The Case Against The Resurrection

Chase D. Byers

# Text: Matthew 26-28; Mark 14-16; Luke 22-24; John 18-21

# Introduction:

# The goal of this outline is two-fold:

## Summarize the most popular and wide-spread reasoning for why Jesus Christ of Nazareth did not rise from the dead. Listed below are the objections we will discuss in further detail. An attempt has been made to examine them in the chronological order in which they have been made (earliest to most recent).

### **Theft Theory** (1st CE): The disciples of Jesus stole his body (Mt. 28:13)

### **Swoon Theory** (7th & 18th CE): Jesus never really died on the cross.

### **Fabrication Theory** (19th CE): The resurrection of Jesus was fabricated by the early disciples or so-called Christians in the 2nd or 3rd century. This theory also explores the unreliability of eye-witness testimony.

### **Wrong Tomb Theory** (20th CE): Jesus never rose, people just looked in the wrong tomb and asserted that he rose.

### **Hallucination/Visions Theory** (20th CE): All who claimed to see the risen Jesus were hallucinating.

### **Memory Distortion Theory** (21st CE): In recent years, Bart Ehrman has asserted that the disciples and early Christians have misremembered and exaggerated their memory of Jesus and what he did when living. Much attention is given to human memory and Bart’s thorough research into the mind’s ability to recall core memories.

## Concisely answer each objection in a way that defends our reasoning for the hope within us. (1 Pet. 3:15)

### Another lecture in this series will be dedicated to making the case for the resurrection of Jesus, so many of my objections to these theories will necessarily overlap with what will be presented in that lecture.

### Therefore, my work will not be exhaustive for each theory, but concise.

# A few reminders for those interested in studying this topic:

## Ecclesiastes 12:12-13 – “But beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body. When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity.”

### Much study and reading has been done to explore the countless objections men give to deny our Lord’s resurrection. It can be exhausting at times to give an ear to some fruitless theorizing.

### I would encourage anyone interested in this topic to allow God’s word to be what shapes our thinking, and to never allow man’s reasoning to trump the mind of our great God. The resurrection is a beautiful mystery that even the Apostle Paul was in awe of. (1 Corinthians 15)

# Body:

# **THEFT THEORY (1st CE)**

## **Basics of the theory**

### Although Jesus’ tomb was found empty, it was only because his body was stolen out of the tomb.

### Mostly favored view: The apostles would be chief suspects because they remembered what Jesus had been saying concerning his death and resurrection.

#### After all, Jesus did predict this happening 3 times (Mt. 16:21-22; 17:22-23; 20:17-19 & Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34)

## **History of the theory**

### 1st CE. Rumor created by the chief priests, spread by the paid off guards of Jesus tomb.

#### “As they were on their way, some of the guards came into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders and agreed on a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money and told them, “Say this, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were sleeping.’ If this reaches the governor’s ears, we will deal with him and keep you out of trouble.” They took the money and did as they were instructed, and this story has been spread among Jewish people to this day.” (Matthew 28:11-15)

### Graverobbers.

#### Grave robbing was a known problem in 1st CE Judea.

##### The Nazareth Inscription as translated by Clyde E. Bilington – “*Edict of Caesar* – It is my decision [concerning] **graves and tombs**—whoever has made them for the religious observances of parents, or children, or household members—that these remain undisturbed forever. But if anyone legally charges that another person has destroyed, or **has in any manner extracted those who have been buried**, or has moved with wicked intent those who have been buried to other places, committing a crime against them, or has moved sepulcher-sealing stones, against such a person, I order that a judicial tribunal be created, just as [is done] concerning the gods in human religious observances, even more so will it be obligatory to treat with honor those who have been entombed. You are absolutely not to allow anyone to move [those who have been entombed]. But if [someone does], **I wish that [violator] to suffer capital punishment under the title of tomb-breaker**” (Billington, *The Nazareth Inscription: Proof of the Resurrection of Christ?* Emphasis mine.*)*

### Jesus’ family.

#### Although self-admittedly Ehrman says he doesn’t believe this is what happened, he still theorizes it in a debate with Dr. William Craig:

##### “Jesus gets buried by Joseph of Arimathea. Two of Jesus’ family members are upset that an unknown Jewish leader has buried the body. In the dead of night, these two family members raid the tomb, taking the body off to bury it for themselves. But Roman soldiers on the lookout see them carrying the shrouded corpse through the streets, they confront them, and they kill them on the spot. They throw all three bodies into a common burial plot, where within three days these bodies are decomposed beyond recognition. The tomb then is empty.” (Ehrman, *Craig-Ehrman Debate*)

### The gardener.

#### “This is He whom His disciples secretly stole away, that it might be said He had risen again, or the gardener abstracted, that his lettuces might come to no harm from the crowds of visitants.” (Tertullian, *De Spectaculis, ch. 30)*

#### I include this one here simply for some humor. Tertullian is most likely mocking those who in his day were theorizing that the gardener stole the body of Jesus.

#### This may have been supported by some because of Mary’s encounter with Jesus and mistaking him for the gardener. Specifically focusing on her words when she said “Sir, if you’ve carried him away, tell me where you’ve put him, and I will take him away.” (John 20:15)

### Celsus, an early 3rd CE heretic, brought this theory back to surface in his debate with Origen.

#### “Origen’s answer to Celsus still stands. Frightened men do not risk their lives and suffer martyrdom to perpetuate a lie. If the Gospel records are reliable these disciples are trembling behind locked doors, afraid to venture out, unwilling even to believe the stories of the women about an empty tomb. Can anyone genuinely believe these men had enough courage to steal away the body and carry off this deception?” (Gresham, *What the Bible Says about Resurrection, pg. 251*)

## **Objections to the theory**

### The above versions of this theory fall apart when considering the following:

#### Matthew’s use of “to this day” (Matt. 28:15)

##### What Matthew contends here would take away his case if it were not true. He says that this story (concerning the disciple’s stealing the body) has been spread “to this day.”

##### If this were not true, then it would take away all of his credibility. Consider the 1st CE Jewish audience that Matthew is writing his account for. If it was not the case that this was a widely spread story among Jewish people, then it would be easy for a Jew to say “that’s not true, I have never heard that before.”

##### It would be risky, if not reckless, for Matthew to make something like this up when trying to convince the Jewish people.

##### This also confirms for us that in the 1st CE it was agreed that the tomb was found empty, but people were coming up with reasons why it could not be Jesus raising from the dead.

#### The guards at the tomb.

##### It is only in Matthew’s account that there were guards present at the tomb of Jesus. (Matt. 27:57-61)

##### There is also no specification as to whether Pilate dispatches Roman guards, or if he intends the Jews to use temple guards. Scholars have been torn between the two.

##### Regardless, it is safe to assume that this part of the resurrection account is reliable for a very simple reason: the argument was never concerning if there were guards, but what happened to them when the tomb was found empty. (Matt. 28:13)

##### Dr. William Craig espouses a similar argument in the Case for Christ:

###### “The initial Christian proclamation was, ‘Jesus is risen.’ The Jews responded, ‘The disciples stole his body.’ To this Christians said, ‘Ah, but the guards at the tomb would have prevented such a theft.’ The Jews responded, ‘Oh, but the guards at the tomb fell asleep.’ To that the Christians replied, ‘No, the Jews bribed the guards to say they fell asleep.’ Now, if there had not been any guards, the exchange would have gone like this: In response to the claim Jesus is risen, the Jews would say, ‘No, the disciples stole his body.’ Christians would reply, ‘But the guards would have prevented the theft.’ Then the Jewish response would have been, ‘What guards? You’re crazy! There were no guards!’ Yet history tells us that’s not what the Jews said. This suggests the guards really were historical and that the Jews knew it, which is why they had to invent the absurd story about the guards having been asleep while the disciples took the body.” (Strobel, *The Case for Christ, pg. 212*)

##### If there were truly guards there, this would only add to the security of the tomb, making it unlikely for the disciples, or anyone for that matter, to have come in and tampered with the body of Jesus.

#### The disciple’s willingness to take a lie like this to the grave.

##### If the disciples did indeed find a way to take the body of Jesus, I find it hard to believe that all 12 of them would be willing to take a lie like this to the grave.

##### Consider the various treatments these men would face because of this “lie”, and not one of them would recount what really happened?

