

Liberty University

**The Early Proclamation of the Resurrection as A Compelling Evidence for the Historicity  
of the Resurrection: A Historical Inquiry of the Resurrection Miracle**

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the Faculty of the School of Divinity  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Christian Apologetics

by

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## Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Statement of Purpose.....	3
Statement of Importance of the Problem.....	4
Statement of Position on the Problem.....	6
Limitations and Delimitations.....	9
Method.....	10
Research Methods.....	10
Data Collection.....	11
Data Analysis.....	12
Chapter Summaries.....	14
Chapter One.....	14
Chapter Two.....	15
Chapter Three.....	16
<b>Chapter One: The Possibility of the Resurrection Miracle and Its Historicity.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Science and Miracles.....	18
Arguments Against the Possibility of Miracles.....	18
Arguments for the Possibility of Miracles.....	23
Conclusive Thoughts and Solutions.....	28
History and Miracles.....	30
Arguments Against the Historian’s Capacity to Investigate Miracles.....	30
Arguments in Favor of the Historian’s Capacity to Investigate Miracles.....	35

Conclusive Thoughts and Solutions.....	39
Empty Tomb, Postmortem Appearances, and Early Resurrection Proclamation.....	40
The Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances: Inference to the Best Explanation .....	40
Issues with inferring the resurrection as the best explanation.....	40
Arguments for the resurrection as the best explanation.....	46
The Early Proclamation of the Resurrection and Inference to the Best Explanation.....	51
Status of the early resurrection proclamation.....	51
Arguments for the resurrection as the best explanation.....	54
Chapter Conclusion.....	59
<b>Chapter Two: Historical Evidence of the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Resurrection Belief and Resurrection Fact.....	60
The Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances: Historical Limitations.....	60
The Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances: Epistemological Limitations.....	64
Summary of limitations.....	64
Marks of authenticity.....	65
Resurrection belief.....	67
The Early Resurrection Proclamation: A Stronger Fact for the Resurrection’s Historicity.....	69
Historical Strength.....	69
Early non-Christian attestation.....	69

Biblical attestation.....	72
Epistemological Strength.....	75
Immediate effects.....	75
Legend hypothesis.....	76
Chapter Conclusion.....	77

**Chapter Three: The Rapid Expansion of the Christian Faith is Best Explained by the Resurrection.....80**

The Early Resurrection Proclamation and Christianity’s Expansion as Inseparable.....	80
Historical Evidence.....	80
Non-Christian sources.....	80
Biblical sources.....	85
Two Types of Early Proclamation.....	88
The empty tomb and postmortem appearances.....	88
The coming of the Holy Spirit.....	90
The Growth of the Christian Faith as Best Evidence for the Resurrection’s	
Historicity.....	93
Supporting Background.....	93
A Massive Expansion.....	95
An Expansion through a Supernatural Power.....	98
Contemporary Effects of Pentecost.....	101
The Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances in Light of the Early Resurrection	
Proclamation.....	105
Status of the Three Facts.....	105

Evaluation of the Legend Hypothesis.....	109
Further Criteria for Historical Justification.....	114
Solutions for a Successful Defense of the Resurrection’s Historicity.....	118
Chapter Conclusion.....	120
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>129</b>

## Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

The resurrection of Jesus is the most exciting event in history. Such an event is also foundational for the possibility of humankind to be saved from eternal damnation. Nevertheless, it is one's belief in the historicity of the resurrection and in its theological meaning that determines one's ability to be saved. Through the resurrection, any person who recognizes his or her sinful state, need for a Savior, and repents from his or her sins, becomes born again through the reception of the Holy Spirit who is the deposit of Jesus's resurrection act.

The resurrection's historicity has been primarily defended through the facts of Jesus's empty tomb and postmortem appearances.<sup>1</sup> The two elements enjoy multiple attestations in the New Testament texts.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the main naturalistic theories that have been used to account for them such as the stolen body, swoon, and hallucination hypotheses, are weak at explaining such facts.<sup>3</sup> The inability of these theories to establish a rationale for the two facts leaves the resurrection inferred as the best possible explanation.<sup>4</sup>

The defense of the resurrection's historicity through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances is problematic, as skeptics within and outside of academia often argue that there exist multitudes of theories other than the swoon and stolen body hypotheses that could possibly

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Siniscalchi, "Early Christian Worship and the Argument for Jesus' Resurrection," *New Blackfriars* 93, Iss. 1048 (2011): 710, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01447.x>. See also Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 550.

<sup>2</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 602, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>3</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

account for the empty tomb.<sup>5</sup> Skeptics assert that it is impossible to consider and study all of them, thereby making the resurrection as the best possible explanation an unfounded default position.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, certain types of hallucinatory experiences are not unsustainable to account for the post-resurrection appearances.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances are not well attested historically outside Scripture. The empty tomb is defended indirectly through the stolen body theory that circulated in Jerusalem at the time, and appears mainly in Christian accounts.<sup>8</sup> The postmortem appearances appear in a much-debated account from Josephus that is argued to have been manipulated by a Christian interpolator.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances have epistemological and historical limitations that present obstacles to the defense of the resurrection's historicity. In light of this issue, it is reasonable to ask the following question: "Is there a more appropriate way to defend the resurrection's historicity than by appealing to the empty tomb and postmortem appearances?"

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<sup>5</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: The Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York, NY: Harper Collins E-Books, 2010), 177-8. See also Dale Allison Jr., "Explaining the Resurrection: Conflicting Convictions," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 2 (2005): 118-9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476869005060235>.

<sup>6</sup> Robert G. Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti, "Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis: Problems with Craig's Inference to the Best Explanation," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 2 (2019): 208, <https://doi.org/10.24204/EJPR.v11i2.2836>.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen H. Smith "Seeing Things: Best Explanations and the Resurrection of Jesus," *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 61 (2020): 693, 695-7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.13316>.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, trans. T. R. Glover (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), ch. 30, 299. See also Thomas B. Falls, trans., *St Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho*, vol. 3, *Selections from the Fathers of the Church*, ed. Michael Slusser (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 162, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>9</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 55. See also Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 238.

## Statement of Purpose

The research will attempt to solve the issue by bringing into focus a minimal fact that is often neglected when defending the resurrection's historicity: the early proclamation of the resurrection.<sup>10</sup> The purpose will not be to refute the historicity of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, nor to refute the resurrection as being the best explanation to account for the two facts. Instead, the research will emphasize the need to center the defense of the resurrection's historicity on the aspect of the resurrection's proclamation, which dates early after the crucifixion, when the early church was in its birthing process.<sup>11</sup>

The argument's defense will address the possibility of miracles to occur in nature and the historian's right and capacity to investigate them. For this reason, the resurrection miracle cannot be ruled out as the best possible explanation for Jesus's empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Nevertheless, there exists a more substantiated way to defend the resurrection as a historical fact than what has often been used in apologetics to this point.<sup>12</sup> The research will strive to establish that the early proclamation of the resurrection is a more adequate fact for defending the resurrection's historicity as it is better historically attested. Moreover, it is correlated with tangible elements that posit the resurrection as the best possible explanation to a more solid degree than it does for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances.

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<sup>10</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 9, 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> It is necessary to specify that the type of defense the research will offer seems to be a better alternative to the empty tomb and postmortem appearances only regarding the two specific issues previously mentioned; furthermore, the solution advanced in this study only applies to skeptics who do not find the two facts convincing for the two reasons that have been stated. However, this solution can be useful for all skeptics regardless of their limitations.



### Statement of Importance of the Problem

Skeptics have intellectual hurdles hindering them from coming to faith in Christ. The resurrection is the foundational doctrine of Christianity<sup>13</sup> and involves a miraculous event. Consequently, one cannot defend Christianity without addressing the possibility of miracles such as the resurrection, and the historicity of the resurrection. Skeptics need evidence and tangible data, without which the gap between their belief system and Christianity remains and grows larger. The resurrection must be defended not only as a possible event in nature, but also as an event in history where one can find facts that trace back to its high level of probability.

Mathematical proof cannot apply to historical investigations. Instead, one must rely on several levels of probability.<sup>14</sup> The literature on the possibility of miracles and the historian's ability to investigate them is already extensive, especially in apologetics. Nevertheless, the resurrection's historicity has been mainly defended through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, for which the resurrection is inferred as the best possible explanation. The issue with this type of defense is that the historical evidence for these facts outside the Bible and Christian sources is weak.

Furthermore, skeptics are already bound to their naturalistic worldview. It is troublesome for them to have to think of the resurrection through a defense that revolves around stating that such a miraculous event is the best possible explanation for the facts that Jesus's tomb was found empty and that He was seen alive after His death. The resurrection's defense seems to be circular as it establishes the defense of the miraculous on two facts that are psychologically difficult for the skeptic to grasp, despite their best intentions. As a result, their minds do not cease to imagine

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<sup>13</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 193-4.

indefinite numbers of theories other than the ones commonly used to defend the resurrection (stolen body and hallucination) as the best possible explanation, and that could account for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the lack of historical data outside Scripture for the two facts makes the case for the historical defense of the resurrection weaker.

The apologist must build bridges with skeptics<sup>16</sup> to enable them to grasp the truth in a way that does not turn them further away from it. Indeed, their obstacles are intellectual.<sup>17</sup> For that purpose, the selection of the type of data used to defend the resurrection is a determining factor. It is necessary to use a line of defense that has the most historical evidence outside of Christian sources, and one that is more tangible than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. The purpose of apologetics is not to manipulate the evidence to accommodate skeptics. Rather, the apologist must strive to appeal to facts that are the most historically attested and that skeptics can understand without additional intellectual hurdles.

The early proclamation of the resurrection is one of the twelve most historically attested facts<sup>18</sup> and yet, it seldom appears in the defense of the resurrection's historicity. This minimal fact is related to the rapid spread of Christianity as an immediate consequence.<sup>19</sup> Both facts enjoy

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<sup>15</sup> Dale Allison Jr. "Explaining the Resurrection: Conflicting Convictions," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 2 (2005): 118-9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476869005060235>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul M. Gould, Travis Dickinson, and R. Keith Loftin, *Stand Firm: Apologetics and the Brilliance of the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2018), 5.

<sup>17</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2012), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 9, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 196-7, 416. See also James R. Edwards, *From Christ to Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the Church in Less than A Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 116-7, ProQuest Ebook Central.

solid historical attestation from non-Christian sources. However, they are often left aside in arguments defending the resurrection's historicity.

#### Statement of Position on the Problem

The early proclamation of the resurrection is a stronger candidate for the historicity of the resurrection than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, as it is correlated to a rapid expansion of the Christian faith that is better historically attested and a current state of affairs best explained by the resurrection, while the empty tomb and postmortem appearances attest more to the resurrection belief of the earliest Christians than to the resurrection as a historical fact. Such is the position that the thesis will defend.

The empty tomb and postmortem appearances are mainly attested in the Bible such as the Gospel accounts, the 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 pre-Pauline creed, and the early sermon of Acts 13:19-31. However, they lack attestation in non-Christian sources. Furthermore, the resurrection is inferred as being the best explanation to account for them by stating the weaknesses of the main naturalistic theories. This approach does not satisfy skeptical audiences, since one can conceive of any theory other than the most refuted ones to account for the empty tomb. Additionally, the hallucination theory remains a plausible cause for the postmortem appearances.<sup>20</sup> The empty tomb and postmortem appearances have historical and epistemological limitations when used to defend the resurrection's historicity.

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<sup>20</sup> As the research will address, cases of collective delusions exist. The study does not assert that the disciples' experiences of the risen Jesus were hallucinations. Rather, it emphasizes legitimate concerns skeptics have regarding the plausibility of the postmortem appearances as having been caused by the resurrected Christ.

In contrast, the early proclamation of the resurrection is attested by two non-Christian sources: Josephus<sup>21</sup> and Pliny the Younger.<sup>22</sup> It also permeates the New Testament texts through the early Acts sermon summaries which date a few years after the crucifixion (Acts 2:14-41, 4:5-12, 10:34-43, 13:16-41, 17:22-34),<sup>23</sup> and several pre-Pauline creeds that also date within a few years of Jesus's death (1 Cor. 15:3-8, Phil. 2:5-11, 1 Cor. 8:1-6, Rom. 1:1-4).<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the early proclamation of the resurrection is immediately followed by the rapid spread of the Christian faith. Such an explosive expansion started after the coming of the Holy Spirit that Christ had promised as a deposit of His resurrection and ascension (John 16:7, Acts 1:4-5), and through whom the church grew instantly and exponentially<sup>25</sup> by accomplishing all that Christ had promised and predicted (Acts 1:7-8).<sup>26</sup> This growth is manifest in Acts and the Pauline epistles. Indeed, Paul wrote to already established churches as early as ca. AD 48,<sup>27</sup> and his letters display the presence of a high Christology that reflect the faith and practice of the earliest Christians.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 240. See also Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 134-7, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism of the Early Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 129, ProQuest Ebook Central. See also Barnett, *Jesus and The Rise of Early Christianity*, 196-7, 207.

<sup>26</sup> James R. Edwards, *From Christ to Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the Church in Less than a Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 116-7, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>27</sup> Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 92.

<sup>28</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 141-54.

Furthermore, such a growth never stopped but has persisted throughout human history, and is still tangible to this day,<sup>29</sup> through the same Holy Spirit and theology received two millennia ago. The rapid spread of Christianity as a continuity of the early resurrection proclamation is attested by five non-Christian sources: Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and Lucian of Samosata.<sup>30</sup>

The research will attempt to establish that the empty tomb and the postmortem appearances are sufficient conditions for the resurrection belief of the first Christians who were the disciples and a few others (Acts 1:15),<sup>31</sup> but not for the resurrection as a historical fact. The empty tomb and postmortem appearances only account for the faith of the Christians who preceded the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:15).<sup>32</sup> However, the Holy Spirit accounts for the faith that is at the origin of the birth and expansion of Christianity (Acts 2:41).<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the thesis will argue that the legend theory is inadequate for explaining the early resurrection proclamation and the subsequent birth and expansion of the Christian faith, and that they are best explained by the resurrection.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Christ's resurrection is unparalleled in ancient Judaism and pagan myths,<sup>35</sup> which makes the theory according to which the early

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 554.

<sup>30</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 47-57.

<sup>31</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 693-6, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>32</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 196-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 207. See also Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 554.

<sup>34</sup> The legend theory will be assessed through McCullagh's seven-step criteria for historical justifications. See C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>35</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 595, 597-8.

church invented the resurrection narrative unlikely. Furthermore, there is not enough time between Jesus's crucifixion and the early proclamation of the resurrection for voluntary or involuntary exaggerations and legends to have infiltrated the accounts.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, there is not enough time between the early proclamation of the resurrection and the rapid expansion of the Christian faith for it to have emerged from legendary developments through voluntary or involuntary distortions. Lastly, the resurrection traditions were transmitted through a reliable oral tradition,<sup>37</sup> which makes the early church's potential distortions from the original accounts also improbable.

