God who speaks with absolute authority did not use the Scriptures as pious sayings or as a guide for the fulfilling Christian life. He regarded Scripture as the revelation of God Himself.

(2) Jesus entrusted His own life to the Scriptures, relying on them totally. He submitted to the authority of Scripture.

(3) Examining Jesus' stand on Scripture throughout His ministry, it is clear that He believed the Word infallible and *inerrant* —that is, reliable and without error.⁵

How can we who purport to follow Him do any differently?