#### We must ignore the eyewitness testimony.

##### Perhaps the biggest thing that would have to be overlooked would be the many eyewitnesses to the Resurrected Jesus.

###### Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:10–18)

###### To the other women (Matt. 28:8–10)

###### Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13–32)

###### Eleven disciples and others (Lk. 24:33–49)

###### To ten apostles and others, with Thomas absent (Jn 20:19–23)

###### Thomas and the other apostles (Jn 20:26–30)

###### Seven apostles (Jn 21:1–14)

###### The disciples (Matt. 28:16–20)

###### The apostles at the Mt of Olives before his ascension (Lk. 24:50–52; Ac. 1:4–9)

##### This was not as if the disciples (or anyone for that matter) stole the body of Jesus and then just said, “Look! His tomb is empty, he must have raised!”

##### Jesus appeared to many after his resurrection, as the New Testament writers emphasize so often. (1 Cor. 15:3-8)

# **SWOON THEORY (7th & 18th CE)**

## **Basics of the theory**

### Jesus never really died during the crucifixion process.

### Rather, when he was put in the tomb it created a perfect environment for him to heal up enough to escape the tomb.

### When he came out, he claimed a resurrection when really, he never died.

## **History of the theory**

### 7th CE – Although up for debate, it sounds like the Quran proports that Jesus never really died at all, nor was he even crucified.

#### ˹They were condemned˺ for breaking their covenant, rejecting Allah’s signs, killing the prophets unjustly, and for saying, “Our hearts are unreceptive!”—it is Allah Who has sealed their hearts for their disbelief, so they do not believe except for a few — and for their denial and outrageous accusation against Mary, and for boasting, “We killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.” But they neither killed nor crucified him—it was only made to appear so. Even those who argue for this ˹crucifixion˺ are in doubt. They have no knowledge whatsoever—only making assumptions. They certainly did not kill him. Rather, Allah raised him up to Himself. And Allah is Almighty, All-Wise.*(Surah IV 155-58)*

#### Ahmadiyya Muslims take this part of the Quran and say, “Thus, Ahmadi Muslims believe that God frustrated the plan of the disbelievers of Jesus. Although Jesus was nailed to the cross, he did not perish on it. He was removed from the cross in a state of unconsciousness… Ahmadi Muslims believe that Jesus came under the care of his devoted followers after he was removed from the cross. He was placed in the tomb where he recovered from his ordeal. The Gospels too describe that Jesus was still in his earthly body of flesh and bones after emerging from the tomb (Luke 24:39). An analysis of the post-crucifixion period described in the Gospels reveals that Jesus led a low-profile existence. He hurriedly traveled away from the locality of the crucifixion (Qur’an 23:51; Matt 28:10, Mark 16:7).” (alislam.org, *Article: Jesus Son of Mary – Islamic Beliefs*)

#### Ahmadiyya Muslims go on to suggest that Jesus fled to India and lived out the rest of his days there.

### 18th CE – Around 1780 a German named Karl Bahrdt became one of the larger proponents of this view. He suggested that Jesus was nursed back to health by Luke the Physician.

#### Around 1800 fellow German, Karl Venturini, suggested a similar view citing the “cool, damp air of the tomb” being adequate conditions to aid Jesus in recovery.

#### Others shortly after suggested similar ideas, such as Heinrich Paulus and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

#### Since most of these men are German, their works where they proport such views are written in German. I am relying on several sources who have shared the beliefs of these men. The main one being Strobel:

##### “As the nineteenth century dawned, Karl Bahrdt, Karl Venturini, and others tried to explain away the Resurrection by suggesting that Jesus only fainted from exhaustion on the cross, or he had been given a drug that made him appear to die, and that he had later been revived by the cool, damp air of the tomb.” (Strobel, *The Case for Christ, pg. 192*)

### Present day – This theory continues to resurface in various works of literature. Listed below are just some of them:

#### D. H. Lawrence, Love among the Haystacks and Other Stories (New York: Penguin, 1960), 125.

#### Hugh Schonfield, The Passover Plot (New York: Bantam, 1965), 165.

#### Donovan Joyce’s 1972 book The Jesus Scroll.

#### As recently as 1992 a little-known academic from Australia, Barbara Thiering, caused a stir by reviving the swoon theory in her book Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

### In all my study for this lecture, this view is largely dismissed by today’s scholars and writers.

## **Objections to the theory**

### If there is anything that history shows us, it is that the Roman’s knew how to do a crucifixion. Consider the various parts of Jesus’ crucifixion that undoubtedly would have contributed to his death:

#### “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.” (John 19:1)

##### ἐμαστίγωσεν. - to flog, whip, scourge; to punish, chastise (Mounce)

##### “Hereupon our rulers supposing, as the case proved to be, that this was a sort of divine fury in the man, brought him to the Roman procurator; where he was whipped till his bones were laid bare;” *(*Josephus*, The War of the Jews, 303-304)*

##### “John uses the word ἐμαστίγωσεν, a purely Greek word. Matthew and Mark, who referred to the scourging which preceded Christ being led to Calvary, use another official and technical word φραγελλώσας (identifiable with the Latin word *flagellans*). This does not require us to believe in two scourgings. Matthew and Mark simply refer to the scourging, which had been arbitrarily and informally inflicted, as John informs us, before the condemnation was pronounced. The Roman punishment *flagellis* inflicted hideous torture. It was executed upon slaves with thin elm rods or straps having leaden balls or sharply pointed bones attached, and was delivered on the bent, bare, and tense back… The flagellation usually brought blood with the first stroke, and reduced the back to a fearful state of raw and quivering flesh. Strong men often succumbed under it, while the indignity of such a proceeding in this case must have cut far deeper into the awful sanctuary of the Sufferers’ soul.” (Reynolds, *The Gospel According to St. John, pg. 416)*

##### “At Rome the scourging of citizens had been forbidden from very early times. Unprivileged persons, and especially slaves, were scourged in a variety of ways, of which the flagellum was the wors. It was a “knout” or “cat,” with lashes of knotted cord, or even wire; like the ἀστραγαλωτὴ of the Greeks, it might be loaded with knuckle-bones or other cruel aggravations.” (Smith, Wayte, Marindin, *a dictionary of Greek & Roman Antiquities)*

##### “For they say that the bystanders were struck with amazement when they saw them lacerated with scourges even to the innermost veins and arteries, so that the hidden inward parts of the body, both their bowels and their members, were exposed to view” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, 4.15*).

##### Evident from the above quotes, Romans knew how to scourge someone. The amount of blood loss combined with what Jesus will experience on the cross would make it impossible for someone to survive.

#### “They dressed him in a purple robe, twisted together a crown of thorns, and put it on him. And they began to salute him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” They were hitting him on the head with a stick and spitting on him.” (Mark 15:17-19)

##### Although not near as severe as the flogging Jesus endured, I believe it is worth noting the injury that would come from this.

##### Simply imagine a crown of thorns being put upon the head of Jesus, but then beaten into his skull. Not only would there be blood loss from such violence, but potential for brain damage and multiple concussions.

###### One commentator suggests, “The crown of thorns was in all probability from the *Zizyphus spina Christi* (the *nâbk* of the Arabs), which grows abundantly in Palestine, fringing the banks of the Jordan. This plant would be very suitable for the purpose, having flexible branches, with leaves very much resembling the ivy leaf in their colour, and with many sharp thorns. The pain arising from the pressure of these sharp thorns upon the head must have been excruciating.” (Bickersteth, *The Gospel According to St. Mark, pg. 305)*

###### A quick google image search of this plant showed 1-2-inch-long thorns, that appeared rigid and sturdy. Unlikely to break off easily even if they were hitting Jesus hard. It would almost be like a crown of nails.

##### Nothing is said as to how big the stick (or reed) that Jesus was being hit with was, or how hard they were hitting. But I would imagine it was not a gentle beating considering the circumstances.

#### “They led him out to crucify him. They forced a man coming in from the country, who was passing by, to carry Jesus’s cross. He was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.” (Mark 15:20b-21)

##### Each of the synoptics record that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:20-21; Luke 23:26) while John’s gospel says Jesus was “Carrying the cross by himself”.

###### I believe this is easily reconciled, considering the agony and torture Jesus had already experienced. It would be hard to believe that Jesus could carry the patibulum (the horizontal cross member) the whole way to Golgotha. Therefore, they had to get Simon to carry it the rest of the way.