The research will argue that the early resurrection proclamation is not solely limited to the one that came from the disciples after the facts of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Instead, it also comprises the resurrection proclamation that emerged from the first believers upon receiving the Holy Spirit and from which the church was born and grew rapidly, with such facts enjoying solid extra-biblical historical attestation. The research will also strive to establish that through a failure of the legend and lie hypotheses to account for such data, the early resurrection proclamation understood in the broader sense provides stronger historical evidence for the resurrection, and consequently also for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances by working its way backward in time.

### Limitations and Delimitations

The thesis will not establish the early proclamation of the resurrection as being “full proof” of the resurrection. There exists no mathematical certainty in history. The most one can

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<sup>36</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Michael L. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 39.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 220, ProQuest Ebook Central.

assert is a certain level of probability. In that sense, the research will aim to show that the early proclamation of the resurrection contains more historical data and has more tangible effects that can be traced back to the resurrection as a historical fact, than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. The study does not pretend that it will prove its position, but only that it will present the minimal fact defended as having a higher degree of probability than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances to grant the resurrection's historicity.<sup>38</sup>

The thesis is motivated by the intention to build bridges with skeptics while remaining truthful to the available data. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that the research will convince skeptics, even a few. The field of apologetics must attempt to do its best to fill the existing gaps between skeptics and the Christian worldview in a way that is relatable to such an audience. However, one must keep in mind that despite the apologist's best intentions and proper use of reason, they might not achieve this desired effect. The purpose of the research is to defend what is believed to be a better defense of the resurrection's historicity, without guaranteeing its success both within Christian scholarship and among skeptical audiences.

## Method

### **Research Methods**

The research method follows the model of a descriptive study with subsequent analysis. The approach taken has aimed to look at all the relevant themes to the research topic at a historical, theological, and biblical level. After the data has been gathered, the goal has been to

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<sup>38</sup> As previously stated, this declaration only applies to the specific limitations some skeptics (and perhaps many) encounter when inferring Christ's resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances. In that sense, the alternative approach defended in the research will only address this particular gap.

analyze all content for comprehension of the issues at stake, and conduct a subsequent synthesis of all data to draw implications and create new information.

### **Data Collection**

The study has searched for themes and authors' works that are relevant to the research topic, and mainly used online databases for ease of access and more targeted findings. Articles have been retrieved from databases such as ATLA Serials Plus, Jstor, ProQuest, and Google Scholar, by typing specific keywords pertinent to the research topic. For broader research, keywords have also been typed in the Jerry Falwell Library online general database, from which results have been automatically separated into different categories (books, articles, and reference works) from which to choose.

The study has also used books from electronic databases such as ProQuest Ebook Central and the Jerry Falwell Library online general database, since many electronic books also pertain to databases other than ProQuest Ebook Central. For more specific findings, relevant keywords and themes have been typed within electronic books through the toolbar search. Books have also been retrieved from a personal non-electronic library and proceeded through targeted research by analyzing each selected book's glossaries and table of contents. The research has proceeded as mentioned whenever information has been needed on a given theme or topic, and in the absence of sufficient information to avoid gaps in knowledge or unfounded assumptions.

In terms of practical application to the topic, the study first researched the historical information available for Jesus's empty tomb and postmortem appearances through online journal articles and book chapters from the personal library and online. A similar approach has been conducted for the minimal fact of the early proclamation of the resurrection, which is the



area of interest since the fact seldom appears in apologetic discussions on the resurrection's historicity, although personal intuition and background knowledge lead to thinking that it should.

Additionally, research on arguments that support the resurrection's historicity through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances from within Christian scholarship has also been retrieved through specific keyword searches. The same method has been applied to skeptics' arguments against the resurrection's historicity through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Finally, research on the main obstacles against the early proclamation of the resurrection and the subsequent growth of the Christian faith has been conducted through the search of keywords such as "legend theory." Indeed, such a theory is often used to deny the resurrection as the best explanation for the early resurrection proclamation and correlated expansion of Christianity. For ease of access and targeted results, the majority of sources have been accessed through online databases.

### **Data Analysis**

The research process has correlated all gathered data through an Excel literature matrix sheet. First, authors' names and work titles have been entered alongside the bibliographic information in the top bar and appear vertically. Then, each book or article's themes that are pertinent to the research topic have been summarized in one or a few words and have been entered on the left column and appear horizontally. From this step, paraphrases or direct quotes with page numbers that bind an author to a theme have been entered, which have enabled subsequent synthesis of information.

After gathering all the necessary information progressively alongside all reading, it has been possible to establish comparisons among all cross-referenced themes. Furthermore, implications have been drawn regarding existing gaps in knowledge or undeveloped themes that

should be part of the continuation of the scholarly discussion. The matrix sheet has been used to record any relevant information from all readings pertinent to the research topic, and synthesize all knowledge to create new information and promote further development of the academic discussion on the research matter.

The literature matrix has enabled drawing historical comparisons between the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, and the early resurrection proclamation to raise problems and offer solutions. It has also allowed comparing Christian and non-Christian arguments for and against the resurrection's historicity through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. This process has paved the way for emphasizing the areas where apologetic arguments are weak in their response to skeptics' objections against the resurrection's historicity.

Additionally, the matrix has permitted comparing arguments for and against the resurrection as it relates to science and the historian's ability to investigate miracles. This method has enabled establishing conclusions on the flaws of skeptics' arguments against the possibility of the resurrection miracle and its ability to be investigated by history. In doing so, a consensus on the best way to move forward has been reached. Indeed, one cannot discuss the resurrection's historicity without addressing common skeptics' objections. Finally, the matrix has been essential for assessing the areas where the resurrection's historicity through an appeal to the empty tomb and postmortem appearances is weak, thereby necessitating a new solution.

A common objection against the resurrection as the best explanation for the early resurrection proclamation and the subsequent rapid spread of the Christian faith is that both facts emerged from a legend. For this reason, the matrix has been useful for conducting cross-comparisons of scholars' arguments for and against the legend theory to show the weaknesses of such a hypothesis in explaining the origin of the Christian faith.

## Chapter Summaries

### Chapter One

The first chapter of the thesis focuses on setting the stage for the possibility of miracles to occur and for them to be investigated by the historian. A successful defense of the historicity of the resurrection necessitates answering common objections to the possibility of miracles and their ability to be within the historian's scope of inquiry. Arguments against the possibility of miracles and the historian's right and capacity to investigate such phenomena are flawed. Science cannot show that miracles are impossible entities, and no legitimate reasoning lies behind assuming that such phenomena exceed historical investigations. The historian is within his ability to inquire whether a miraculous event such as Jesus's resurrection is the best explanation for the relevant historical data.

The historicity of the resurrection is often defended by inferring it as being the best explanation for Jesus's empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Such a defense relies on the fact that the main naturalistic theories (swoon, stolen body, hallucination) to account for these two phenomena are inadequate. However, skeptics often state that multitudes of theories other than the main naturalistic ones can potentially account for the empty tomb. Additionally, a specific version of the hallucination theory remains a plausible cause for the postmortem appearances.

The early proclamation of the resurrection is often neglected in arguments for the defense of the resurrection, although it provides a solid historical background to attest to its historicity. The 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 pre-Pauline creed dates less than five years after the crucifixion. The early dating of the creed which proclaims the resurrection leaves no time for a legend to have developed, especially with the reliability of the oral traditions that characterized the early church.

The early resurrection proclamation also permeates other creeds such as Romans 1:1-4, 1 Corinthians 8:1-6, and Philippians 2:5-11. Attention must be given to the minimal fact of the early resurrection proclamation, which subsequent chapters will establish as stronger than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances in defending the resurrection as a historical event.

## **Chapter Two**

The second chapter of the thesis compares the historical evidence for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances with the early resurrection proclamation. The empty tomb and postmortem appearances accounts do not enjoy a solid attestation in non-Christian sources. The first is only mentioned indirectly through the stolen body circulating rumor, while the latter is mentioned by Josephus in an account that is thought to have been manipulated by a Christian scribe. The empty tomb and postmortem appearances are sufficient conditions for the resurrection belief and proclamation of the first Christians who were the disciples and a few of Jesus's first followers (Acts 1:15). However, they are not sufficient conditions for the resurrection as a historical fact. Indeed, even well-meaning skeptics will assert that it remains possible to conceive multitudes of theories other than the resurrection to account for the empty tomb, and that the hallucination theory is not implausible.

The early proclamation of the resurrection is better historically attested than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Several non-Christian sources mention the fact, and the Bible testifies to its reality through the earliest New Testament documents which are Paul's letters and the sermon summaries in Acts. Furthermore, the Pauline corpus and Acts emphasize the proclamation of the resurrection through a practice of such belief. Indeed, the first Christians' practices reflect the presence of a high Christology. Moreover, the early proclamation of the resurrection is immediately followed by a rapid expansion of the Christian faith as seen in Acts,

the latter being inseparable from the first. The early proclamation of the resurrection did not stop but led to a radical expansion of the Christian faith within a short amount of time. The legend theory fails to explain the early resurrection proclamation due to its early dating, as well as the subsequent growth of the Christian faith, which had no time to be founded on a legend.

### **Chapter Three**

The final chapter of the research defends that the rapid expansion of the Christian faith is best explained by the resurrection. The explosive growth of the Christian faith as an immediate consequence of the early proclamation of the resurrection is attested by five non-Christian sources, the Pauline epistles which are addressed to already established churches by ca. AD 48, and Acts. There exist two types of early resurrection proclamation. The first is caused by the empty tomb and postmortem appearances and solely affects the disciples and a few of Jesus's first followers (Acts 1:15). The second is caused by the believers' reception of the Holy Spirit, who also stands as the cause of the instantaneous expansion of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit came after having been predicted and promised by Christ, and accomplishes the effects that Christ had foretold, both at an individual level but also at a global scale. Such a growth has been persisting in history to this day.

The early proclamation of the resurrection and the subsequent expansion of the Christian movement do not deny the plausibility and historical potential of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Instead, the early proclamation and the expansion make them stronger and more likely to have occurred and been caused by the resurrection. For this reason, a defense of the resurrection's historicity would do well to focus on the expansion of the Christian faith which immediately followed the minimal fact of the early resurrection proclamation, and that

came as a result of the promised Holy Spirit whose effects still persist today, as Christ had promised.

Finally, the early dating of the resurrection proclamation and the immediate growth of the Christian faith that followed it, as well as the absence of correspondence of the resurrection with ancient Judaism and pagan myths, rule out the possibility of a legend as their cause. The resurrection is the best possible explanation for the early resurrection proclamation due to its historically attested consequences that no legend can explain.

## **Chapter One: The Possibility of the Resurrection Miracle and Its Historicity**

The purpose of this chapter is to address arguments against the possibility of miracles through their alleged conflict with science and the historian's inability to investigate such phenomena. One cannot discuss the historicity of the resurrection and construct a defense of the early proclamation of the resurrection as a corroborating factor, without discussing whether miracles are possible and can be investigated.

### **Science and Miracles**

This section will evaluate some of the main arguments for and against the possibility of miracles. Such a step is necessary to discuss the historicity of Jesus's resurrection. The study will review arguments against the possibility of miracles and proceed to study counterarguments from proponents of the possibility of miracles. Conclusions on the most appropriate alternative and the best way forward will be drawn.

### **Arguments Against the Possibility of Miracles**

The topic of Jesus's resurrection is often argued to have been an impossible event due to its incompatibility with scientific data. The world obeys an observable pattern of events describable by laws that predict phenomena.<sup>39</sup> The regular course of nature seems to discard the occurrence of exceptions. For instance, it is well-accepted that people do not come back to life after their death, even less in a resurrected body; or that if one drops an object, it will inevitably fall and be subject to the pull of gravity. For this reason, Jesus's resurrection is objected to by

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen Law, "Evidence, Miracles, and the Existence of Jesus," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 28, no. 2 (2011): 131-2, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil20112821>.

many to be an impossible event, and one for which there can be no historicity due to its *a priori* impossibility.

The resurrection miracle is claimed to be an impossibility as “God never supernaturally intervenes in the affairs of the universe.”<sup>40</sup> The characteristics of Jesus’s resurrection entail properties that are contrary to the established laws of nature on observed phenomena. For instance, Cavin and Colombetti state that the ability of Jesus’s body to materialize and dematerialize out of the physical universe is contrary to the Standard Model of particle physics (SM).<sup>41</sup> Indeed, such a model denies the possibility of quarks and electrons composing human bodies to be able to do anything of the sort.<sup>42</sup> Since Jesus’s post-resurrection body lacked the physical properties to interact with the environment, He could not appear to people, be heard, or be touched by them.<sup>43</sup>

For this reason, Cavin and Colombetti deny the possibility of the resurrection hypothesis being the best possible explanation for the alleged events of the postmortem appearances.<sup>44</sup> This line of thinking entails that since SM and the theory of relativity are the two most confirmed items of today’s scientific knowledge, the resurrection has no place in being inferred as being the best possible explanation for any observed phenomena such as the postmortem appearances.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> David Kyle Johnson, “Inference to the Best Explanation and Rejecting the Resurrection,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 3, no. 1 (2021): 27, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2021.vol3.no1.02>. Johnson makes this exact claim in his arguments against miracles.

<sup>41</sup> Cavin and Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis,” 217.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.



The same applies to Jesus having defied the laws of biology by resurrecting through his pre-resurrection body, leaving behind an empty tomb. For Cavin and Colombetti, well-accepted scientific laws deny “that anything acts *super-naturally* in the world.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, scientific findings rule out the occurrence of miracles. Since Jesus’s resurrection implies an imperishable body which contradicts SM,<sup>47</sup> the *a priori* possibility of this miracle is ruled out. For this reason, Johnson states that the resurrection hypothesis is “necessarily implausible” and is of low explanatory power for the facts claimed to be best explained by Jesus’s resurrection.<sup>48</sup>

A hypothesis is plausible when implied by a greater variety of accepted truths and has high explanatory power when making the observed facts more probable than not.<sup>49</sup> Since Jesus’s resurrection is not accepted by a greater variety of accepted truths such as well-established scientific knowledge, one can understand Johnson’s argument against the resurrection as plausible. However, neither Johnson nor Cavin and Colombetti establish the reason for asserting the resurrection hypothesis as being of low explanatory power.<sup>50</sup> One can assume that it might be due to the alleged conflict between science and miracles.

In a different article, Johnson claims that no one is justified to believe in miracles, even if they think they have witnessed one.<sup>51</sup> A miracle is commonly defined as a breaking or suspension

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<sup>46</sup> Cavin and Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis,” 222.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>48</sup> Johnson, “Inference to the Best Explanation,” 27.

<sup>49</sup> C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Cavin and Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis,” 220.