###### This only speaks to the weakness and frailty of Jesus’ body to this point, and we are not even to the cross yet.

#### “They shouted, ‘Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Should I crucify your king?’ ‘We have no king but Caesar!’ the chief priests answered. Then he handed him over to be crucified.” (John 19:15-16)

##### Once they arrive at Golgotha, the process of crucifying Jesus has just begun.

###### Jesus was nailed to the cross.

Although none of the gospels record this part of the crucifixion, we know it happened because it is referenced on 2 occasions after his resurrection.

So the other disciples were telling him, “We’ve seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “If I don’t see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.” (John 20:25)

“Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself! Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” Having said this, he showed them his hands and feet.” (Luke 24:39-40)

This part of Roman crucifixion is well documented.

“In 1968 a significant archaeological discovery was made in a suburb of Jerusalem: an ossuary with the skeletal remains of a man named Yehochanan who had been crucified. Yehochanan had been nailed to an upright beam of wood through the ankle, but the nail hit a knot in the wood and bent, making it difficult to be removed after his death. And so a chunk of the wood was broken off, and Yehochanan was buried with wood and nail still attached to the ankle bone.” *(*Ehrman*, The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings, pg. 156.)*

These nails were anywhere from 5-9 inches long.

Apply slight pressure at your wrists/palms, or along your ankles, and then imagine a spike being driven through. These parts of human anatomy are near median nerves which would have caused horrific pain.

###### Jesus dies on the cross.

Jesus let out a loud cry and breathed his last.” (Mark 15:37)

Many have cited asphyxiation as the cause of death for crucified people.

This is in large part due to the physics of how one would be hung on a cross. Chest sunken, shoulders likely falling out of joint, and then painful attempts to prop oneself up enough to take a breath.

When we are no longer able to take a breath, the body will go into respiratory acidosis (when the carbon dioxide in the blood is dissolved as carbonic acid). At this point the heart goes into cardiac arrest and one dies.

###### The Roman soldiers determine Jesus is dead.

“When they came to Jesus, they did not break his legs since they saw that he was already dead.” (John 19:33)

I would imagine it is safe to say that a Romans soldier knows good and well when someone is dead.

###### The Roman soldiers pierce his side. (John 19:34)

Having broken the legs of the 2 criminals, they decide to stab the side of Jesus. Upon doing so, a combination of blood and water come gushing out.

Many modern doctors say this would be consistent with the type of death Jesus just experienced.

There would also be further motivation for these soldiers to ensure Jesus is dead, because if he turns up alive and is bloodied, bruised, and beaten: it is their life that is now on the line. If Jesus were still alive, they would have finished him off right there.

### It is overwhelming to consider all that Jesus suffered before and during the crucifixion. Many medical doctors through the centuries have written about the death of Jesus, most of them say without a shadow of a doubt that Jesus died because of the crucifixion. A few to note here are:

#### Alexander Metherell, M.D., PH.D. in the Case for Christ (Strobel)

#### On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ by William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer

#### Joseph W. Bergeron, M.D in The Crucifixion of Jesus: A Medical Doctor Examines the Death and Resurrection of Christ

### Even if we were to suppose Jesus survived these horrific events, are we ready to believe that he recovered from these injuries in just 3 days?

#### The reports of Jesus’ resurrection are not 3 months later, but 3 days. This would not be near enough time to recover.

#### The accounts of seeing Jesus also indicate that he was fully restored, aside from the imprints left from the nails and spear.

#### Consider all that Jesus does in his appearances:

##### Walks nearly 7 miles on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)

##### Eats with his apostles (John 21:9-15)

### And if the Apostles were to see Jesus in this broken state, are we ready to believe that this would not have been disheartening and discouraging to see? Who would want to follow a man claiming a resurrection when he obviously did not raise? And who would follow a man like this to their own graves and face the levels of persecution they faced?

### The swoon theory is an outdated one, and quite honestly ridiculous to consider when thinking about what it means for one to be crucified.

# **FABRICATION THEORY (19th CE)**

## **Basics of the theory**

### The resurrection of Jesus was fabricated by the early disciples or so-called Christians in the 2nd or 3rd century.

### This theory also explores the unreliability of eye-witness testimony.

### Proponents of this view believe Jesus of Nazareth was a real person in history, but believe his disciples later fabricated the miraculous events recorded in the gospels.

## **History of the theory**

### David Strauss (1835) – In his 1,600 page book, “*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*”, Strauss puts forward the idea that Jesus never did miracles, therefore, he also did not rise from the dead. Interestingly enough, Strauss was not a historian, but a German theologian. His views grew popular in an age where German rationalism was thriving.

#### Strauss goes on to suggest that the early disciples of Jesus began to fabricate these events when they were writing the gospel narratives.

##### “Now, if the history of the life of Jesus be of mythical formation, inasmuch as it embodies the vivid impression of the original idea which the first Christian community had of their founder, this history, though unhistorical in its form, is nevertheless a faithful representation of the idea of the Christ. If instead of this, the history be legendary—if the actual external facts are given in a distorted and often magnified form—are represented in a false light and embody a false idea,—then, on the contrary, the real tenor of the life of Jesus is lost to us.” (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, pgs. 59-62)*

#### It would also appear his conclusions of Jesus’ resurrection are similar. Strauss spends a lot of time developing how much the disciples would have anticipated his resurrection because of how often Jesus predicted it. When it didn’t happen, the early Christian’s felt it necessary to add a resurrection in to uphold the credibility of Jesus and his teachings (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, pgs. 563-598)*

#### Included below are some helpful quotes summarizing Strauss conclusions regarding the resurrection and the eyewitnesses.

##### “…that the adherents of Jesus, from their hopelessness, which is both unanimously attested by the narratives, and is in perfect accordance with the nature of the case, here rise to the rank of impartial witnesses. If they had expected a resurrection of Jesus and we had then been called upon to believe it on their testimony alone: there would certainly be a possibility and perhaps also a probability, if not of an intentional deception, yet of an involuntary self-delusion on their part; but this possibility vanishes in proportion as the disciples of Jesus lost all hope after his death.” (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, pgs. 735-744)*

##### “We might then rest satisfied with the evangelical testimonies in favour of the resurrection, were but these testimonies in the first place sufficiently precise, and in the second, in agreement with themselves and with each other. But in fact the testimony of Paul, which is intrinsically consistent and is otherwise most important, is so general and vague, that taken by itself, it does not carry us beyond the subjective fact, that the disciples were convinced of the resurrection of Jesus; while the more fully detailed narratives of the gospels, in which the resurrection of Jesus appears as an objective fact, are, from the contradictions of which they are convicted, incapable of being used as evidence, and in general their account of the life of Jesus after his resurrection is not one which has connexon and unity, presenting a clear historical idea of the subject, but a fragmentary compilation, which presents a series of visions, rather than a continuous history.” (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, pgs. 735-744)*

##### “But the further these narratives were propagated by tradition, the more must the difference between the locality of the resurrection itself and the appearances of the risen one, be allowed to fall out of sight as inconvenient; and since the locality of the death and resurrection was not transferable, the appearances were gradually placed in the same locality as the resurrection,—in Jerusalem, which as the more brilliant theatre and the seat of the first Christian Church, was especially appropriate for them.” (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, pgs. 735-744)*

### Rudolf Bultmann, another well-known German theologian, also subscribed to this way of reasoning:

#### “It is impossible to repristinate a past world picture by sheer resolve, especially a *mythical* world picture, now that all of our thinking is irrevocably formed by science. A blind acceptance of New Testament mythology would be simply arbitrariness; to make such acceptance a demand of faith would be to reduce faith to a work.” (Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology, pg.3)*

### Jesus Seminar, a group of some 50 “biblical scholars” are also known for their conclusion that all the miracles including the resurrection are later myths.

### Many who hold this kind of view will eventually resort to tearing down the credibility of eyewitness testimony.

#### Ehrman does this in chapter 3 of a recent book: *Jesus Before the Gospels*.

## **Objections to the theory**

### The dating of 1 Corinthians.

#### The book of 1 Corinthians is one of the easier epistles to assign a date to because of the Delphi (or Gallio) Inscription.