<sup>51</sup> David Kyle Johnson, “Justified Belief in Miracles is Impossible,” *Science, Religion, and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2015): 61, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2015/2.2.61.74>.

of natural laws.<sup>52</sup> For Johnson, one is justified in believing that a miracle has occurred if and only if one is justified in believing that a scientific law has been broken and if one is justified in believing that such a law accurately describes a natural law.<sup>53</sup> Johnson argues that even in the event of himself observing a miracle, the possibility of his senses tricking him or of there being an explanation consistent with science that he is ignorant about is far more probable.<sup>54</sup> It is always more likely that there exists a natural explanation one cannot detect, even in the event of witnessing a miracle in the first person.<sup>55</sup>

For instance, if Einstein's law of nature ever becomes violated by discovering that something can exceed the speed of light, his law would no longer be a genuine law as it would not accurately describe the course of nature. In other words, Einstein's law would not be broken since it would not be an accurate scientific law. Consequently, there would not be any miracle since a law describing the available data would have yet to be found and formulated. The other alternative would be one's senses being misleading. It appears that Johnson's argument presents an *a priori* refusal of the possibility of miracles as he has decreed that even if he ever witnesses a miracle, it is necessary that either his senses would be deceiving him or that the supposedly broken or suspended law of nature would not be the right law.

A more moderate approach to denying the possibility of miracles involves stating that extraordinary events require extraordinary proof.<sup>56</sup> In the absence of such proof, one is not

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<sup>52</sup> Johnson, "Justified Belief in Miracles is Impossible," 66.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>56</sup> Law, "Evidence, Miracles, and the Existence of Jesus," 132.

justified to believe that a miracle has occurred.<sup>57</sup> For Law, the evidence for the miraculous must be of such a higher standard that he would not even believe trusted friends who would tell him they have witnessed a miracle unless they would present solid proof, such as a video.<sup>58</sup>

Johnson goes further and affirms that even in the absence of extraordinary proof, he would still not be justified to believe that a miracle has occurred.<sup>59</sup> The probability of his senses tricking him or the existence of a naturalistic explanation would always be higher than a miracle's actual occurrence.<sup>60</sup> Johnson uses several examples, such as the instance of him observing stars spelling out in the sky, "Give it up, Kyle. Belief in miracles can be justified, and here's your proof. – God."<sup>61</sup> Even in that instance, Johnson claims that it would be far more likely that either his telescope was rigged or that aliens plotted against him.<sup>62</sup>

From the arguments mentioned above, it appears that miracles are argued not to be plausible entities due to the presence of scientific laws that leave no room for supernatural acts. Nevertheless, it is unfounded to claim that because science has nothing to say about miracles, miracles are impossible and one's belief in them is unjustified. Although scientific laws do not mention anything about supernatural activities, it does not imply that they are impossible. This point leads to the need to analyze arguments on behalf of the possibility of miracles.

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<sup>57</sup> Law, "Evidence, Miracles, and the Existence of Jesus," 132.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 132, 136.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, "Justified Belief in Miracles is Impossible," 69.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

## Arguments for the Possibility of Miracles

Arguments regarding the impossibility of miracles, as well as the impossibility for one to be justified in believing that a miracle has occurred, are flawed. As previously stated, scientific laws do not posit the impossibility of miracles. Their role is to describe phenomena interacting through regular patterns that are both describable and predictable. Although scientific laws are effective ways to establish predictions based on observable regularities in the natural world, they cannot disprove the possibility of miracles.<sup>63</sup> As Habermas asserts, *a priori* objections against the possibility of miracles reveal an inadequate methodology.<sup>64</sup>

Such a methodology is founded on the presupposition that one can only know what is scientifically testable and provable.<sup>65</sup> It revolves around seeing the regularities of the natural world, which can be measured scientifically, as being an indicator that nothing outside what science can observe is possible. The idea that science is the gold standard of knowledge is a belief that emerges from scientism.<sup>66</sup> Scientism is self-refuting as it is not itself a scientific claim, but a philosophical claim about science.<sup>67</sup> Scientism is intertwined with naturalism. Scientism claims that all knowledge derives from science or has to be compatible with scientific findings. However, since science only deals with the natural world, scientism entails that the natural world is all there is and that nothing outside the material realm of things exists.<sup>68</sup> Arguments against the possibility of miracles or one's justified belief in such phenomena are consequently founded on

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<sup>63</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Gould, Dickinson, and Loftin, *Stand Firm*, 64.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

naturalistic presuppositions. Naturalism denies any reality outside the physical world,<sup>69</sup> which itself is the sole object of science.

Nevertheless, nothing within the scientific realm and the observable world can establish the impossibility of miracles and supernatural entities, such as a God who exists and acts by choosing to temporarily suspend some laws of nature. For this reason, the event of God having raised Jesus Christ from the dead is not an impossible fact. Furthermore, one's belief in that event is not unjustified simply because science refutes such types of events. Indeed, science does not deal with miracles but with the physical world, and it cannot disprove the possibility of miracles.<sup>70</sup>

It is necessary to specify that not all rare events are miracles.<sup>71</sup> For instance, the landing on the moon is a rare event that can be naturally explained.<sup>72</sup> Purtill offers to define a miracle as “an event in which God temporarily makes an exception to the natural order of things, to show that God is acting.”<sup>73</sup> The idea of a miracle is intertwined with the existence of a God who decides to intervene in the world He created by choosing to provisionally override regular patterns of nature. One could inquire whether a miracle needs to have been caused by God to be a miracle.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Richard L. Purtill, “Defending Miracles,” in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 69.

<sup>70</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 136.

<sup>71</sup> Purtill, “Defending Miracles,” 62.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>74</sup> George I. Mavrodes, “Miracles and the Laws of Nature,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 2, no. 4 (1985): 335, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil1985242>. Mavrodes raises the question of whether a miracle needs to be caused by some deity.

A plausible reason for God to be thought of as the agent of miracles is that nothing occurs without a cause. Consequently, miracles must be entities caused by a source that is greater than nature as well as greater than miracles. Miracles require a special power to be accomplished.<sup>75</sup> Purtil goes on to add the specificity of intentionality as he posits miracles as entities caused by God in order to create faith, confirm faith, or show that He is acting.<sup>76</sup> A miracle bears the intentionality of a divine agent to achieve a specific purpose in human history, and works as a “contrast-idea.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, the idea of a miracle is only understood as an exception to the observed regularities of nature.<sup>78</sup>

David Hume’s argument against one’s justified belief in miracles contains this contrast-idea as for him, a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, such laws describe regularities that Hume states as offering a “firm and unalterable experience.”<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, Hume’s argument reflects a circularity founded on a presupposition that is found at the core of common arguments against the possibility of miracles. Hume asserts that the observed course of nature offers an experience that is “unalterable.” However, one can only state that the experience of the world’s regularities is unalterable if and only if one is certain that no miracle has ever occurred.<sup>81</sup> One can only be certain that no miracle has ever occurred if one assumes that none

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<sup>75</sup> Mavrodes, “Miracles and the Laws of Nature,” 334.

<sup>76</sup> Purtil, “Defending Miracles,” 64.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> David Hume, “Of Miracles,” in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Action in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 33. This chapter can be found in section X of Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1777).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1947), 162.

has ever occurred.<sup>82</sup> Besides being circular, Hume's argument also contradicts his own philosophy that refutes the idea of a necessary connection between events.<sup>83</sup> For this reason, the laws of nature cannot describe an "unalterable" experience. Hume's argument against the possibility of miracles can be summarized as follows:<sup>84</sup> 1/ A miracle is a violation of natural laws; 2/ There is uniform experience that natural laws are never violated; 3/ Therefore, miracles cannot occur.

As C. S. Lewis asserts, Hume's argument lies on the assumption that the uniformity of nature is itself uniform.<sup>85</sup> However, the uniformity of nature is only the framework within which probabilities take place and is consequently neither probable nor improbable. In denying that miracles occur, Hume contradicts his philosophy as he implicitly assumes a nature that is necessarily uniform, that is, with a necessary connection between events. On that matter, C. S. Lewis' remark is worth considering when he says:

The question, 'Do miracles occur?' and the question, 'Is the course of Nature absolutely uniform?' are the same question asked in two different ways. Hume, by sleight of hand, treats them as two different questions. He first answers 'Yes,' to the question whether Nature is absolutely uniform: and then uses this 'Yes' as a ground for answering, 'No,' to the question, 'Do miracles occur?' The single real question which he set out to answer is never discussed at all. He gets the answer to one form of the question by assuming the answer to another form of the same question.<sup>86</sup>

Hume's reasoning is reflected in today's skeptics regarding the possibility of miracles, and is at the root of the refusal to think of Jesus's resurrection as a possible event. A rebuttal of

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<sup>82</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 162.

<sup>83</sup> Purtill, "Defending Miracles," 67.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 162.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

the possibility of miracles implies the assumption of a necessary connection between the events in nature.

Purtill's definition of a miracle includes God as the intentional cause to point to Himself as the agent of such phenomenon.<sup>87</sup> God has ordained a specific order in nature for its governance, and He sometimes chooses to suspend the laws that describe and predict regularities to lead humankind to His existence.<sup>88</sup> Another essential aspect of miracles is their inability to be explained by natural causes.<sup>89</sup> This fact leads one to question the potential existence of God.

This section has attempted to establish the possibility of miracles by revealing some of the main flaws of opposing arguments. Since no scientific law can disprove the possibility of a God who acts in the world and who sometimes temporarily overrides natural laws, there is no reasonable ground for stating that Jesus's resurrection is an implausible event. The fact that dead people do not come back to life does not necessarily imply that one cannot come back to life.

The observation of the regular course of nature only shows regularities but does not disprove the possibility of such regularities being suspended for a limited amount of time, and for a specific purpose. Most importantly, science cannot disprove the possibility of a God who transcends nature and who can disrupt the natural course of events that He has established for the world to run and be orderly governed. Since miracles are outside the scope of science as they are precisely exceptions to the regularities measured by natural laws, can miracles and science be reconciled, and if so, in what fashion? This question leads to the next section.

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<sup>87</sup> Purtill, "Defending Miracles," 72.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Michael R. Licona and J. G. Van der Watt, "Historians and Miracles: The Principle of Analogy and Antecedent Probability Reconsidered," *HTS Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009): 58, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.129>.



## Conclusive Thoughts and Solutions

The two previous sections have shown that miracles are not logical impossibilities, and that science cannot rule them out. The reason is that the scope of natural laws is solely restricted to natural phenomena. Since miracles are by definition outside of the realm of natural events, they are also outside of the scope of science and its laws. Consequently, miracles do not “break” the laws of nature.<sup>90</sup>

The fact that modern science has revealed that the world’s regularities are governed by natural laws leads humankind to the idea that miracles are impossible.<sup>91</sup> However, miracles are impossible if and only if natural laws cannot have exceptions.<sup>92</sup> In other words, if one understands natural laws as being exceptionless, then miracles become an impossibility. The research has attempted to establish that nothing in nature or science can disprove the possibility of natural laws being temporarily suspended. For this reason, scientific laws are not exceptionless since there is no internal inconsistency in them being suspended by a God who can sometimes choose to override them for specific purposes in human history.

Since there exists no necessary connection between sets of events following a regular pattern despite being described by laws, it is necessary to ask oneself if miracles are exceptions to accidental facts.<sup>93</sup> As Mavrodes observes, there exist two types of generalizations: accidental and nomological.<sup>94</sup> Accidental generalizations are coincidental generalities such as the fact that

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<sup>90</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 533.

<sup>91</sup> Steven Horst, “Miracles and Two Accounts of Scientific Laws,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 49, no. 2 (2014): 323, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12088>.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>93</sup> Mavrodes, “Miracles and the Laws of Nature,” 344.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

everyone in a room is a United States citizen.<sup>95</sup> Nomological generalizations reflect regularities describable by laws that also predict them, such as the fact that each time one lets go of an object, it becomes subject to gravity and does not stay suspended in the air.<sup>96</sup>

However, there exists no internal contradiction in the case of the law of gravity becoming suddenly suspended. Although one cannot think of a triangle without three sides, one can imagine a heavy object being dropped in the air without falling. For this reason, one could think of nomological generalizations as bearing accidental facts since, despite the observed regular patterns in nature, it is perfectly conceivable that such patterns become suspended.

Unlike Johnson asserts, a violated or broken law of nature is not a non-genuine law. Scientific laws can temporarily stop and cannot disprove the possibility of being suspended by a God who decides to do so for His divine ends. Consequently, laws of nature cannot be violated or falsified but only suspended. In light of this conclusion, Jesus's resurrection from the dead is not an impossible event and one can have good reasons to consider it to be a possible event in history. The resurrection miracle contains no internal contradiction and remains a possibility that science cannot rule out in any way. Scientific laws only specify how certain objects will behave under specific conditions.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, they have nothing to say about how they will act under different conditions such as divine action.<sup>98</sup>

This first portion of the research has attempted to establish reasonable grounds for asserting that miracles are possible phenomena. Such a step is necessary to conduct a historical

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<sup>95</sup> Mavrodes, "Miracles and the Laws of Nature," 338.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Horst, "Miracles and Two Accounts of Scientific Laws," 332.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

investigation of the resurrection miracle. If miracles are possible entities, one is justified in moving forward into the resurrection's historicity. However, can history investigate miracles? This question leads to the next section.

## History and Miracles

### **Arguments Against the Historian's Capacity to Investigate Miracles**

Bart Ehrman is notorious for claiming that historians cannot establish that a miracle has occurred, as they are incapable of discussing miracles.<sup>99</sup> For this reason, whether Jesus rose from the dead is outside of the historian's purview. Ehrman's justification for his argument is that the historian's craft deals with the past and strives to determine what likely occurred.<sup>100</sup> Unlike science, history cannot test its hypotheses through experiments that show what does and will most probably happen.<sup>101</sup> The absence of repeatability in history requires historians to work with several hypotheses to establish what most likely occurred at some point in the past.<sup>102</sup> Some historical events have more probability than others. For instance, evidence about who won a tournament a few weeks ago as opposed to a century ago, especially when technology was nowhere near what it is today, is much higher.<sup>103</sup> For this reason, the most that historians can do is establish levels of probability, and determine what probably happened.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 172-3.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

For Ehrman, miracles are the least probable explanations since they are “virtually impossible events.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, they are contrary to the way nature runs its usual course and, in that sense, “violate” it. For this reason, miracles are impossible and their chances of occurring are infinitesimal.<sup>106</sup> Since historians can only establish what likely happened in the past and miracles are the least likely occurrences, historians cannot investigate them or establish their historicity. Consequently, Jesus’s resurrection cannot be investigated or established by history.<sup>107</sup>

The issue with Ehrman’s argument is that he *a priori* excludes the possibility of miracles from being historically investigated and established only because they are rare and supernatural events. However, rare or supernatural does not mean “impossible,” as he claims.<sup>108</sup> The fact that the historian must work with several levels of probability does not preclude him from inferring a rare and supernatural event as being the best possible explanation for the available data. The idea that miracles are exceptions to the regular order of nature should not keep the historian from being able to establish their historicity with a significant level of probability, especially if they are found to be the most likely explanations for certain events given all the available evidence.<sup>109</sup> Ehrman seems to establish an unfounded implication. The rare and supernatural nature of an event does not disqualify it from being historically investigated and established as having likely occurred.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 175.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>109</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 177.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

Other arguments claim that miracles cannot be the object of historical investigations as they solely pertain to the realms of theology and philosophy.<sup>111</sup> J. P Meier states that miracles are illegitimate in a historical investigation as they are unanswerable by the historian.<sup>112</sup> Meier defines a miracle as an unusual or extraordinary event without known explanation by natural forces, and that is caused by God.<sup>113</sup> According to Meier, the most a historian can do is state that an extraordinary event has occurred, without qualifying it as a miracle and stating that God has acted.<sup>114</sup> The historian deals with an empirical science that prohibits him from going beyond observation.<sup>115</sup> He is confined to asserting that an extraordinary event has taken place and that some have claimed it to be a miracle.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, the historian cannot claim that such an unusual event is a miracle and that God caused it.<sup>117</sup> Meier leaves matters of definition and causation to theology and philosophy.

Meier's position deals with the issue only partially as the historian does not have to define an event as a miracle or as being caused by God. However, there is no reasonable ground for stating that the historian cannot investigate an event claimed to be miraculous by some to then decide whether it likely occurred or not. On that matter, Licona recognizes that a historian can infer Jesus's resurrection as the most likely explanation for the historical evidence, yet

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<sup>111</sup> J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 514-5.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 513-4.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 514-5.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

without pronouncing any statement on its cause or origin, such as that God did it.<sup>118</sup> This approach is known as methodological naturalism.<sup>119</sup>

Furthermore, one must also distinguish miracles from miracle claims. While the historian is not required to define an unusual event as a miracle, he can nevertheless investigate the claims made about that event, such as the resurrection miracle, to determine whether it is likely that it occurred in history.<sup>120</sup> One cannot deny the limitations of historical knowledge, whether dealing with the miraculous or the non-miraculous.<sup>121</sup> Since history targets the past and the past is non-repeatable and non-testable, the historian can only work with several levels of probability. Moreover, the further in time an event is, the more difficult it often is to evaluate whether it happened.

However, such limitations of historical knowledge should not *a priori* discard miracles as being possible objects of historical investigation. Thus far, Ehrman and Meier's arguments are not compelling for the reasons stated to this point. Although Allison is right to mention that the historian should be modest regarding reason's abilities to reconstruct events of the past,<sup>122</sup> the historical investigation of miracles is not impossible or out of the historian's scope. The miraculous nature of the resurrection does not necessarily prevent it from being historically investigated.

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<sup>118</sup> Michael R. Licona, "Historians and Miracle-Claims," *Journal for the History of the Historical Jesus* 12, no. 1 (2014): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01202002>.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Licona, "Historians and Miracle-Claims," 106.

<sup>121</sup> Allison, "Explaining the Resurrection," 132-3.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 133.

Segal claims that the resurrection is neither probable nor improbable since it is impossible to confirm historically.<sup>123</sup> Miracles such as the resurrection are for Segal a matter of faith and not historical verification.<sup>124</sup> Striving to prove the resurrection historically is similar to attempting to prove Adam and Eve's story scientifically or the Trinity doctrine historically.<sup>125</sup> The historical investigation of the resurrection miracle is for Segal a category mistake.<sup>126</sup> The resurrection is solely confined within the realm of faith.<sup>127</sup>

Segal rightly affirms that Christian scholars are the ones who tend to believe in the historicity of the resurrection and the historian's ability to investigate miracles. It is indeed easier for those who have already accepted Christ as their Savior to make such statements. Nevertheless, it does not imply that Christian scholars make category mistakes. They are possibly more equipped to develop philosophical and epistemological arguments on behalf of the historian's ability to investigate miracles, due to the absence of naturalistic presuppositions in their worldviews.

The objections against the historian's capacity to investigate miracles are similar to arguments that deny the possibility of miracles due to their contradiction of scientific laws. Both types of arguments seem to bear naturalistic presuppositions. Such presuppositions are not a sign of intellectual deficiency or lack of an open mind. Rather, they reveal the overwhelming

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<sup>123</sup> Alan F. Segal, "The Resurrection: Faith or History?" in *The Resurrection of Jesus: N. T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan in Dialogue*, ed. Rob B. Stewart (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2006), 135.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

submersion of humankind in a world that appears to be uniquely physical and where knowledge is thought to be only applicable to the visible and tangible.

It is undeniably less challenging for a theist to believe in the possibility of miracles and their historicity, and for a Christian theist to believe in the historicity of Christ's resurrection. Although the faith of Christian scholars weighs heavily on their presuppositions, it does not imply that their philosophy is devoid of truth and validity. Such scholars are simply more open to the possibility of miracles and their capacity to be investigated by history. For this reason, it is essential to study some of the arguments they present on behalf of the possibility of investigating miracles such as Jesus's resurrection.

### **Arguments in Favor of the Historian's Capacity to Investigate Miracles**

Objections to the objectivity of history revolve around stating that the historian cannot know the past as it happened. Indeed, it cannot be reconstructed in its totality nor objectively, as historians are not neutral observers but the product of their time, culture, and circumstances.<sup>128</sup> Both objections are founded: the past cannot be fully reconstructed, and the historian is limited by his own presuppositions and the circumstances surrounding him. As Ehrman previously stated, the historian's object no longer exists and is not repeatable, unlike scientific entities.<sup>129</sup>

Nevertheless, the historian's limitations are also found in the scientist. Just like the historian, the scientist is a human being bound to his presuppositions and subsequent chosen methods of inquiry. In that sense, scientific work is also exercised within a worldview that makes

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<sup>128</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 331, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.



scientists non-neutral observers.<sup>130</sup> The scientist is often prone to choosing to investigate objects depending on what he believes. In other words, two scientists will not necessarily be willing to investigate the same entities. Consequently, even the world of natural sciences cannot interpret the world as it truly is.<sup>131</sup>

Although the scientist can test and verify hypotheses through predictability and repeatability, the historian cannot reproduce the past as it occurred.<sup>132</sup> For this reason, the only way for the historian to reconstruct the past is by considering the available evidence through “residues” of the past that he can access.<sup>133</sup> Craig asserts that the historian can adopt the same methods for testing hypotheses as the scientist does, through the hypothetico-deductive model or the inference to the best explanation method.<sup>134</sup>

According to the hypothetico-deductive method, the scientist invents a hypothesis to account for a fact, to then deduce from his hypothesis conditions that would corroborate or disconfirm it.<sup>135</sup> He then proceeds through experiments to verify the hypothesis.<sup>136</sup> The historian works similarly, except that, unlike the scientist, he cannot test his hypotheses in a laboratory. Instead, he reconstructs a picture of the past and verifies if what should be true were his hypothesis accurate, does in fact obtain.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 332-3.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 350-1.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

The inference to the best explanation model (IBE) starts with the available evidence, from which the scientist or historian infers what hypothesis would, if true, provide the best explanation for that evidence.<sup>138</sup> While the scientist verifies his hypotheses through experiments in both models, the historian will determine how well his chosen hypotheses explain the historical data or residual past.

Although the past cannot be fully known and reconstructed, the historian can arrive at a certain level of clarity regarding what occurred.<sup>139</sup> In terms of neutrality, he can detach himself from his presuppositions if he chooses to use methods of inquiry that are independent of his worldview.<sup>140</sup> Craig's comparison of the scientist's methods of inquiry with that of the historian shows that a miracle cannot be discarded from being investigated or historically established if it is the hypothesis that makes the most sense to account for the historical residues of the past.

The methods of inquiry found in science in conjunction with the awareness of one's presuppositions, can lead the historian to determine what most likely occurred at some point in the finite past. If a miracle such as Jesus's resurrection best explains a residual evidence of the past, there is no reasonable ground for discarding it on the basis of it being a supernatural event. As Groothuis observes, a philosophical commitment to naturalism rather than to the available evidence can lead the historian to dismiss Jesus's resurrection as historical.<sup>141</sup> However, if the resurrection is the most plausible explanation to account for certain data, it should not be discarded.

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<sup>138</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 351.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 340, 353.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 354. In *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, Licona offers six criteria for reaching historical conclusions as objectively as possible given the historian's worldview and presuppositions (see pages 50-62).

<sup>141</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 555.

The objection according to which the resurrection is a miracle and therefore the historian has no tools for investigating it,<sup>142</sup> is unfounded. As Habermas states, the only improper methodology is to *a priori* exclude miraculous events as historical events because they are miracles.<sup>143</sup> It is possible for the historian to investigate miracle claims while leaving matters of definition to the philosopher and theologian.<sup>144</sup> If a miracle best explains the available data, it should be adopted as the most probable conclusion.<sup>145</sup> However, a conclusion should not be dismissed in advance. Otherwise, the historian no longer operates according to a neutral methodology since he remains bound to his worldview, which should never dictate his methods of inquiry. As Licona asserts, historians' investigations should be guided by the data and not their worldviews, as "bad philosophy corrupts good history."<sup>146</sup>

Additionally, scientists often infer theoretical entities as the best explanation for some observed phenomena. Such is the case of quarks, strings, gluons, and black holes, which are not observed but inferred objects.<sup>147</sup> Historians are also within their professional rights to infer a miraculous event such as the resurrection when it best explains an event, and to investigate miracle claims.<sup>148</sup> Licona defines a miracle as an event unlikely to have occurred "given the circumstances or natural law" in a context "charged with religious significance," and for which

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<sup>142</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 4.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 8.

<sup>146</sup> Licona, "Historians and Miracle-Claims," 117.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-6.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-2, 128.

natural explanations are inadequate.<sup>149</sup> In the case of Jesus's resurrection, the event is significantly charged with religious significance since it took place as a result of Jesus's prophecies<sup>150</sup> for the theological purpose of bringing redemption into the world, and the reconciliation of humankind with God the Father.

### **Conclusive Thoughts and Solutions**

When one strives to pursue history through a worldview-neutral methodology, it becomes possible to be epistemically justified in believing that a miracle has occurred when it is inferred as the most plausible explanation<sup>151</sup> for residues of the past. A rejection of the possibility of a miraculous event such as the resurrection to be historically investigated relies more on a commitment to metaphysical naturalism<sup>152</sup> than reason.

James Charlesworth's method of inquiry is worth noting when he says:

If we ask a question, we should not presuppose a desired answer or manipulate data to acquire a pleasing answer. We need to develop the maturity to be honest in asking questions, and be prepared for a possibly unattractive answer. In asking questions, we need to include all pertinent data and employ all relevant methods.<sup>153</sup>

If endowed with the decision to be detached from his horizons and biases, the historian is professionally justified in investigating miracle claims and inferring them as historical if they

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<sup>149</sup> Licona and Van der Watt, "Historians and Miracles," 58.

<sup>150</sup> Licona, "Historians and Miracle-Claims," 121.

<sup>151</sup> R. Douglas Geivett, "The Epistemology of Resurrection Belief" in *The Resurrection of Jesus: N. T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan in Dialogue*, ed. Rob B. Stewart (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2006), 93, 102-3.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>153</sup> James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 121.

best account for the data. There is consequently no reasonable ground for discarding miracles as non-historical entities due to their rare nature.

The first two sections of this chapter have attempted to establish the non-impossible nature of miracles, and their ability to be historically investigated and posited as the most plausible explanation for certain events when the evidence leads the historian to do so. Such steps were necessary for the context of establishing Jesus's resurrection as historical, which the remainder of the research will strive to accomplish through the defense of a specific angle often neglected in current scholarship. The rest of this chapter will initiate the focus on the main argument defended in the study.

Empty Tomb, Postmortem Appearances, and Early Resurrection Proclamation

### **Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances: Inference to the Best Explanation**

Issues with inferring the resurrection as the best explanation

Jesus's resurrection has been inferred as being the best possible explanation to account for the facts of the empty tomb and the disciples' claims that they saw Jesus back to life after His death.<sup>154</sup> The reason for such an inference is that the naturalistic theories offered to potentially explain the two facts are flawed.<sup>155</sup> The hypothesis according to which Jesus's disciples stole His body to pretend that He resurrected,<sup>156</sup> or that He never truly died but got up from His tomb and left (swoon theory), have been the main ones to account for the empty tomb in a way that does

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<sup>154</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 9, 31.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>156</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 560-1.

not infer the resurrection.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, the hypothesis according to which the disciples never saw Jesus resurrected but hallucinated Him as such, has been the main naturalistic theory to account for the postmortem appearances claim.

These naturalistic hypotheses have been judged implausible for reasons that will be studied at a later point. However, skeptics argue that they are not strictly impossible and that there exist multitudes of theories other than the main naturalistic ones that have been offered that could potentially explain the empty tomb.<sup>158</sup> As for the postmortem appearances, a version of the hallucination theory remains plausible.<sup>159</sup> The resurrection hypothesis cannot be inferred as the best possible explanation for the empty tomb since there is an indefinite number of other naturalistic hypotheses that have not been considered. Indeed, their number is too great for them to be analyzed.<sup>160</sup> Consequently, the resurrection as the best possible explanation for the empty tomb is an unfounded default position.

It is important to state that while the empty tomb is one of the twelve minimal or most attested facts, the postmortem appearances are a conjunction of two minimal facts: the disciples' claims to have seen the risen Christ, and their subsequent radical transformation, from which it is inferred that they at least believed to have seen Jesus resurrected. The question remains whether their experience is best explained by the resurrection or the hallucination theory. The research

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<sup>157</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 540-3.

<sup>158</sup> As the research will show, an indefinite number of theories could account for the empty tomb. However, it is impossible to consider them all. As for the postmortem appearances, the hallucination theory is not as strong of an impossibility as it has been established.

<sup>159</sup> See comment above.

<sup>160</sup> Cavin and Colombetti, "Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis," 208.

will focus on the empty tomb and postmortem appearances among the ten other minimal facts, as they remain the most used in scholarship when defending Jesus's resurrection.<sup>161</sup>

Ehrman sees strong limitations in inferring the resurrection as the most likely explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances.<sup>162</sup> Although Ehrman's philosophy on the impossibility of investigating miracles is flawed as previously studied, his objections to the inferred resurrection are not without merit. They also reflect common objections coming from skeptics in and outside academia. The problem with inferring the resurrection as the most likely explanation for the empty tomb is that the list of naturalistic theories to account for it is not exhaustive. For this reason, the lack of plausibility of the main ones offered (theft and swoon theories) is not enough to infer the resurrection as the most probable explanation. Indeed, there are many other naturalistic theories one can come up with, and that would have to be evaluated against the competing resurrection hypothesis.

As Ehrman asserts, "there are lots of other explanations" for Jesus's possible outcome than the resurrection.<sup>163</sup> One could indeed conceive just about any.<sup>164</sup> Ehrman considers an explanation for the empty tomb that is not the resurrection, but that also does not involve Jesus's disciples stealing His body. For instance, it is possible that there was no guard at the tomb, and that followers of Jesus other than the Twelve decided to move the body.<sup>165</sup> Some Roman legionnaires could have seen the men passing by with a shrouded corpse, intercepted them, and

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<sup>161</sup> Siniscalchi, "Early Christian Worship and the Argument for Jesus' Resurrection," 710. See also Gould, Dickinson, and Loftin, *Stand Firm*, 111.