##### “The reference to the twelfth Tiberian year and twenty-sixth imperatorship dates this imperial inscription between January and August of A.D. 52. Gallio was already proconsul of Achaia at the time; he must have taken office sometime in A.D. 51. Paul left Corinth shortly after Gallio was appointed… Taking into account the time spent in journeying to and from Antioch, time spent in Antioch, and at least two years in Ephesus, the date of **this letter can be fixed in the year A.D. 55 or possibly A.D. 56**.” (Willis, *A Commentary on First Corinthians, pg.vi)*

#### In this letter, Paul references the events of Christ crucified (2:2), the events leading up to his death (11:23-26), and finally Jesus’ resurrection and its eyewitnesses (15:3-8).

#### How could it be possible that these events were made up in later centuries when Paul is writing about it within 20 years of its happening?

#### Some have used 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 to suggest Paul is citing an early Christian creed of sorts that was given to him by earlier disciples.

##### Dr. Craig Blomberg, author of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels,* was interviewed by Lee Strobel and said the following:

###### “If the Crucifixion was as early as A.D. 30, Paul’s conversion was about 32. Immediately Paul was ushered into Damascus, where he met with a Christian named Ananias and some other disciples. His first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem would have been about A.D. 35. At some point along there, Paul was given this creed, which had already been formulated and was being used in the early church. Now, here you have the key facts about Jesus’ death for our sins, plus a detailed list of those to whom he appeared in resurrected form—all dating back to within two to five years of the events themselves! That’s not later mythology from forty or more years down the road, as Armstrong suggested. **A good case can be made for saying that Christian belief in the Resurrection, though not yet written down, can be dated to within two years of that very event**.” (Strobel, *The Case for Christ, pg. 35)*

##### Among other passages to be cited as “early Christian creeds” are Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20.

### Not enough time passed for a legend to develop.

#### This was an argument first made in response to Strauss’ claims by several of his contemporaries. In response to his book *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined,* J.R. Beard put together a book titled *Voices of the Church*. This was a collection of essays from various church leaders voicing their concerns for Strauss’ work. In it, Dr. Julius Müller says the following:

##### “Most decidedly must a considerable interval of time be required for such a complete transformation of a whole history by popular tradition, when the series of legends are formed in the same territory where the heroes actually lived and wrought. Here 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 and connexion of their heroes' lives in the minds of the community, 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 grey antiquity, is wont to seek a remoteness of age, along with that of space, and to remove its boldest and more rare and wonderful creations into a very remote and unknown land.” (Müller, *Voices of the Church, pg. 194)*

#### Many have done work against this theory, including Dr. William Craig in *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus.* In reference to how long it takes for a legend to be formed after the events of history, he states:

##### “The writings of the Greek historian Herodotus enable us to test the rate at which a legend accumulates; the tests show that even the span of two generations is too short to allow legendary tendencies to wipe out the hard core of historical fact.” (Craig, *The Son Rises, pg. 101)*

#### This timeline matches up quite well even for the gospels because this timeframe is exactly when the apocryphal gospels started popping up. Such as the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas.

##### Unsprisingly, they include details that the original gospels do not. Including exactly what happened when Jesus rose from the dead (Gospel of Peter).

### Conversions of Skeptics, response to unreliable eyewitness testimony.

#### This objection could well belong in any of the 6 theories we are examining. But simply put, it would take something extraordinary for some of the skeptics we read about to convert to this Jesus of Nazareth.

##### The Apostle Paul would be at the top of this list.

###### A persecutor of the Lord’s church (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-8; 26:9-11; Gal. 1:13-16; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13)

###### Bearing in mind the 7 critic accepted letters: Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon. Paul clearly states that he was vehemently opposing Jesus and His church. But something changed him. As he states in 1 Corinthians:

“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1)

“Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.” (1 Cor. 15:8)

###### Would a skeptic such as Paul really be convinced to leave his life of Pharisaism behind all for a lie?

Scholars at this point, such as Bart D. Ehrman, would suggest Paul really did see Jesus, but just in a vision or dream.

“Paul is quite clear, Paul claims he had a vision of Jesus after Jesus death. Historians cannot show that Paul really saw Jesus alive after his death because that would require us to say that Jesus really was raised. And that is what we cannot know historically, even if we believed it. But historians can say that Paul had a vision of Jesus. There has been a substantial amount of scholarship on visions and visionary experiences over the past 20 years. People have all kinds of visions. Some visions are called veridical. That means that their visions are of things that are actually there. These are visual experiences of phenomenon that are actually present before the eyes. You wake up, you see somebody in your room, because there really is somebody in your room! Christians would claim that Paul’s vision of Jesus was veridical. That Jesus really did appear to Paul. Non-Christians would claim that Paul’s visions were not veridical, but were hallucinations. But one thing Christians and Non-Christians can agree on is that Paul had a vision of Jesus alive after he died. Or at least he thought he had a vision. Or at the very least he said that he had a vision. He does say he did, and so I have no reasons to think he didn’t. He had a vision. Whether veridical or not. (Ehrman, *The Greatest Controversies of Early Christian History. Lecture 11: Was Jesus Raised from the Dead. mm 20:30-23:02*)

###### Even if Paul had some kind of hallucinatory dream, what are we to do with the other accounts of people seeing Jesus after he raised?

### If this is a “legendary” story, they made it very “unlegendary”.

#### 2 things stand out to me about the story as it is told in the gospels that would make it sound odd if it were not true:

##### Female witnesses. Females were especially an untrusted and unreliable source of information in the first century.

###### “any evidence which a woman [gives] is not valid... A robber is qualified to give the same evidence as a woman” (Talmud, *Rosh Hashannah 1.8*)

###### “let not the testimony of women be admitted … it is probable they may not speak the truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment” (Josephus, *Antiquities, 4.8.15*)

##### The apostle’s reactions to the resurrected Jesus.

###### “So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples the news. Just then Jesus met them and said, “Greetings! ” They came up, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus told them, “**Do not be afraid.** Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.” (Matt. 28:8-10)

###### “Returning from the tomb, they reported all these things to the Eleven and to all the rest. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them were telling the apostles these things. **But these words seemed like nonsense to them, and they did not believe the women.** Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. When he stooped to look in, he saw only the linen cloths. **So he went away, amazed at what had happened. (**Luke 24:9-12)

###### “When it was evening on that first day of the week, the disciples were gathered together with the **doors locked because they feared the Jews.** Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you.”(John 20:19)

###### In each gospel, the disciples are recorded being shocked, perplexed, confused, and even scared. All the same reactions we would have if we saw someone come back from the dead! If the gospels were written at a later date to try and inspire and encourage people to listen to apostolic teaching, would it not make sense to record Jesus’ closest followers as having anticipated the resurrection or at least be preparing people for Jesus’ return? Instead, they are acting like 11 men who just witnessed the impossible.

###### “Fourth, there’s the simplicity of the empty tomb story in Mark. Fictional apocryphal accounts from the second century contain all kinds of flowery narratives, in which Jesus comes out of the tomb in glory and power, with everybody seeing him, including the priests, Jewish authorities, and Roman guards. Those are the way legends read, but these don’t come until generations after the events, which is after eyewitnesses have died off. By contrast, Mark’s account of the story of the empty tomb is stark in its simplicity and unadorned by theological reflection. (Strobel, *The Case for Christ, pg. 220*)

# **WRONG TOMB THEORY (20th CE)**

## **Basics of the theory.**

### The women who came to Jesus’ tomb were actually at the wrong one. When they saw the one they thought to be the gardener, it really was just a gardener. His words were quite clear: “He is not here.” (Mark 16:6).

### Later legends took this part of the story and ran, claiming Jesus had risen.

### All along, Jesus’ tomb was there and his body as well.

## **History of the theory**

### Kirsopp Lake was the one to advance this view in his 1907 book, “*The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*”.