<sup>162</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 176-9.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-8.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

killed them. In that case, they would be left with all the bodies and decided to get rid of them, without a clue as to where the first one came from.<sup>166</sup> Although Ehrman sees this spontaneously imagined situation as more likely than an actual resurrection as he judges miracles “virtually impossible events,”<sup>167</sup> this scenario shows that one could invent any theory other than the most commonly rejected naturalistic ones, which could never all be considered and vetted.<sup>168</sup> Gerald Bostock even mentions the possibility that the Jewish authorities removed Jesus’s body to avoid the veneration of His tomb, and subsequently created the disciples’ stolen body narrative to account for the empty tomb.<sup>169</sup>

As N. T. Wright observes, it is the conjunction of the empty tomb with the postmortem appearances that makes the resurrection hypothesis more likely.<sup>170</sup> The empty tomb without the postmortem appearances is a puzzling tragedy and indicates nothing but a grave robbery.<sup>171</sup> The postmortem appearances without the empty tomb lead to a hallucination hypothesis.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, the postmortem appearances without an empty tomb<sup>173</sup> could also imply a non-bodily resurrection of Christ.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 177.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Cavin and Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis,” 208.

<sup>169</sup> Gerald Bostock, “Do We Need an Empty Tomb?” *The Expository Times* 105, no. 7 (1994): 201-4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001452469410500703>.

<sup>170</sup> N. T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan, “The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation? A Dialogue” in *The Resurrection of Jesus: N. T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan in Dialogue*, ed. Rob B. Stewart (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2006), 37-8.

<sup>171</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 687, 689.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 687.

<sup>173</sup> In that case, the absence of an empty tomb is understood as the presence of a full tomb.

<sup>174</sup> Wright and Crossan, “The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation?” 36-7. Jesus’s resurrection would only involve the raising of His spirit and not His body.



Unlike the empty tomb, the naturalistic theories for the postmortem appearances involve either hallucinations or lies from the disciples. The combination of the empty tomb with the postmortem appearances is problematic for the resurrection to be inferred, as the empty tomb contains an open door of possibilities other than the disciples' theft. For instance, Allison mentions the possibility of the Jewish authorities having disposed of Jesus's body by fear of it being venerated, or a gardener who did so "for reasons forever unknown,"<sup>175</sup> or even Joseph of Arimathea having moved Jesus's body.<sup>176</sup>

Moreover, despite the implausibility of the hallucination theory to explain the postmortem appearances, it remains a persisting possibility in skeptics' minds.<sup>177</sup> An implausible theory is not necessarily impossible. The medical consensus is that hallucinations are private events,<sup>178</sup> which makes the possibility of the disciples having had group hallucinations (John 20:19-23, 21:1-14; Luke 24:13-53; Matt. 28:8-10, 16-20) unlikely. Additionally, clinical studies have shown that hallucinations are caused by one of the following phenomena: lesions in the brain (psychophysiological causes); the presence of toxic substances in the body, infections, and metabolic disorders (psychobiochemical causes); or mental illnesses (psychodynamic causes).<sup>179</sup>

The scientific data discards the nature of hallucinations as group events, and the disciples were not known to have any physical or mental illnesses that would cause them to hallucinate.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Allison, "Explaining the Resurrection," 118.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 178.

<sup>178</sup> Stephen H. Smith, "'He Appeared to Peter': Reconsidering the Hallucination Hypothesis," *Neotestamentica* 53, no. 1 (2019): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1353/neo.2019.0011>.

<sup>179</sup> Joseph W. Bergeron and Gary R. Habermas, "The Resurrection of Jesus: Clinical Review of Psychiatric Hypotheses for the Biblical Story of Easter," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2015): "Clinical Considerations of Hallucination Hypotheses," <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140014564555>.

<sup>180</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 547.

Since hallucinations are also common in people who have lost a loved one and who are bereaved as a result, it has been objected that the disciples likely had bereavement hallucinations.<sup>181</sup>

Nevertheless, while such types of hallucinations are most common in grieving spouses after long and healthy marriages,<sup>182</sup> it remains possible that the disciples had such types of hallucinations both collectively<sup>183</sup> and individually (John 20:11-18) due to their intense grief. Despite it being more likely to occur in grieving spouses, the disciples could have had such experiences, as Ehrman mentions similar cases of grieving people all over the world.<sup>184</sup>

The other naturalistic theory besides hallucinations is that the disciples lied. Although it is unlikely given the fact that they risked torture, death, and persecution,<sup>185</sup> it remains a possibility. One can conceive the disciples as having lied despite the risks at stake because of some fanatic tendencies, and that they started believing their own lies and were subsequently transformed. Although a Christian person would have trouble accepting this theory, skeptics can easily conceive of it since they are not bound by any faith.

To infer the resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, both facts need to work in combination. The empty tomb is limited due to the multitudes of possible theories other than the disciples' theft. As for the postmortem appearances, the hallucination theory remains possible, at least under the scope of bereavement

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<sup>181</sup> Bergeron and Habermas, "The Resurrection of Jesus," *Bereavement Hypothesis*. See also Johnson, "Inference to the Best Explanation," 39-40.

<sup>182</sup> Bergeron and Habermas, "The Resurrection of Jesus," *Bereavement Hypothesis*.

<sup>183</sup> In that case, they would have had to experience individual hallucinatory experiences in groups, that is, at the same time. This explanation often accounts for the famous "Miracle of the Sun" phenomenon (see Smith, "Seeing Things," 695).

<sup>184</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 178.

<sup>185</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 20.

hallucinations.<sup>186</sup> As Smith observes, the empty tomb makes the idea that the disciples had bereavement hallucinations even more likely, not less.<sup>187</sup> Indeed, their already present vulnerability combined with an empty tomb could have provoked their visions of the risen Christ.<sup>188</sup>

Although the grounds for the limitations of the inferred resurrection have been laid out, it is necessary to evaluate the main justifications for inferring the resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. This step will enable to draw conclusions on the best way forward.

#### Arguments for the resurrection as the best explanation

The present section will overview some of the main reasons scholars advance for inferring the resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Their arguments rely on the implausibility of the naturalistic theories that have been formulated to explain the two facts without involving the resurrection miracle. The study will overview the main naturalistic theories without going into much depth, as it would deviate from the scope of the research.

The empty tomb does not indicate that Jesus rose from the dead.<sup>189</sup> By itself, it is weak and needs the postmortem appearances to lead to the resurrection inferred as the best possible explanation. Moreover, some theories other than the resurrection could also account for the fact. The most significant theories to potentially explain the empty tomb are the theft hypothesis,

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<sup>186</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 693, 696-7.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 694. See also Allison, "Explaining the Resurrection," 119.

<sup>188</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 694.

<sup>189</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 544. See also Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 23.

according to which Jesus's disciples stole His body (Matt. 28:12-13),<sup>190</sup> and the swoon theory, according to which Jesus never died from His crucifixion but fainted and got up afterward.<sup>191</sup>

The swoon theory is less commonly used than the disciples' theft theory. This hypothesis has been considered implausible.<sup>192</sup> In response to the theft theory, it has been argued that the disciples would have never been able to steal Jesus's body without the tomb guards being aware of the commotion.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, the disciples would have likely not dedicated their existence to preaching what they knew to be a lie, especially given the severe risks they incurred.<sup>194</sup> As for the swoon theory, it is nearly impossible from a medical point of view. Indeed, Jesus had been severely beaten and rendered extremely weak prior to His crucifixion, thereby making His survival from the cross highly implausible.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, Roman executioners were experts at ensuring their prisoners' death, and they even pierced Jesus's side to certify that He was dead (John 19:33-4).<sup>196</sup>

As Habermas observes, the Jewish leaders did not provide proof that Jesus's tomb was not empty.<sup>197</sup> The enemies of the new religion of Christianity only had to exhume the corpse, which they never did.<sup>198</sup> A potential excuse is that the body would not have been non-identifiable,

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<sup>190</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 560-1.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 540-3.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 544.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 560. Ehrman argues against the plausibility of the guards' presence, in part due to the fact that only Matthew's account mentions it (*Jesus, Interrupted*, 177).

<sup>194</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 560.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 541.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 542.

<sup>197</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 23.

<sup>198</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 70.

which does not cohere with Jerusalem's arid climate.<sup>199</sup> Moreover, the Gospels mention that women discovered the empty tomb, which makes the event more likely than not since women were not allowed to testify in a court of law.<sup>200</sup> This last point is an embarrassing detail that does not work on behalf of a fabricated story.<sup>201</sup> In that regard, the disciples did not initially believe the women's testimony (Luke 24:11).<sup>202</sup>

The strengthening factor for the resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb is that the corpse heist hypothesis does not account for the postmortem appearances.<sup>203</sup> However, the theory of bereavement hallucinations remains a plausible explanation for the postmortem appearances claim. Although hallucinations are private events, it remains conceivable that the disciples had an experience of the risen Jesus collectively and individually because of intense grief. The skeptic will often argue that such cases are often heard all around the world.<sup>204</sup>

The postmortem appearances have led to Jesus's resurrection as the inferred explanation, since its naturalistic competitors have been argued as implausible. The main theory advanced to account for the post-resurrection appearances is the hallucination theory.<sup>205</sup> In addition to the reasons previously mentioned, the hallucination hypothesis has been deemed flawed as it does not explain the disciples' radical transformation from fearful men to bold witnesses of the

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<sup>199</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 70.

<sup>200</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 23.

<sup>201</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 72. See also Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 24.

<sup>202</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 72.

<sup>203</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 560-1.

<sup>204</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 695. In *Jesus, Interrupted*, Ehrman mentions the case of the Virgin Mary often claimed to be appearing to groups of people (see page 178).

<sup>205</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 556-8.

faith.<sup>206</sup> The 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 pre-Pauline creed corroborates the plausibility of the postmortem appearances, since many of the witnesses Paul mentions are still alive when he speaks of the event.<sup>207</sup> Most importantly, the apostle Paul's radical and instantaneous transformation from fervent persecutor of the faith to ruthless witness of Christ, also lead to deem the hallucination theory implausible.<sup>208</sup>

Although such arguments are compelling, they do not discard the possibility of the hallucination hypothesis. It is possible to experience what is a mere hallucination and yet have one's life transformed as a result, especially if believing that the perceived experience reflects the true risen Christ and that it is not a mere vision. Moreover, the 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 pre-Pauline creed does not negate the possibility of the witnesses who are still living from having had hallucinations due to unknown psychological causes, including bereavement.

Lastly, Paul's conversion and subsequent transformation could also be due to some unidentified psychological or physical cause. Despite the hallucination theory having limitations, it is not fully implausible, especially regarding the bereavement type of hallucinations as it applies to the disciples' experience.<sup>209</sup> As Smith argues, while hallucinations are internally generated and consequently private events, collective delusions are possible.<sup>210</sup> Such cases have occurred in history, such as with the famous "Miracle of the Sun."<sup>211</sup> The alleged event is notorious for a seventy-thousand-people crowd's delusional experience of the sun dancing and

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<sup>206</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 50, 56.

<sup>207</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 19.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>209</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 693, 696-7.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 694-5.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 695.

changing colors in Fátima on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917.<sup>212</sup> Not all witnesses present at the scene had reported seeing such a thing, while others reported seeing something completely different, thereby leading to conflicting accounts on the matter.<sup>213</sup>

Jesus's resurrection is inferred as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances as its rival naturalistic hypotheses have been characterized as failures.<sup>214</sup> What has been previously stated on the limitations of positing the resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances applies here. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that accepting the resurrection hypothesis and discarding all its naturalistic rivals is more doable on the grounds of faith in Christ.

Although some skeptics have decided not to believe in the resurrection's historicity no matter the amount of evidence, some skeptics in and outside academia are not bound by such *a priori* decisions.<sup>215</sup> The resurrection's historicity has been predominantly defended as being the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. As seen in the research, such a defense is problematic. To infer the resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb requires considering the totality of potential theories other than the theft and swoon theories, which is not doable.

As for the postmortem appearances, the bereavement type of hallucinations coupled with collective delusions are not unlikely. For this reason, such a type of defense is more easily acceptable on the grounds of faith. It does not imply that the Christian mind should not strive to

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<sup>212</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 695.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 31.

<sup>215</sup> I once had a philosophy professor who was a proud and self-proclaimed atheist who one day told me, "I am an atheist who would love to become a believer."

use reasoning to defend the faith using both facts (1 Pet. 3:15-6). What it does imply, however, is that such a defense will be far more convincing for those who have already been born again through faith in Christ and who have experienced Him as their personal Lord and Savior. Consequently, is there a more convincing way to defend the resurrection's historicity than by centering its defense on the empty tomb and postmortem appearances? This question leads to the next section.

### **The Early Proclamation of the Resurrection and Inference to the Best Explanation**

#### Status of the early resurrection proclamation

The early proclamation of the resurrection is one of the most attested facts by a majority of scholars from all theological convictions.<sup>216</sup> For this reason, it is one of Habermas' minimal facts.<sup>217</sup> The resurrection was proclaimed extremely early, at the time of the church's infant stage.<sup>218</sup> One of the most determining factors is the 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 pre-Pauline creed, in which Paul recites a formula that dates within two to five years after Jesus's crucifixion.<sup>219</sup> Some skeptics even date this creed two to three years after Jesus's death.<sup>220</sup> In 1 Corinthians 15:4, the creed explicitly states Jesus's resurrection.<sup>221</sup> It has been established that the resurrection proclamation originates with the primitive church and is consequently an extremely early

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<sup>216</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 51-2.

<sup>217</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 9, 27.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 28. See also Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 56.

<sup>219</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 29. See also Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 167, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>220</sup> Gould, *Stand Firm*, 77-8. See also Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 177-8.

<sup>221</sup> Paul mentions Jesus's burial and resurrection on the third day. Skeptics often refute that the verse refers to the empty tomb (see Allison, "Explaining the Resurrection," 122).



element.<sup>222</sup> Paul likely received the creed from Peter and James approximately three years after his conversion when he returned to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18-20).<sup>223</sup>

It is necessary to emphasize that the early proclamation of the resurrection is not limited to the empty tomb and postmortem appearances claim (1 Cor. 15:4-8). Indeed, it also refers to the general fact that Jesus's resurrection was proclaimed at the very beginning of the church's birthing process. Therefore, the proclamation of the resurrection encompasses the resurrection belief and proclaimed fact of Jesus's resurrection even in those who did not claim to have seen the risen Lord and His empty tomb, but who claimed His resurrection by their reception of His Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:38, 41) and the visible manifestations of the Spirit's works (Acts 2:4, 17-19).

The Pauline epistles are the earliest New Testament documents, written as early as AD 48.<sup>224</sup> Several passages of Paul's letters contain earlier formulas reflecting the first Christians' beliefs and teachings, and therefore precede Paul.<sup>225</sup> In those creedal formulas, Jesus's resurrection is the central theme and indicates that the resurrection was proclaimed at an early date. The early belief and proclamation that Jesus had resurrected and been exalted to eternal glory is manifested in Romans 1:1-4, 1 Corinthians 8:1-6, and Philippians 2:5-11.<sup>226</sup> As Hurtado

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<sup>222</sup> Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth" in *The Blackwell Companion of Christian Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 604.

<sup>223</sup> Gould, Dickinson, and Loftin, *Stand Firm*, 78. See also Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 224.

<sup>224</sup> Kruger, *The Question of Canon*, 92.

<sup>225</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 133.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-7.

observes, the first Christians considered the resurrection as God’s vindication of a crucified Messiah exalted to the highest position in the heavenly realm.<sup>227</sup>

Romans 1:1-4 reveals the earliest Christian beliefs of Palestinian Christian communities as the passage echoes a pre-Pauline confessional language of divine agency.<sup>228</sup> In that same formula, Christ’s resurrection is an essential element (Rom. 1:4). Similarly, 1 Corinthians 8:1-6 echoes the earliest Christian thought as it emphasizes God’s oneness through the Shema (Deut. 6:4), a concept of ancient Judaism.<sup>229</sup> The passage describes Christ as one “through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Cor. 8:6, *New International Version*), which implies that He was regarded as God and had consequently resurrected.<sup>230</sup> To the same extent, Philippians 2:5-11 ascribes to Christ the same nature as God the Father, who is claimed to be “in very nature God” (Phil. 2:6), thereby implying His resurrection and exaltation. This formula is a pre-Pauline hymn of Jewish-Christian origin, giving access to the earliest Christian belief and practice.<sup>231</sup>

The presence of a high Christology in pre-Pauline material leaves no doubt that the first believers professed Christ as the resurrected God in the flesh. The resurrection is the foundational and central doctrine of Christian theology, and permeated the beliefs and practices of believers at the church’s very beginning. As Hurtado states, the pre-Pauline fragments contained in Paul’s letters are “the earliest available conceptions of the exalted Christ.”<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 133.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>230</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 418.

<sup>231</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 136.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

Although the Acts accounts were written sometime between AD 65-85,<sup>233</sup> its embedded sermons proclaiming Jesus's resurrection (Acts 2:14-40, 3:11-26, 4:5-12, 10:34-43, 13:16-41, 17:22-34) are dated from the AD 30s, near the time of the alleged resurrection of Christ.<sup>234</sup> For instance, the resurrection account of Acts 2:32-6 summarizes early Christian teachings with the resurrection and the consequential pouring of the promised Holy Spirit as main themes (Acts 2:32-3), and Jesus's exaltation (Acts 2:33-6) echoing Psalm 110:1.<sup>235</sup>

The specificity of the early dating of the proclamation of the resurrection is that it leaves Jesus's resurrection as a better inference for the fact, than it does for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. The reasons for this assertion will be the object of the next section and subsequent chapters of the research. What has been established in this section suffices to indicate that Christ's resurrection was proclaimed at a very early date and not decades or centuries after the crucifixion, as some have argued.<sup>236</sup>

#### Arguments for the resurrection as the best explanation

As seen in previous sections, the inference of Jesus's resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances is problematic at two levels. First, the empty tomb can be conceived as being potentially explained by any theory other than the main ones such as the disciples' theft hypothesis. However, one cannot survey and analyze an indefinite amount of theories to compare them to the resurrection hypothesis. As for the postmortem appearances, they are either the result of hallucinations or lies. The swoon theory is highly

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<sup>233</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 133.

<sup>234</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 29.

<sup>235</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 133.

<sup>236</sup> Ehrman makes that claim in *Jesus, Interrupted*, 267-8. See also Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 28.

implausible to account for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances,<sup>237</sup> for reasons that have already been established. For this reason, it will be left aside.

In the skeptic's view, the bereavement type of hallucinations remains a plausible cause for the postmortem appearances. For this reason, the resurrection inferred as the best explanation is more doable for those who have already recognized Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, and experienced supernatural events through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Lastly, the extra-biblical historicity of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances is weak and is mostly inferred through criteria of authenticity, as will be studied in chapter two.

The resurrection proclamation refers to the general teaching and belief that Christ had risen from the dead. Indeed, it is not exclusively limited to the disciples' resurrection claim through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Such teachings were formed at the beginning of the church's birthing process after the believers' reception of the Holy Spirit, through whom the church was born and grew exponentially. The fact that Jesus's resurrection was proclaimed near the time of His death and not long after is a solid indicator that such a proclamation is not the fruit of a lie or legend. There are only two alternatives to the resurrection proclamation not being born out of the actual resurrection of Jesus: either it emerged from a lie, or from an involuntary distortion of the events that originally took place through legendary developments.

The fact that Jesus's resurrection was proclaimed early does not give enough time for any lie to take root between His crucifixion and the resurrection claim and belief. A lie would have required more time to develop given the fact that no Messianic resurrection was expected in

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<sup>237</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 691.

Jewish doctrine,<sup>238</sup> to the point that even Jesus's disciples had been confused at His resurrection predictions (Luke 18:31-4). On that matter, it is worth mentioning Hurtado's observation:

Both Jewish and Gentile believers seem characteristically to have practiced a rather strict 'monotheistic' worship, rejecting all the deities of the wider religious environment as bogus and even demonic forces unworthy of reverence (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:14-22), and worshipping only the one God of the Jewish scriptures as the 'living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9-10).<sup>239</sup>

The idea of a Messiah being crucified and rising from the dead was quite foreign to the expectations of Jesus's time (Deut. 21:23, Gal. 3:13 ).<sup>240</sup> Indeed, only criminals were crucified. Moreover, ancient Judaism understood the resurrection as occurring after the end of time (Dan. 12:2, Isa. 26:19, Ezek. 37).<sup>241</sup> The resurrection was therefore a post-historical event not to be taking place within human history (John 11:23-4, Mark 9:9-11).<sup>242</sup>

Most importantly, the Jewish resurrection referred to a collective event, that is, the resurrection of the righteous after the end of history.<sup>243</sup> It contained no idea of a Messiah to be raised from the dead.<sup>244</sup> Additionally, the resurrection had no parallels with pagan myths.<sup>245</sup> For these reasons, an invented story of Jesus's resurrection is unlikely, especially given the short amount of time between His death and the resurrection proclamation and belief. The criteria of

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<sup>238</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 142.

<sup>239</sup> Larry Hurtado, "Homage to the Historical Jesus and Early Christian Devotion," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 1, no. 2 (2003): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147686900300100201>.

<sup>240</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 551.

<sup>241</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 597.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 598.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 595.

authenticity of dissimilarity and expectation<sup>246</sup> apply here. The first Christians' belief in the resurrection is dissimilar to what they would have been prone to believe, especially given the Jewish background of many. Moreover, the Jewish context of the time and place discarded any expectation of a dying and rising Messiah.

Another possibility for the early resurrection proclamation is that it was the fruit of a legendary development through which the first believers had their sayings and testimonies of Jesus distorted.<sup>247</sup> However, the minimal amount of time between Jesus's death and the proclamation of His resurrection left no time for any distortion to have developed. As Habermas and Licona observe, "The closer the time between the event and testimony about it, the more reliable the witness, since there is less time for exaggeration, and even legend, to creep into the account."<sup>248</sup> Here again, the lack of expectation of a dying and rising Messiah makes the possibility of distortions from original teachings unlikely.<sup>249</sup>

Christian teachings were originally transmitted orally.<sup>250</sup> There are solid indications that the resurrection accounts were maintained through a reliable oral tradition that prevented the risks of distortion. As Bauckham specifies, Paul's letters emphasize that the earliest Christian doctrine followed transmission formalities.<sup>251</sup> Paul mentions the handing of oral traditions (1 Cor. 11:2, 23) and their reception (1 Cor. 15:1, 3; Gal. 1:9; Col. 2:6; 1 Thess. 2:13, 4:1; 2 Thess. 3:6)

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<sup>246</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 603.

<sup>247</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 84.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>250</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 441.

<sup>251</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 220.

according to strict procedures to ensure their correct preservation.<sup>252</sup> The oral traditions remained stable through the recurring rehearsal of its contents. As 1 Corinthians 14 establishes, Christians did not solely gather to partake in the Lord's Supper. They also fellowshiped through praise and worship, prophecy, and the teaching of Scripture (1 Cor. 12, 14:6; 2 Cor. 10:10; Eph. 4:11, 5:19; Col. 3:16).<sup>253</sup>

Several biblical accounts of the resurrection follow identical structures to ensure memorization, such as the four-part formula of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Acts 13:28-31, and Mark 15:37-16:7.<sup>254</sup> The social context of public teaching and worship that characterized the first Christians necessitated a reliable collective memory that worked constantly at each gathering.<sup>255</sup> The consistent rehearsal of oral formulas through memorable structures enabled the stability of teachings such as Christ's resurrection, and prevented distortions.<sup>256</sup> For this reason, there is an extremely low probability that the proclamation of the resurrection was the fruit of distortions from original accounts. Ehrman's claim that the oral tradition was malleable, fragile, and prone to distortions,<sup>257</sup> appears unfounded considering the substantive biblical data from the Pauline epistles that point toward the opposite.

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<sup>252</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 220.

<sup>253</sup> Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 93.

<sup>254</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 556-7.

<sup>255</sup> Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 92.

<sup>256</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 278-9.

<sup>257</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 13, 145-8.

## Chapter Conclusion

The first chapter has attempted to establish that miracles such as Jesus's resurrection are not impossible phenomena. The fact that they are exceptions to scientific laws implies nothing other than that they are by definition outside of the purview of science. Most importantly, science cannot prove miracles to be impossible entities. Furthermore, a miracle can be the object of historical investigation and be deemed as historical when inferred as the best explanation for the available data. While it is the role of the philosopher and theologian to define and study the nature of miracles, the historian is within his professional right and capacity to investigate them.

The historical defense of Jesus's resurrection by inferring it as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances is problematic and easier to accept on the grounds of faith. The early dating of the proclamation of Jesus's resurrection is counteracted by the legend and lie hypotheses, which do not provide a viable explanation. There was not enough time between the crucifixion and the proclamation of the resurrection for the latter to have been the fruit of a lie or involuntary distortion, especially given the lack of proper context for both possibilities. Moreover, the stability of the oral traditions that preserved the resurrection creeds discard the potential for legendary developments.

In contrast with the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, the early proclamation is attested by several early non-Christian sources, including its effects across history. The early proclamation is not confined to the disciples' empty tomb and postmortem appearances claims. It encompasses a much larger audience comprised of the multitudes of new believers who came after Pentecost. The historical attestation of the early proclamation of Jesus's resurrection and its significance will be the object of the next chapter.



## Chapter Two: Historical Evidence of the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection

The chapter will evaluate the historical data of some of the facts most defended to infer Jesus's resurrection as the best explanation. Attention will be given to the historical attestation of the empty tomb, postmortem appearances, and early resurrection proclamation from non-Christian sources. The inference of Jesus's resurrection as the best explanation for these facts is stronger when non-biblical sources point to their historicity. Although the Bible claims the three facts, it is necessary to investigate whether some early non-Christian accounts mention them.

### Resurrection Belief and Resurrection Fact

The section will attempt to differentiate the stance the empty tomb, postmortem appearances, and early resurrection proclamation hold regarding the resurrection as a historical fact. Conclusions will be drawn as to whether some are more indicative of the resurrection belief rather than the resurrection as a historical fact.

### The Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances: Historical Limitations

The postmortem appearances account does not appear in early non-Christian sources except in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*.<sup>258</sup> Nevertheless, the italicized portions of the text below have been the subject of much debate.<sup>259</sup> It is the consensus that Josephus' original text may have been manipulated by a Christian scribe.<sup>260</sup> Josephus' account is as follows:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had

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<sup>258</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Volume VIII: Book 18, Section 63, trans. Louis H. Feldman. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

<sup>259</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 55.

<sup>260</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 237.

condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him.* And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.<sup>261</sup>

The three italicized portions of Josephus' text do not resemble what a non-Christian would say about Jesus. Indeed, if Josephus believed such things about Christ, he would have likely been a believer.<sup>262</sup> For this reason, these sections have been thought to be the interpolations of a Christian scribe. Josephus' mention of the postmortem appearances is the object of the much-debated authenticity of the text. The historical attestation of Jesus's postmortem appearances outside Scripture is challenged. The doubts regarding Josephus' writings on the matter leave no room for an early report of the appearances in early non-Christian sources.

The mention of the postmortem appearances in Josephus' account is such that if Josephus truly wrote it, he likely believed that Christ appeared to His disciples. This fact seems highly improbable to emanate from an unbeliever. Indeed, Josephus' text mentions Christ having appeared to His disciples, not the fact that His disciples claimed to have seen Him risen. However, even a statement as such coming from an early non-Christian source would have helped increase the probability level of the historicity of the disciples' claim, and the historicity of Jesus's resurrection in its inference from a well-attested historical fact.

The empty tomb is mentioned in early texts from Justin Martyr and Tertullian. Although the sources are essentially Christian accounts, they deal with the empty tomb narrative by addressing the rumor that the disciples had stolen Jesus's body. The empty tomb as a historical fact is not stated by the actual presence of an empty tomb but is assumed by the existence of the

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<sup>261</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Book 18, Section 63.

<sup>262</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 55-6.

theft theory. Indeed, the idea that such a rumor was circulating in Jerusalem at the time strengthens the possibility of the empty tomb as a historical fact.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr (ca. AD 100 - ca. AD 165) presents an apology of Christianity to whom has been thought to be a fictional Jewish character named Trypho.<sup>263</sup> About Jesus and the empty tomb, Justin writes:

You chose certain men by vote and sent throughout the whole civilized world, proclaiming that a godless and lawless sect has been started by a deceiver, one Jesus of Galilee, whom we nailed to the cross, but whose body, after it was taken from the cross, was stolen at night from the tomb by his disciples, who now try to deceive men by affirming that he has arisen from the dead and has ascended into Heaven. And you accuse him of having taught those irreverent, riotous, and wicked things, of which you everywhere accuse all those who look up to and acknowledge him as their Christ, their Teacher, and the Son of God.<sup>264</sup>

Similarly, Tertullian (ca. AD 160 - ca. AD 220)<sup>265</sup> addresses the stolen body claim:

‘This is he,’ I shall say, ‘the son of the carpenter or the harlot, the Sabbath-breaker, the Samaritan, who had a devil. This is he whom you bought from Judas; this is he, who was struck with reed and fist, defiled with spittle, given gal and vinegar to drink. This is he whom the disciples secretly stole away, that it might be said he had risen – unless it was the gardener who removed him, lest his lettuces should be trampled by the throng of visitors!’<sup>266</sup>

Although both accounts of the empty tomb emerge from Christian sources, its mention through the rumor of a stolen body increases the likelihood that there was an empty tomb. On this matter, Craig recognizes the rumor as providing a criterion of authenticity for the empty

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<sup>263</sup> Mark J. Edwards, “Justin Martyr” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall et al, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012).