### Being a liberally minded theologian, Lake rejected the idea of physical resurrection in favor of the doctrine of immortality of the soul alone. (Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, pg. 247-249)*

### The following excerpt from his book summarizes his view best:

#### “It is seriously a matter for doubt whether the women were really in a position to be quite certain that the tomb which they visited, was that in which they had seen Joseph of Arimathaea, buried the Lord’s body. The neighborhood of Jerusalem is full of rock-tombs, and it would not be easy to distinguish one from another, without careful notes. So far as their frame of mind at the time of the burial was concerned, the women were certainly not fit to take notes. They had spent the day in watching the dying agony of their Master, and it is not in human nature at such a time calmly to consider a question of locality. Moreover, it is very doubtful if they were close to the tomb at the moment of burial. As was shown in chapters ii. and iv., it is likely that they were watching from a distance, and that Joseph of Arimathaea was a representative of the Jews, rather than of the disciples. If so, they would have a limited power to distinguish between one rock-tomb and another close to it. **The possibility, therefore, that they came to the wrong tomb is to be reckoned with, and it is important because it supplies the natural explanation of the fact that whereas they had seen the tomb closed, they found it open.**” (Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, pg. 250, emphasis mine)*

## **Objections to the theory**

### The women observed precisely where Jesus was laid to rest.

#### “The women who had come with him from Galilee **followed along and observed the tomb** and how his body was placed.” (Luke 23:55, emphasis mine)

#### “After he bought some linen cloth, Joseph took him down and wrapped him in the linen. Then he laid him in a tomb cut out of the rock and rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. **Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were watching where he was laid**.” (Mark 15:46-47, emphasis mine)

#### I don’t think it is outlandish at all, as Lake seems to suggest, that the women, although distraught, would have been able to remember and take note of where the tomb is.

### Lake seems to be picking and choosing which parts of the gospel narrative he wants to believe. The men at the tomb said more than just “He is not here”, they also said, “He is risen!” (Mark 16:6)

### Perhaps the most obvious of issues with this theory is simple: if this were the case, then the Jews and Romans would have been all too happy to show them where the tomb actually is once the disciples started spreading the news of a resurrection.

#### This would also assume that the apostles didn’t second guess the women and go to the wrong tomb themselves.

### Ignore eyewitness accounts.

#### Lake and any others would still have to deal with the eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus.

### Disciples dying for their beliefs.

#### Not sure if this one belongs here, but if this were the case, the disciples felt awfully bold for something they actually never saw.

# **HALLUCINATION/VISIONS THEORY. (20th CE)**

## **Basics of the theory**

### The disciples seeing a risen Jesus was due to hallucinations or visions they were each experiencing.

### This is also known as doubt theory in some circles. This is because of the apostle’s reactions when they saw the risen Jesus, many of them couldn’t believe it and doubted their own eyes.

#### The reason they doubted is because they were hallucinating and knew it was too good to be true.

## **History of the theory**

### The 19th CE theologian, Rudolph Bultmann (mentioned also in the legendary theory) surfaced this view at one point as well:

#### “The historian can perhaps to some extent account for that faith [in the resurrection] from the personal intimacy which the disciple had enjoyed with Jesus during his earthly life and so reduce the resurrection appearances to a series of subjective visions.” (Bultmann, *Kerygma & Myth, pg. 42*)

### Unsurprisingly, this is also something Strauss suggested.

#### “Thus the faith in Jesus 7 as the Messiah, which by his violent death had received a fatal shock, was subjectively restored, by the instrumentality of the mind, the power of imagination, and nervous excitement.” (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, pgs. 414-431)*

### In recent years, Bart D. Ehrman has suggested this at various times, as mentioned on page 13 of this outline.

## **Objections to the theory**

### Hallucinations don’t work this way.

#### To suggest that each individual hallucinated and saw the same thing is outlandish and goes against everything we know about hallucinations. Consider a couple of quotes from some reputable psychologists:

##### “Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren’t something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce an hallucination in somebody else. Since an hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.” (Dr. Gary Collins, *in Gary Habermas and J. P. Moreland, Immortality: The Other Side of Death, pg. 60*)

##### “I have surveyed the professional literature (peer-reviewed journal articles and books) written by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant healthcare professionals during the past two decades and have yet to find a single documented case of a group hallucination, that is, an event for which more than one person purportedly shared in a visual or other sensory perception where there was clearly no external referent.” (Dr. Gary Sibcy, in Bergeron’s *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Clinical Review of Psychiatric Hypotheses for the Biblical Story of Easter, pg. 8)*

### The disciples were not doing anything to warrant a hallucination.

#### In Bergeron and Habermas’ work *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Clinical Review of Psychiatric Hypotheses for the Biblical Story of Easter,* they do a great job at explaining the various clinically proven reasons why someone would have a hallucination.

##### “Hallucinations are personal perceptions of objects or events by the physical senses without external stimulus or physical referent. A hallucination is a symptom, not a diagnosis. The presence of hallucinatory symptoms, therefore, mandates consideration of their etiology and the kinds of medical pathology that would account for their occurrence. Hallucinations can be classified in three types of etiology: Psychophysiologic, arising from alteration of brain structure and function; Psychobiochemical, due to neurotransmitter disturbances; and Psychodynamic, arising from intrusion of the unconscious into the conscious mind.” (Bergeron & Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Clinical Review of Psychiatric Hypotheses for the Biblical Story of Easter, pg. 6)*

#### In this work they go on to detail that the apostles would have had no reason to be experiencing any of these symptoms. I recommend reading this.

### Hallucinations would not have necessarily led to the conclusion that Jesus had been raised.

#### Supposing the disciples were seeing things in their mind, what would make them see a resurrected Jesus? People have dreams all the time of deceased loved ones, that would not mean they had risen from the dead.

##### Hallucinations are often visions of what we already know and have experienced in one form or another. The disciples clearly had no idea Jesus was going to be raised, despite how often he talked about it.

##### Because the idea of a resurrection was not on their minds, then I find it unlikely that they would hallucinate something like that when they never even thought it to be a possibility.

### Even if they had hallucinated, where is the body of Jesus?

#### As with most of these theories, there is still work that would need to be done to explain the absence of Jesus body! What happened to it?

##### Therefore, this view would need to be mashed up with another of the theories we have examined. Which is exactly what Strauss and Bultmann did.

# **MEMORY DISTORTION THEORY (21st CE)**

## **Basics of the theory**

### In recent years, Bart Ehrman has asserted that the disciples and early Christians have misremembered and exaggerated their memory of Jesus and what he did when living. Much attention is given to human memory and Bart’s thorough research into the mind’s ability to recall core memories.

### Bart has done most of his work on this theory in his 2016 book, *Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior.*

### This theory is also lightly suggested by Ehrman in his 2005 New York Times best seller list, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why.*

## **History of the theory**

### Bart Ehrman. I find it best to give some basics of who this man is, and what led him to become one of the leading voices in atheist and agnostic circles.

#### From believer to blasphemer.

##### Ehrman grew up in the Episcopal churches. He did not have much interest in the Bible until he had a “born-again” experience when he was a sophomore in high school. Through his various connections in this new group of Christians, a mentor of his suggested that he apply and attend Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Bart got in and began in the fall of 1973.

##### He majored in Bible Theology and was a believer that the Bible was the inerrant word of God. He completed his 3-year degree and continued his education at Wheaton College in Chicago. Throughout his schooling, Ehrman’s fascination with textual criticism began to increase. He committed himself to learning Koine Greek fluently, finished his degree at Wheaton, and began to do course work at Princeton Theological Seminary studying Textual Criticism under Bruce Metzger.

##### In a course at Princeton on the exegesis of the Gospel of Mark, Ehrman wrote a paper explaining why Jesus said “Abiathar” when referencing 1 Samuel 21, and not “Ahimelech”, who was the high priest at the time. (Mark 2:23-28). Ehrman was taking a position that explained why Jesus meant to say Abiathar, and why the Greek would support that view. Concerning the response Ehrman got from his professor he writes:

###### “I was pretty sure Professor Story would appreciate the argument, since I knew him as a good Christian scholar who obviously (like me) would never think there could be anything like a genuine error in the Bible. But at the end of my paper he made a simple one-line comment that for some reason went straight through me. He wrote: "Maybe Mark just made a mistake." I started thinking about it, considering all the work I had put into the paper, realizing that I had had to do some pretty fancy exegetical footwork to get around the problem, and that my solution was in fact a bit of a stretch. I finally concluded, "Hmm... maybe Mark did make a mistake." Once I made that admission, the floodgates opened. For if there could be one little, picayune mistake in Mark 2, maybe there could be mistakes in other places as well.” (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus, pg. 9)*

##### The floodgates certainly opened for Ehrman; this has led him down a determined path to prove that the Bible is not the inerrant word of God. One final quote summarizes best where Ehrman stands with God and the Bible:

###### “Moreover, I came to think that my earlier views of inspiration were not only irrelevant, they were probably wrong. For the only reason (I came to think) for God to inspire the Bible would be so that his people would have his actual words; but if he really wanted people to have his actual words, surely he would have miraculously preserved those words, just as he had miraculously inspired them in the first place. Given the circumstance that he didn't preserve the words, the conclusion seemed inescapable to me that he hadn't gone to the trouble of inspiring them.” (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus, pg. 211)*

##### Ehrman considers himself to be a Historian, not a textual critic or theologian.

#### Summary of beliefs.

##### Views on Jesus

###### “Probably the majority of modern scholars have remembered Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who was predicting that the end of the world was near, that God was soon going to intervene in the course of human affairs to destroy the forces of evil wreaking such havoc on earth, creating such enormous amounts of pain, misery, and suffering; this cataclysmic act of God was to arrive very soon, within Jesus’s own generation. God would send a cosmic judge of the earth to annihilate everything and everyone that stood opposed to him and his purposes, bringing in a good kingdom on earth in which there would be no more war, hatred, natural disaster, violence, sin, or death. This is a view that I myself have held since I was a graduate student in the early 1980s. But is it an accident that the view became so forcefully expressed by scholars in the nuclear age, when the world was in imminent danger of destruction?” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pgs. 23-24)*

##### Views on the Death & Burial of Jesus

###### Ehrman dismisses that Jesus was buried in a tomb and that the tomb was found empty.

###### “I don’t know of any instance where we have a verified account of anybody being buried in the afternoon of their crucifixion in a known tomb. So how likely is it that they made an exception in the case of Jesus?” (Ehrman, *Response to Craig on Resurrection, 6:50-7:07)*

### Below is my attempt to summarize this theory as Ehrman makes his case in *Jesus Before the Gospels*.

#### The following quotes best summarizes Ehrman’s thesis:

#### “We—whether as individuals or as members of a collective—“remember” the past because of its value in the present. Otherwise we have no reason even to think about the past—whether it is our own past lives and experiences or the lives and experiences of our society. And—this is the key point I am trying to make—sometimes, often, or always our memories of the past are distorted precisely because of the demands of the present.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 7)*

#### “Here, though, is my ultimate point, both for this chapter and for the entire book: this invention of memories of Jesus is not simply a modern phenomenon. It has always been going on. From the very earliest of times. As far back as we have recorded memories of Jesus, we have widely disparate accounts of his words and deeds. And the events of his life. And the events of the lives of those who knew him.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 25)*

##### From here, Ehrman builds entire theories on why the gospels were written the way that they were. For instance, he uses the story of Pontius Pilate to demonstrate this point:

###### “They remembered the past life of Pilate in light of their own present circumstances. They remembered Pilate as innocent in the death of Jesus. And why was that? For a very simple reason. If Pilate was innocent, who was guilty? It was those godless Jews. These memories are being shaped by the world in which storytellers and those who hear their accounts live, a world of deep, bitter, and growing animosity between Christians and Jews. Christians are recalling the past because of what was happening in their own time***.*** I’m afraid we all do that, to one degree or another.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pgs. 31-32)*

##### You can hear where he would apply this same logic with the resurrection.

### Ehrman’s different findings on the kinds of “memory” that humans have:

#### Episodic and Semantic Memory

##### “Episodic memory is what most of us think about when we talk about “remembering” something from our pasts. This is the kind of memory that involves recalling things that happened to you personally: what you did on your first date, the most recent argument you had with a family member, where you went on vacation last year.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 18)*

##### “Semantic memory, on the other hand, involves factual information about the world, quite apart from whether you have personally experienced it.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 18)*

#### “Group memory”

##### “Cognitive psychologists have studied the phenomenon of “group memory” and have reached several very important conclusions that might be surprising. One is that when a group “collectively remembers” something they have all heard or experienced, the “whole” is less than the sum of the “parts.” That is to say, if you have ten individuals who have all experienced an event, and you interview the ten separately, you will learn a good deal about what happened when you piece all the information together. But if you interview them precisely as a group, you will get less information.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 75)*

###### From here, Ehrman begins to build an entire theory on the unreliability of these groups who told the stories of Jesus before they could be written down.

###### It is at this point as well that he attacks the literary rates of the common Jew, to show how flimsy the retellings of Jesus would be.

#### “Suggestion memory”

##### In reference to a study done by Susan Clancy, who investigated the claims of some people who said they were kidnapped by aliens, Ehrman says:

###### “A major portion of her study, then, is about the power of suggestion, and about how once a “possibility” has been implanted in someone’s head, it sometimes becomes a “memory” that has generated its own reality. If someone has a mental framework that allows for the existence of aliens, and comes to think that alien abductions happen, it is possible to imagine that he has experienced an abduction himself. And once that is imagined, if it is imagined vividly and frequently enough, it becomes a part of the person’s mental apparatus. As Clancy puts it, “In situations where the perceptual clarity of an imagined event is high—where we have provided contextual details by vividly imagining the event—we have a lot of trouble distinguishing between products of reality and those of fantasy.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 92)*

#### F.C. Bartlett’s research in his book, *Remembering*.

##### “Suppose you are trying to remember what the doctor’s office looked like on your last visit. You saw, heard, smelled, and generally experienced things there. When you try to remember the experience, you piece it all together as well as you can; but your brain fills in the bits you don’t actually remember by recalling what you typically would find (and have found) in doctors’ offices, such as a reception desk; chairs; tables; a corner for children to play; magazines; a TV overhead showing health videos. Now, it may be that the last time you were in the doctor’s office the TV was turned off, but you remember it being on. That’s because your memory is filling in the gaps with what you would be accustomed to seeing. The problem is that there is precisely no way to know when your mind is filling in the gaps and when it has retrieved the information from this or that part of the brain. (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pgs. 134-35)*

###### You can see where Ehrman will go with this. He goes on to suggest that this is a possibility for how the early disciples transcribed the gospel narratives. Some of it was truth, some of it was “filling in the gaps”.

#### Distorted memory

##### “Sometimes we actually have “distorted memories,” that is, recollections—often quite vivid—of things that did not happen. One of the fairly recent discoveries in the field is that distorted memories can be implanted in people’s minds, for example, by hearing distorted information about a past event and then remembering it as part of the event. That can happen even with respect to events of one’s own personal history. Psychologists have long known this is true of children: adults can be made to think that as a child they were once lost in a shopping mall, or that they accidentally but disastrously overturned a punch bowl at a wedding.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 139)*

##### “When memory researchers speak about “distorted” memories they do not necessarily mean anything negative by it. They are simply referring to memories of things that did not really happen.1 Most, probably all, of the memories of Jesus discussed in the previous chapter are distorted in that sense. People brought to mind words and deeds of Jesus that the historical Jesus himself did not actually say and do.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 49)*

#### “Flashbulb” vs “gist” memory

##### A term coined by psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulik in a 1977 article, Ehrman summarizes it as this:

###### “It is almost as if the mind says, “Take a picture of this!” And it does so. Brown and Kulik called these “flashbulb memories.” When you recall such memories, they claimed, your mind says “Now print!” and the memory flashes back, as clear as day and as accurately as when you first experienced it.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 140)*

##### Ehrman goes on to cite various studies where people had “flashbulb memories”, but then could not recall the exact details a year later.

###### Such as people who saw the Challenger explode in 1986. A study done by psychologists Ulric Neisser and Nicole Harsch. (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pgs. 140-141)*

###### A similar study was done by Neisser regarding specific conversations that happened in the Oval Office between John Dean and Richard Nixon during the Watergate Hearings. (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pgs. 143-46)*

##### All of this “research” led Ehrman to this conclusion:

###### “Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5–7 was recorded about fifty years after he would have delivered the sermon. But can we assume he delivered it? If he did so, did he speak the specific words now found in the sermon (all three chapters of them) while sitting on a mountain addressing the crowds? On that occasion did he really say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,” and “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves,” and “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock”? Or did he say things sort of like that on the occasion? Or did he say something sort of like that on some other occasion—any occasion at all? Which is the gist and which is the detail?” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 147)*

### Various studies that Ehrman cites.

#### Consistently throughout his book, Ehrman cites “studies” that will leave you scratching your head as to their relevance to the question at hand.

#### One that stands out to me is a study Ehrman references when trying to explain why more Christians do not see the discrepancies that others can so obviously see.

##### It was a study done by psychologists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chambris. The study can be found on YouTube, see the selected bibliography for the link.

##### But from that video, Ehrman draws the following conclusion:

###### “And so to return to my question: is it possible that some people—many people—see “invented” traditions about Jesus, or “distorted” memories of what happened in his life, when they are looking for them, in books from outside the New Testament? But that when the books are inside the New Testament they are not looking for such things and so don’t see them?” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pgs. 51-52)*

##### If you watch the video, you will see why this is a laughable thing to compare to the beauty and mystery behind the preservation of the New Testament canon.

### Ehrman largely subscribes to the Legendary/Myth theories of Jesus Resurrection.

#### In reading and carefully studying *Jesus Before the Gospels*, I believe it holds true that there is “nothing new under the sun”. Ehrman’s views are nothing short of German Rationalism and the belief that the “historical Jesus” can be found if we will simply remove the “ridiculous” parts of the New Testament.

##### “Even though there were significant differences in how Dibelius and Bultmann approached the task of analysis, they were agreed in their ultimate objectives. There were principally concerned about two features of the oral traditions recorded in the Gospels. They wanted to analyze the “form,” or shape that the stories took (that is why they are called form critics) and they wanted to determine the *Sitz im Leben*, or, in English, the “situation in life” that led to the formation of the stories.” (Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels, pg. 63)*

#### Ehrman may think he has uncovered some rock that has never been touched, but all this memory study is less than convincing.

#### Even after reading and listening to much of Ehrman’s thinking, it is my opinion that trying to understand what he believes is like trying to catch a fish. He cites several studies but cannot conclusively draw those studies back to why the New Testament and its writers gave us what we have today. Much of his study is conjecture, with no real evidence.

## **Objections to the theory**

### There is no comparing what the early disciples and eyewitnesses of Jesus saw.

#### Ehrman has embarked on an impossible task: to find people who have experienced wild things and see how good they are at recalling those memories. Where he fails, is that in all the people he can find, none of their experiences will compare to those who saw God in the flesh return from the dead.

#### The stories and experiences of the apostles and witnesses is an immeasurable statistic, and it will never be recreated in a lab. Nothing of this caliber has ever happened since. This is why we are talking about it 2000 years later.

### When weighed against all the evidence and the eyewitnesses, this theory seems improbable.

#### In his books *Tactics*, Gregory Koukl puts forward a helpful way when thinking through alternative viewpoints:

##### “There are three questions should always ask whenever someone offers an alternate explanation: Is it possible? Is it plausible? Is it probable? First, is it *possible*? Some options seem unworkable on closer examination.” (Koukl, *Tactics, pg. 83*)

###### Ehrman’s theory in his book is certainly *possible*, so let’s continue asking these questions.

##### “Second, is it *plausible*? Is it reasonable to think something like this might have taken place, given the evidence? Many things are possible, but not plausible… So whenever you hear, “well, I can explain that,” look closely to see whether there’s any evidence that the alternative offered describes what actually took place. It may be theoretically possible, but is it plausible? Does any reliable evidence point to that alternative?” (Koukl, *Tactics, pg. 83*)

###### Given the evidence and the eyewitness testimony, I would say no, it is not plausible that the early Christian writers just “misremembered” what happened to Jesus. And Ehrman has no evidence from the 1st CE to back his claims, just random studies on a variety of topics done by psychologists in the 20th CE.

##### “Third, is it *probable*? Is it the best explanation, considering competing options? The person you’re talking with must be able to show why his view is more likely than the one you are offering.” (Koukl, *Tactics, pg. 83*)

###### Again, I do not believe Ehrman does a good job at tying his “evidence” back to the 1st CE gospel narratives.

### Ehrman’s worldview dismisses plenary inspiration of the Scriptures.

#### As Ehrman cites the impossibility of the New Testament writers being able to recall exactly what Jesus taught and did, the Christian has no issues with that.

#### It is our understanding that the Holy Spirit aided the writers of the New Testament in their writing of the text. (Eph. 3:3-5; 2 Tim. 3:16)

### Ehrman’s begins with conjecture that leads to his conclusions.

#### In much of Ehrman’s writings I have found this to be the case. Take for example something he says in *Misquoting Jesus*:

##### “It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the only changes being made were by copyists with a personal stake in the wording of the text. In fact, most of the changes found in our early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology. Far and away the most changes are the result of mistakes, pure and simple – slips of the pen, accidental omissions, inadvertent additions, misspelled words, blunders of one sort or another. Scribes could be incompetent: **it is important to recall that most of the copyists in the early centuries were not trained to do this kind of work but were simply the literate members of their congregations who were (more or less) able and willing**. Even later, starting in the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christian scribes emerged as a professional class within the church, and later still when most manuscripts were copied by monks devoted to this kind of work in monasteries even then, some scribes were less skilled than others.” (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus, pg. 55, emphasis mine*)

#### Where I certainly can understand where Ehrman is coming from, he begins this entire discourse on how unreliable the early Christian text would have been because “the early copyists were just untrained scribes”. This is conjecture and he offers no data to back this claim up. How do we know there were not trained scribes among the early Christians? If large groups of priests (Acts 6:7) were becoming Christians, and if Pharisees were obeying the gospel, is not possible that scribes were as well?

#### And is it not possible that the early Christians could have commissioned trained copyists to make copies to be distributed?

#### My point here is simple: Ehrman does this a lot. Begins with conjecture and then draws conclusions.

### An over exaggeration of textual criticism.

#### Ehrman has a tendency in his books to “throw the baby out with the bathwater”.

#### He will readily admit how many of the discrepancies in the Biblical text can be easily reconciled, and then in the same breath say that those same discrepancies are enough evidence to dismiss the Bible altogether as being God’s inerrant word.

##### “The more I studied the manuscript tradition of the New Testament, the more I realized just how radically the text had been altered over the years at the hands of scribes, who were not only conserving scripture but also changing it. To be sure, of all the hundreds of thousands of textual changes found among our manuscripts, most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial, of no real importance for anything other than showing that scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us.” (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus, pg. 207*)

#### The 2 passages Ehrman likes citing as an example of New Testament corruption is the ending of Mark’s gospel and the adulterous woman in John 8. From there, he finds problems with other passages as well.

##### “It would be wrong, however, to say—as people sometimes do—that the changes in our text have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. We have seen, in fact, that just the opposite is the case. In some instances, the very meaning of the text is at stake, depending on how one resolves a textual problem: Was Jesus an angry man? Was he completely distraught in the face of death? Did he tell his disciples that they could drink poison without being harmed? Did he let an adulteress off the hook with nothing but a mild warning? Is the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly taught in the New Testament? Is Jesus actually called the "unique God there? Does the New Testament indicate that even the Son of God himself does not know when the end will come? The questions go on and on, and all of them are related to how one resolves difficulties in the manuscript tradition as it has come down to us.” (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus, pg. 207*)

#### I believe these are smoke screens distracting from the glaringly obvious: we do have a reliable and cohesive story here. Yes, some of these stories may not belong (such as the ending of Mark’s gospel and John 8), but those texts have no bearing on what the rest of the Scriptures teach and the reliability of their transcriptions.

### Recreation of the story of Jesus in the 7 critic accepted Pauline letters.

#### If Ehrman wants to insist that the gospels are unreliable documents that were later written down by people with distorted memories, then I would ask how is it that the apostle Paul is able to share the tenants of the gospels in his letters?