<sup>264</sup> Thomas B. Falls, trans., *St Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho*, vol. 3, *Selections from the Fathers of the Church*, ed. Michael Slusser (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 162, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>265</sup> Bryan M. Liftin, “Tertullian of Carthage: Christian Apologetics Enters the Fray” in *The History of Apologetics*, ed. Benjamin K. Forrest, Joshua D. Chatraw, and Alister E. McGrath (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 85.

<sup>266</sup> Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 299.

tomb account, known as “effect.”<sup>267</sup> The effect criterion posits an element as the most adequate cause for some fact, and in the present case, the empty tomb as the most adequate cause for the stolen body rumor.<sup>268</sup>

However, such a criterion applied to the empty tomb by using the stolen body conspiracy theory to point to its reality<sup>269</sup> can potentially be judged as unconvincing by skeptics. They could object that the Jewish authorities foresaw that Christ’s disciples would invent an empty tomb narrative since Jesus had prophesied about His resurrection on many occasions (John 2:19-22; Matt. 16:21, 17:22-23). To that effect, a stolen body theory can have been formulated by the enemies of the faith to counteract the empty tomb narrative that would potentially emerge after the crucifixion.

The historical attestation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances outside Scripture especially from early non-Christian sources is weak. The empty tomb enjoys a more solid corroboration than the postmortem appearances. Nevertheless, it appears indirectly through the stolen body polemic, from which its emptiness is inferred. As previously mentioned, it is possible that the Jewish authorities foresaw what Jesus’s disciples would probably say about the tomb, and proceeded through the proclamation of the stolen body conspiracy.

As Smith observes, the attestation of the two facts mainly emerges from “faith-based documents,”<sup>270</sup> which is limiting. Indeed, establishing the historicity of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances is essential for determining whether Jesus’s resurrection is the best

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<sup>267</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 603.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 564, 603.

<sup>269</sup> William Lane Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb,” *New Testament Studies* 31, no. 1 (1985): 59-60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500012911>.

<sup>270</sup> Smith, “Seeing Things,” 690.

explanation for such facts. Although the empty tomb on its own does not imply Jesus's resurrection, its conjunction with the postmortem appearances claim<sup>271</sup> could form a compelling case. Nevertheless, both facts lack extra-biblical substantiation from early non-Christian independent sources. Their limitation is not only historical but also epistemological.

### **The Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances: Epistemological Limitations**

#### Summary of limitations

As mentioned in chapter one, the empty tomb could be accounted for by an indefinite number of theories that could not be all vetted and analyzed in comparison with the resurrection hypothesis.<sup>272</sup> Despite being implausible, the disciples' theft theory is only one of many other possibilities. For instance, Tertullian's account even mentions the rumor of the gardener having moved Jesus's body for fear of his lettuces being trampled upon by the throngs of visitors who would come visit the tomb area.<sup>273</sup> Its historicity is not well-attested in early non-Christian accounts.<sup>274</sup> Moreover, skeptics argue that Paul's 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 creed does not mention an empty tomb, but only the fact that Jesus was buried, rose from the dead, and then appeared to people.<sup>275</sup> Although Paul's implied mention of the empty tomb seems obvious, such an inference

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<sup>271</sup> The distinction between postmortem appearances and postmortem appearances claim is mentioned here, as it would be unlikely to have a non-Christian source mention that Christ appeared to His disciples and others as a fact. Furthermore, the only entities who would be able to make this statement would be those who had such experiences, as well as those who believed that Christ rose from the dead and then appeared to people in His resurrected body.

<sup>272</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 176-8.

<sup>273</sup> Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 299.

<sup>274</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 690.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 690, 694.

is often seen as an argument from silence.<sup>276</sup> Lastly, the empty tomb alone does not conclude to Jesus's resurrection.<sup>277</sup> However, its conjunction with the post-resurrection appearances could present a solid case.

If not caused by Jesus's resurrection, His postmortem appearances are either the fruit of a lie or of some type of hallucinatory experience. The swoon theory is too implausible to be taken into account.<sup>278</sup> Despite some limitations of the hallucination theory, the bereavement type of hallucinations through a collective delusion remains a plausible case.<sup>279</sup> Although much less probable, some could also argue that the disciples could have lied about their experiences and believed in them to the point of becoming religious fanatics. Such cases are not absent from the history of human behavior.<sup>280</sup> The historicity of the postmortem appearances outside Christian sources is weak. The post-resurrection appearances could lead to Jesus's resurrection if combined with the empty tomb, without which there is a lack of indication of a bodily resurrection.<sup>281</sup> However, for reasons previously mentioned, the empty tomb account has shortcomings and is not historically well-attested by early non-Christian sources.

### Marks of authenticity

Arguments using criteria of authenticity have been developed to account for the historicity of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Craig recognizes several marks of

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<sup>276</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 690.

<sup>277</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 544.

<sup>278</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 691. It is necessary to specify that the swoon theory is a potential explanation for both the empty tomb and postmortem appearances.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 693, 694-7. See also Allison, "Explaining the Resurrection," 119.

<sup>280</sup> Johnson, "Inference to the Best Explanation," 34.

<sup>281</sup> Wright and Crossan, "The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation?" 36-7.

authenticity, the most used being the criteria of multiple attestation, embarrassment, and effect.<sup>282</sup>

The empty tomb and postmortem appearances are multiply attested by independent biblical accounts, through a similar four-line structure according to which Jesus died, was buried, rose from the dead, and appeared to people after His death (1 Cor. 15:3-5, Acts 13:28-31, Mark 15:37-16:7).<sup>283</sup> The empty tomb is also attested by the Gospels which work with independent sources from one another. Matthew's mention of the tomb guard (Matt. 27:62-6) and the stolen body conspiracy theory (Matt. 28:15) are not found in the other Gospels, which all narrate the account through other details (Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-10).<sup>284</sup> The postmortem appearances are also multiply attested by the Gospel accounts and the Pauline epistles.<sup>285</sup>

Furthermore, the empty tomb contains the embarrassing detail of having been discovered by women<sup>286</sup> and been provided by Joseph of Arimathea who was a Sanhedrist, just like those who crucified Jesus.<sup>287</sup> As previously mentioned, the criterion authenticity of "effect" applied to the empty tomb through the stolen body rumor (Matt. 28:11-15) infers the empty tomb as the most probable cause for this fact.<sup>288</sup> Additionally, the conversion of James, Paul, and the disciples, point to the postmortem appearances as the most adequate cause.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 602-3.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 556.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 560.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 602.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 561.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>288</sup> William Lane Craig, "The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus," 59-60.

<sup>289</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 603.

The issue with the multiply attested accounts for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances is that they solely emerge from Scripture and not from early non-Christian sources. The embarrassing details remain the most compelling elements for the historicity of the empty tomb. However, in the skeptic's eyes, it remains possible that since the Gospel writers knew they had to establish credibility in their accounts, they mentioned the women to convey a realistic narrative. This point does not state that the probability for this scheme is high, but that such behaviors are unfortunately common among humans. A skeptic could indeed object as such regarding the authenticity criterion of embarrassment.

The criterion of "effect" as it applies to the empty tomb through the Jewish stolen body polemic is also a credible factor, although it is possible that the Jewish leaders foresaw what the disciples would say and preemptively established that narrative. The "effect" factor of the disciples' conversion inferred from the reality of the postmortem appearances is hindered by the potential for collective delusion, as pointed out by Smith earlier. Nevertheless, the collective delusion does not explain Paul's visionary experience and subsequent radical conversion.

In conclusion, some of the criteria of authenticity increase the likelihood of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances as historical facts. However, the inference of Jesus's resurrection as the best possible explanation for these facts is not without substantial hurdles, as previously studied through common skeptics' objections.

### Resurrection belief

As Wright argues, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances constitute sufficient conditions for the emergence of the disciples' belief in the resurrection.<sup>290</sup> One could also add

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<sup>290</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 687.



that such a belief encompasses the very first believers who were not the disciples and who probably believed on the basis of the testimony of what the disciples saw (Acts 1:15). Wright asserts that the empty tomb and postmortem appearances taken separately could not have generated the disciples' belief in Jesus's resurrection. The empty tomb without the postmortem appearances would have pointed toward a grave robbery or some kind of mysterious tragedy.<sup>291</sup> The post-resurrection appearances without the empty tomb—that is, with the body still inside—would have made the disciples think they were hallucinating.<sup>292</sup> However, the two facts combined sufficed to produce early Christian belief.<sup>293</sup>

Wright's observation touches on the crucial fact that the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances are conditions for the first Christians' belief in Jesus's resurrection. However, they are not necessarily indicative of the resurrection as a historical fact. As Smith observes, the two facts are a matter of what the first Christians believed.<sup>294</sup> Furthermore, they are also held by those who accept them because of belief.<sup>295</sup> In contrast with Smith, the research asserts that the two facts are not solely acceptable by faith or belief, but that they are easier to claim if one already has faith in Christ due to the obstacles they present. However, their defense is not fully contradictory to reason, especially when considering potential marks of authenticity.

Nevertheless, the fact that the earliest Christians who were the disciples and a few others believed that Jesus resurrected on the basis of the two facts, does not imply that the resurrection

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<sup>291</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 687-9.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 687, 691.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 693-6.

<sup>294</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 690.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

occurred.<sup>296</sup> Although perfect certainty is unattainable in historical investigations and one ought to work with levels of probability, the two facts speak more of the first Christians' belief than of the resurrection as a historical event. In comparison with the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, does the early proclamation of the resurrection fare better in terms of testifying of the resurrection as a likely historical event?

### The Early Resurrection Proclamation: A Stronger Fact for the Resurrection's Historicity

#### Historical Strength

Early non-Christian sources

Josephus (AD 37 – ca. AD 100)<sup>297</sup> and Pliny the Younger (ca. AD 61 – ca. AD 112)<sup>298</sup> wrote material attesting to the presence of a high Christology that seemed to be well-established in the first century and still thriving at the beginning of the second century. It is undeniable that early Christians considered Jesus to be God, which implies that He was believed to have risen from the dead. Early Christianity does not specifically refer to the very first believers who were the disciples and a few others (Acts 1:15), but to the wave of individuals who became born again Christians at the inception of the church's creation and subsequent explosive growth after Pentecost.

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<sup>296</sup> Segal, "The Resurrection: Faith or History," 136-7.

<sup>297</sup> *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Josephus, Flavius," ed. Paul Lagasse, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>298</sup> *Encyclopedia of Ancient Literature*, s.v. "Pliny the Younger," ed. James Wyatt Cook, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Facts on File, 2014).

It is worth restating Josephus' writing including the italicized portions thought to be extrapolations:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him*. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.<sup>299</sup>

Leaving aside the italicized sections, the text is significant as it emphasizes that at the time of Josephus' writing, Christianity was already established and likely founded on a high Christology. The text makes clear that those who believed in Christ and adored Him remained steadfast in their faith, and that such a movement persisted up to the time of Josephus' writing. As Licona observes, Josephus was closely connected to Jewish priests and Pharisees.<sup>300</sup> He also grew up and spent time in Jerusalem at the time the church was born and grew.<sup>301</sup> For this reason, Josephus likely heard Jesus's resurrection proclaimed in Jerusalem at an early date.<sup>302</sup>

In his letter to emperor Trajan, then governor Pliny the Younger asked him for advice on how to deal with Christians in his questioning approach toward them. As Pliny reports, Christ is the deity of the Christian movement that has been spreading out. Christians were so dedicated to Jesus that they blatantly refused to consider the Roman gods and the emperor as gods but instead as "anti-God," which was against the law.<sup>303</sup> Church and state in the Roman Empire were not

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<sup>299</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Book 18, Section 63.

<sup>300</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 240.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>303</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 51.

separate but closely intertwined entities.<sup>304</sup> Some Christians were released from custody when accepting to worship the gods and the emperor, or when becoming willing to curse Christ.<sup>305</sup>

However, Pliny states that those he considers “genuine Christians” would not do so.<sup>306</sup> The text below is significant as Pliny shares some details regarding Christians’ habits:

They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind [...] I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths [...] It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult.<sup>307</sup>

Pliny’s letter gives a solid indication that if at the beginning of the second century the Christian movement was expanding with unrelenting force, it had already been established for quite some time. For instance, Pliny tells Trajan in another portion of the letter that some Christians had told him they had given up their faith several decades prior.<sup>308</sup> For this reason, Jesus’s resurrection seems to have been proclaimed at an early date.

Josephus and Pliny the Younger do not explicitly mention the proclamation of the resurrection and its early dating. Nevertheless, the presence of an early proclamation of Jesus’s resurrection is implied by the fact that both authors emphasize Jesus as the exclusive subject of

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<sup>304</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 51.

<sup>305</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, Volume II: Book X, Section 96, trans. Betty Radice. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

utter devotion and worship, despite being fully man.<sup>309</sup> For this reason, the belief that Jesus had risen from the dead was surely held as a foundational thought of the Christian movement. Furthermore, by the time of Josephus' and Pliny's writings, Christianity is presented as already well-established and blossoming at a speedy rate. For instance, Pliny's letter to Trajan indicates that Christians had the custom of gathering to worship Christ "as if to a god" and to partake in the Lord's Supper. This description shows the presence of a high Christology fully in place at the beginning of the second century. Josephus, who writes in the first century, also attests to the total devotion given to Christ by His followers.

The two non-Christian accounts indicate a resurrection belief and proclamation at an early date. The belief in Jesus's resurrection can only be inferred by the adoration given to Christ after His death and afterward, as Josephus mentions. Since Christ was known to be human, the belief in His resurrection and its proclamation are implied. The date of the resurrection belief and proclamation is not established by both accounts. However, it appears that its dating originated immediately after the crucifixion. Indeed, Josephus emphasizes that Jesus's death did not stop or prevent any adoration after He was crucified.

#### Biblical attestation

The early dating of the resurrection proclamation permeates the New Testament texts, especially Paul's epistles. As Hurtado observes, Paul's writings are the most adequate way to access what early Christian belief and practice entailed.<sup>310</sup> They are the earliest attestation of the first Christians' teachings and beliefs.<sup>311</sup> Not only are Paul's letters the earliest New Testament

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<sup>309</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 553.

<sup>310</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 137.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

documents, but they also contain several embedded creeds. Such creedal statements precede Paul's letters in time and grant a decisive insight into early Christian statements.<sup>312</sup> As Loke states, "Pauline Christianity is the earliest form of the Christian movement to which we have direct access from undisputed first-hand sources" as they "reflect the christological convictions present among the earliest Christians."<sup>313</sup>

The creedal formula of 1 Corinthians 15:4 claims Jesus's resurrection and originates with the primitive church.<sup>314</sup> Furthermore, Romans 1:1-4 claims Jesus's resurrection and likely goes back to the earliest Christian belief of communities established in Palestine.<sup>315</sup> The words in that fragment convey themes of divine agency through a pre-Pauline language.<sup>316</sup> Other creedal formulas are found in 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Philippians 2:5-11, which do not claim the resurrection but imply it through the explicit presence of a high Christology. Both Scriptures ascribe to Christ a fully divine status through His sovereignty (1 Cor. 8:6) and explicit statements (Phil. 2:6). His resurrection is inferred by the fact that He is claimed to have been "made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7) and "found in appearance as a man" (Phil. 2:8) from which "God exalted Him to the highest place" (Phil. 2:9).