#### Again, the 7 critic accepted Pauline letters are: Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon.

##### Included are a few quotes from Paul’s speeches in Acts.

#### This point largely comes from some work Scott Smelser has done in response to some statements by atheist Richard Carrier. Carrier says that the epistles only speak of a pre-existent celestial being and a revealed gospel. He believes that the gospels would come later and are wildly and deliberately fictional. (Carrier, *Did Jesus Even Exist, mm 8:34*)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Events of the Gospel Narratives** | **Found in 7 Critic Accepted Pauline Letters** |
| ***FAMILY*** |  |
| Born of Mary (a virgin) | Galatians 4:4 |
| Descendant of King David | Romans 1:3 |
| (Father): Joseph / Bro.: James, Joseph, Simon, Judas | 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19 |
| Bethlehem / Nazareth | *Acts 22:28* |
| ***INTRO TO THE GOSPELS*** |  |
| John the Baptist | *Acts 13:24* |
| ***MINISTRY OF JESUS: Galilee / Samaria/ Judea*** |  |
| Teaching *(sermons, parables)* | 1 Corinthians 7:10; 11:23; *Acts 20:35* |
| Miracles *(signs, healings, etc.)* | 2 Corinthians 12:12; Rom. 15:19 |
| 12 Apostles | 1 Corinthians 15:5 |
| Peter, John, etc. | Gal. 1-2; 1 Cor. 1; 15:5 |
| ***EVENTS SURROUNDING DEATH & RES.*** |  |
| Enters Jerusalem | 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15 |
| Betrayal by Judas | 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15 |
| Eats the Lord’s Supper | 1 Corinthians 11:23 |
| Arrested & Tried before High Priest | 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15 |
| Brought to Pilate & Herod | *Acts 13:28* |
| Crucified | 1 Cor. 2:2; 1:18; Phil. 2:8; Gal. 3:13 |
| Buried by Joseph & Nicodemus | 1 Corinthians 15:4 |
| Rose on the 1st day | Romans 1:4; 1 Cor. 15; 16:1; 1 Thess. 4:14 |
| Appeared to disciples | 1 Corinthians 15 |
| Ascended to the Father | Phil. 2:9; Romans 8:34 |

#### The point is simple: If these letters can each be dated in and around 55 AD, we are only talking about 15-20 years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

#### By this point, the tenants of the gospel seem to be nailed down and factual.

#### Not to mention the apostle’s circulating around the known world as Jesus’ witnesses. They would be able to squash any rumors or any error that people began to spread about Jesus and His teachings. Backed with miraculous gifts.

## Ehrman’s work is hard to get through and certainly taxing to understand at times, it is my opinion he still has some work to do.

# Conclusion:

# All of these theories we have examined come and go through the centuries. And as time marches on, more will arise.

# However, the best thing we can do with our time is to continue to be overwhelmed and impressed at the evidence God left behind.

# The theories we have examined are commonly known as the “naturalistic explanations” for the resurrection. But these explanations in some ways are calling for something miraculous to happen in order for something “natural” to be explained.

## The likelihood of some sad and wavering men to snatch and hide the body of Jesus out of a tomb guarded by soldiers, and then stage a man to walk around calling himself Jesus, would be the greatest hoax of human existence. It would be a miracle for them to pull something like this off.

## Similarly, it would be a miracle for a man to experience the excruciating pain and punishment of Roman Crucifixion to fake his death, and then recover 3 days later looking as if nothing happened. This too would be miraculous.

## To then suggest and believe that people could fabricate these stories hundreds of years later and write 27 books/letters that cohesively and perfectly match the prophecies of the Old Testament and gain a following of people that exist today? That sounds like a miracle.

## While finally some believe that hundreds of individual people all hallucinated and dreamt the same experience of a risen Jesus? This too sounds like a miracle to me!

# When we weigh all the evidence left behind, why is it an outlandish thing to suggest that the Creator of this world intervened in the world that He sent His Son into and raised him from the dead?

# These are the basic facts of what history has left behind:

## Jesus was a real person.

## Jesus was crucified.

## Jesus was buried in a tomb.

## People saw a post-mortem Jesus walking around and interacted with him.

# The only question that remains is simple: how is this possible?

## The only rational response when all is considered: “He is risen.”

# If one will open their mind to the possibility of the miraculous explanation, rather than the “natural”, a whole new explanation will begin to overwhelm your thinking.

Chase Byers  
14435 Refreshing Garden Ln, Fishers, IN 46038  
cdbyers33@yahoo.com

# **Excursus I: Addressing other so-called Resurrections**

# In my research, it was inevitable that skeptics would site other resurrections to show that Jesus’ resurrection is not special and should be discarded with the others. There are 2 stories that commonly get shared.

# Romulus, founder of Rome (753-716 BC)

### Basics of the Story

#### Romulus is said to have disappeared in a whirlwind during a sudden and violent storm as he was rallying his troops.

#### Livy, the Roman historian, gives a few options for what happened. He says Romulus was either murdered by the senators, being torn apart out of jealousy, or he was raised to heaven by Mars, the god of war. (Livy, *The History of Rome, 1.16*)

### Problems with the story.

#### Livy is writing about these things for the first time in his lifetime, which was 59BC-17AD. So we are talking 700 years after the actual events occurred.

### Compared to the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection.

#### We have people who witnessed Jesus’ death and saw him post resurrection.

#### Romulus is nothing more than a missing persons case, no one knows what happened to him. Livy is obviously repeating a myth or coming up with one as he talks about the founder of Rome.

## Apollonius of Tyana (15-100 AD)

### Basics of the Story

#### Apollonius was a Greek philosopher who had disciples that claimed he performed miracles, died, and appeared after his death.

#### The only person to write about Apollonius like this was a man named Philostratus (170-245 AD).

### Compared to the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection.

#### Similarly, to Romulus, there are no eyewitnesses to his death or resurrection.

#### Philostratus is the only one writing about this, where with Jesus, we have multiple written and oral accounts.

#### The evidence is just simply not the same.

# What is the difference between the resurrection of Jesus and the other resurrections in the Bible?

## Some will use the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11) or Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5) to suggest Jesus’ resurrection really should not be all that special to the Christian. I believe this is easy to answer:

### Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter did not predict their death, burial, and resurrection.

### Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter were not claiming to be the Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man.

#### The resurrection is the stamp on these facts, this is why the apostles cite it so much in their preaching. (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:30-32; 10:39-41; 13:31; 17:31; 22:15; 26:16)

### Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter would die again, Jesus lives forever.

### **Excursus II: Timeline of Burial & Resurrection of Jesus in each Gospel**

### I have decided to share my own notes here for those who may be interested. This is simply a timeline of events as they are given in each gospel, starting from the burial, and going to the resurrection and Jesus’ appearances.

# **MATTHEW 27:57-28:15**

## Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body

## Wraps body and puts it in his own tomb

## Marys watching

## Chief priests and pharisees ask Pilate if they can guard tomb

## They send guards and seal the stone

## First day of the week Marys come to look

## Earthquake and angel and rolled away tomb

## Guards shook with fear

## Angels inform women that He has risen, go tell others

## Women went to tell, intercepted by Jesus

## Jesus tells them to tell others

## Guards tell chief priests what happened

## Elders and chief priests consult, pay guards off to say disciples stole bodies

## Jesus comes to His disciples

# **MARK 15:42-16:14**

## Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body

## Pilate has centurion check if Jesus is dead

## Joseph wraps body and puts him in a tomb

## Marys watching

## Marys come to tomb on first day of the week at sunrise

## Who will roll away the tomb?

## Its already been rolled away

## Young man wearing white robe says he has risen

## Go tell disciples, and Peter

## Women flee for trembling and astonishment gripped them

## He appears to Mary Magdalene

## Magdalene informs the 11, they don’t believe

## Jesus appears in a “different” form to two of them, they tell others

## Jesus appears to the 11 and rebukes them for disbelief

# **LUKE 23:50-24:49**

## Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body

## Joseph wraps body and puts him in a tomb

## Women watching

## First day of the week women bring spices to tomb

## Found stone already rolled away

## Two men in dazzling clothes — “he has risen”

## Women go and tell the 11

## 11 won’t believe

## Peter runs to see empty tomb, marveling

## Jesus appears to 2 on road to Emmaus, reveals himself after breaking bread

## The 2 tell the 11

## Jesus appears to the 11, “peace be to you”

## “See my hands and my feet”

## Eats broiled fish

## Opens their minds to the scriptures concerning his death and resurrection

# **JOHN 19:31-21:17**

## Jews ask Pilate to break the legs of crucified men

## Soldiers break legs of 2 other men, pierce Jesus side

## Joseph of Arimathea & Nicodemus ask Pilate for the body

## Mary Magdalene comes to tomb on first day of the week

## Stone already rolled away

## She runs to tell Peter & John

## Peter and John run to tomb, John is faster

## Find the wrappings, John immediately believes

## Mary weeping, Jesus reveals himself

## Go tell others

## On evening of first day of the week, Jesus reveals himself to the 10 (1st time)

## Shows them hands and his side

## Thomas not there, others tell him, he won’t believe

## 8 days later, Jesus comes again (2nd time)

## Thomas sees hands and side

## Jesus sees disciples at the sea (3rd time)

## Jesus provides a catch

## Jesus provides breakfast

## Do you love me? — Feed my sheep

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