The fragments of 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Philippians 2:5-11 indicate pre-Pauline belief through the pervasive presence of Old Testament language that emerges from ancient Judaism.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 137.

<sup>313</sup> Andrew Ter Ern Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 24.

<sup>314</sup> McGrew and McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles," 604. Paul's return to Jerusalem to stay with Peter and James (Gal. 1:18-9) indicates that he likely received the teaching from the two disciples.

<sup>315</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 134.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-8.

The Scriptures mentioned above give strong reasons to believe that they predate Paul's writings and reflect the earliest Christian thought, where Jesus's resurrection is explicit and the most foundational element. As Barnett observes, the conviction of Christ's resurrection and ascension was the "impulse" of the first believers.<sup>318</sup> Similarly, the resurrection proclamation that permeates the Acts sermons reflects the earliest Christian belief,<sup>319</sup> as seen in Acts 2:24, 3:15, 4:10, 10:40-1, 13:34, and 17:31.

The combination of biblical and non-Christian sources offered in this section provides a strong degree of evidence that Jesus's proclamation dates extremely early, that is, immediately after His death. The early proclamation through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances deals essentially with the one that emerged from Jesus's disciples. However, another type of resurrection proclamation emerged from the church's birth and expansion after Pentecost, far surpassing the disciples' number. Only then was the highest form of Christology established, as seen in the pre-Pauline creeds and the Acts sermons.

This section has attempted to establish the historical attestation for the early dating of the proclamation of Jesus's resurrection. It enjoys a more solid historical backdrop than the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances from early non-Christian sources. Although the two facts caused the very first instance of the resurrection being proclaimed in Jerusalem, the resurrection proclamation that emerged after Pentecost was caused by another factor: the Holy Spirit. The latter is also the source of the birth and overnight expansion of the Christian faith across the globe. Moreover, it marks the beginning of a doctrine founded on a high Christology, as seen in the pre-Pauline fragments.

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<sup>318</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 418.

<sup>319</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 28-9.

The first type of early proclamation constitutes an obstacle for the resurrection to be inferred as the best possible explanation due to the drawbacks presented by the empty tomb and postmortem appearances from which it emerged. The second type of proclamation presents a significantly stronger case for the resurrection to be inferred as the best explanation due to its effects. This point brings the argument to the next section.

### **Epistemological Strength**

#### Immediate effects

Christ's resurrection was proclaimed within a very short time window after the crucifixion: the first type, three days afterward; the second type, after the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost.<sup>320</sup> This second type marked the birth and immediate growth of the Christian church,<sup>321</sup> with a high Christology permeating its teachings.<sup>322</sup> The coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4) affected the original number of Christ's followers in a dramatic fashion. Indeed, the number of His followers grew exponentially and instantly, without ceasing (Acts 1:15, 2:41).<sup>323</sup> Only then was the Christian movement born, and on its way to an "out-of-control" expansion.

Paul's letters make clear that Christ's resurrection and divine identity were central to the earliest Christian belief.<sup>324</sup> The Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost worked as a decisive confirmation of Christ's resurrection within the initial believers who were the disciples and a few others (Acts 1:15). Furthermore, such a coming became the factor through which many other

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<sup>320</sup> Pentecost occurred fifty days after Jesus's resurrection.

<sup>321</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 207.

<sup>322</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 552.

<sup>323</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 196-7.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 416-7. See also Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 552.



individuals would come to believe in Christ and claim His resurrection. The experience of His Holy Spirit, both inwardly and outwardly through His diverse supernatural manifestations, became a determining factor.<sup>325</sup> It is noticeable that Paul proclaims Jesus's resurrection alongside statements regarding the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:24, 33), and through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8, 10).

#### Legend hypothesis

Christianity is founded on a high Christology that emerged from the belief that Christ rose from the dead. The belief in Jesus's resurrection was manifest through the claim that He was God in the flesh. The proclamation of His resurrection and divine identity permeated the beliefs and teachings of earliest Christianity. Although this factor is not sufficient for concluding that the resurrection likely occurred, it is necessary. Indeed, the early dating of the resurrection belief and teachings establish that there was not enough time for voluntary or involuntary distortions<sup>326</sup> as to who Jesus was and what happened to Him in the timeline between His crucifixion, and the time high Christology was held because of His resurrection.

The information gathered from Paul's epistles<sup>327</sup> and non-Christian sources gives reasonable grounds for believing that the resurrection message did not take time to be proclaimed and believed.<sup>328</sup> As Groothuis observes, Christ's resurrection and deity were "central to the devotional life of the earliest church."<sup>329</sup> Although the early dating of the resurrection being

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<sup>325</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 207.

<sup>326</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 39, 84.

<sup>327</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Rise of Christianity*, 416-7.

<sup>328</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 9, 27-8.

<sup>329</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 552.

proclaimed weakens the assertion that a legend or lie may have produced this claim, one ought to consider the effects produced by such a belief and teaching.

The most significant aspect of the early resurrection's assertion is that it did not cease. Instead, it persisted and caused the "rapid spread"<sup>330</sup> of Christianity in extremely high numbers and a short amount of time. The early dating of the resurrection proclamation undermines the likelihood of its emergence from lies and legendary developments, especially considering the absence of expected context. Moreover, the legend and lie theories become far more unsustainable when one considers the tangible effects of the early resurrection belief and claim.

Legends and lie hypotheses are inadequate in accounting for the resurrection proclamation due to its early dating and lack of proper context. Most importantly, such hypotheses become even more inadequate in accounting for the explosive effects of the resurrection proclamation across the globe within a short amount of time. Indeed, the rapid expansion of the Christian movement started immediately after the resurrection was proclaimed. Nevertheless, such an effect was not caused by the disciples' claims of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, but by the Holy Spirit's tangible actions initiated at Pentecost and still at work today. This point shall be the focus of the next chapter.

### Chapter Conclusion

The chapter has attempted to emphasize the main limitations that the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances present in the defense of Christ's resurrection. Historically, the two facts do not enjoy a solid corroboration from early non-Christian sources. Epistemologically, they constitute hurdles regarding the resurrection's historicity. Scholarship has been focusing on

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<sup>330</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 551-2.

demonstrating the inadequacy of the disciples' stolen body theory. However, the skeptic will argue that there exists a multiplicity of undetermined theories other than the stolen body hypothesis that could account for the empty tomb. Nevertheless, they are far too numerous to be surveyed. Moreover, the hallucination theory that has been advanced to explain the postmortem appearances is not implausible. Instead, it remains a credible explanation when considering a potential collective delusion as a result of the disciples' and other believers' mourning and state of shock after the gruesome crucifixion that had just taken place.

The empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances need to work in conjunction to account for Christ's resurrection. The empty tomb alone could be explained by a grave robbery or some unknown mysterious cause. The postmortem appearances without the empty tomb are either mere hallucinatory experiences, or the experience of the risen Christ in a non-bodily form. Since both facts have a limited non-Christian attestation and present obstacles when considering the rebuttal of some naturalistic explanations, they are more acceptable for those who have already experienced Christ's existence and miracles through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances are more reflective of the resurrection belief of the disciples and those who claimed to have witnessed His empty tomb and appearances, than of the resurrection as a historical fact.

In contrast, the second type of early proclamation of Christ's resurrection enjoys attestation from Scripture and early non-Christian sources. The first type of proclamation encompasses the disciples' claim of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances, and is therefore indistinguishable from the two facts. The second type refers to the resurrection proclaimed starting Pentecost. This type of resurrection proclamation intertwines Christ's resurrection with a high Christology, as manifested in the Acts sermons and Paul's epistles. Such

a proclamation dates extremely early after the crucifixion, emerged after the Holy Spirit's coming, and was conveyed through His empowering effects. Moreover, this type of early proclamation also marks the birth of the Christian church and its explosive growth across the globe. If the legend hypothesis is weak at accounting for the early resurrection proclamation, it is even weaker at explaining the subsequent rapid outbreak of Christianity.

In conclusion, the early proclamation of the resurrection is a stronger candidate for the historicity of the resurrection than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. It is better historically attested by early non-Christian sources, and its main naturalistic counterparts through the legend and lie hypotheses are flawed. Most importantly, the early proclamation is immediately followed by the rapid expansion of Christianity. As will be studied in the next chapter, this fact enjoys a solid early non-Christian attestation. The significance of the rapid growth of Christianity in the defense of the resurrection's historicity and the inadequacy of the legend theory to account for the fact shall be the focus of the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three: The Rapid Expansion of the Christian Faith is Best Explained by the Resurrection**

The chapter will attempt to establish that the rapid spread of Christianity immediately succeeded the resurrection proclamation that emerged from the Holy Spirit's reception at Pentecost. The effect of this early proclamation through a doctrine founded on high Christology is attested by Scripture and several early non-Christian sources. The immediate and explosive growth of Christianity after the event of Pentecost makes the legend hypothesis an implausible option to account for the resurrection. As the chapter will address, the resurrection hypothesis is the most adequate explanation for the effects of the early dating of the proclaimed resurrection. The study will also focus on the applicability of the findings to the facts of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, and establish conclusions on the best way forward.

### **The Early Resurrection Proclamation and Christianity's Expansion as Inseparable**

The first section of the chapter will analyze the effects of the early dating of the proclaimed resurrection. The specificity of the event is that it did not cease but persisted and produced a radical expansion.

### **Historical Evidence**

#### **Non-Christian sources**

The spread of Christianity is not an event that took decades or years to occur. Instead, it was initiated immediately after the already early proclamation of Christ's resurrection. Several non-Christian sources within the first century and early second century attest to the significant spread of the Christian faith. Although these sources do not explicitly mention the rapid spread of Christianity in conjunction with Christ's early resurrection proclamation, they give reasons to

believe that it occurred as such. The earliest account comes from Josephus. For ease of recollection, below is a restatement of his account (with the three debated portions in italics):

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him*. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.<sup>331</sup>

Josephus' account gives an explicit attestation of the fact that Christianity was already established at the end of the first century.<sup>332</sup> From this point, one can infer that Christianity grew rapidly and shortly after Christ's death. The Christian movement appears as a direct growth that sprung from the proclaimed resurrection in Jerusalem at an early date. As Bock describes, "Jesus caused a stir that significantly affected history."<sup>333</sup> Josephus' text is significant as it gives an early non-Christian attestation of the rapid spread of Christianity as a direct offshoot of the resurrection proclamation. Indeed, Josephus states that those who loved Christ did not give up on Him after His death, and that a group called "Christians" was still alive and well at the end of the first century. One can infer from this information that Christianity grew directly from the resurrection proclaimed in Jerusalem at an early date. Consequently, the Christian movement does not seem to have emerged from legendary developments.

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<sup>331</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Book 18, Section 63.

<sup>332</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 57.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

Roman historian Tacitus (AD 56 – AD 120)<sup>334</sup> also gives helpful information regarding the status of Christianity at the time of writing the *Annals*, which dates approximately between AD 115-117.<sup>335</sup> Tacitus' account deals with events covering Roman history between AD 14 and 68. Nero blamed the great Rome fire of AD 64 on Christians, as Tacitus narrates the following:

Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible and shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much for arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.<sup>336</sup>

Tacitus' account renders explicit the fact that in the 60s AD, the Christian movement was thriving and had consequently been established for some time. From the text, it is evident that the movement did not die out after Christ's death, nor remained stable. Not only did it stay, but it also grew and spread out to parts outside of Judea and made its way to Rome.<sup>337</sup>

Roman historian Suetonius (ca. AD 70 – AD 160)<sup>338</sup> alludes to a similar fact in a short sentence that explains Roman emperor Claudius' attitude toward Christians: "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome."<sup>339</sup> The

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<sup>334</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 242.

<sup>335</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 49.

<sup>336</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XV, Chapter 44, trans. John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937).

<sup>337</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 50.

<sup>338</sup> *Encyclopedia of Ancient Literature*, s.v. "Suetonius," ed. James Wyatt Cook, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Facts on File, 2014).

<sup>339</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, vol. 2, *Claudius*, trans. J. C. Rolfe. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

event is mentioned in Acts 18:2, where Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome because of the commotion of which he accused them. The event dates back to AD 49.<sup>340</sup> The citation shows that Christ's death did not prevent the Christian movement from being born, and that it was already established and spreading fifteen years after His death.<sup>341</sup> Within a few years, the Christian movement had expanded from Jerusalem to Rome, and its effects were not without notice. It is worth noting that the Romans considered the Jews and Christians as one group, which emphasizes the intertwined relationship between the early church and Judaism.<sup>342</sup>

Pliny the Younger's account also reveals significant elements regarding the status of Christianity at the beginning of the second century. A recollection of his account is helpful:

They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind [...] I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths [...] It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult.<sup>343</sup>

Pliny's account is the first extra-biblical source testifying of the customs of Christians in the early second century.<sup>344</sup> A high Christology was definitely in place since Christians partook in the Lord's Supper and worshipped Christ as God. These elements show that the Christian

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<sup>340</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 48.

<sup>341</sup> As Bock mentions, the issue with Suetonius' citation is that the name "Chrestus" does not explicitly refer to Christ. However, there are reasons to think that Christ is meant. First, the Latin word *quodam* to introduce an unknown figure is missing in the original text. Second, the name "Chrestus" has not been found among the multitudes of Roman Jews' catacombs. For these reasons, Suetonius may have made a mistake and likely had Christ in mind (*Studying the Historical Jesus*, 48).

<sup>342</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 49.

<sup>343</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, Volume II: Book X, Section 96.

<sup>344</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 51.



movement was not starting but had already been established for a significant amount of time. Although the citation does not specifically refer to the resurrection, the high Christology that characterized what Christians believed signifies that Jesus was already seen as God at the beginning of the second century. From this point, it can be inferred that Christ's resurrection had been believed and proclaimed much earlier than the second century since the church was already functioning around a set doctrine and customs.

Most importantly, Pliny's account shows that the Christian movement had already spread to Rome and was an issue in other parts of the Roman Empire<sup>345</sup> because of the perceptible effects it caused. It is evident that the proclamation of Jesus's resurrection did not cease but had ripple effects across the world as an immediate consequence. Indeed, the church was already established and running at the beginning of the second century. This fact implies that the church was likely born and grew directly from the resurrection being proclaimed in Jerusalem soon after the crucifixion.<sup>346</sup>

Syrian writer Lucian of Samosata (ca. AD 115 – AD 200) wrote a piece known as *The Passing of Peregrinus* in which he used the character of the story as a satirical illustration for the worship given to Jesus by His followers.<sup>347</sup> Lucian writes that Christians' devotion to Peregrinus

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<sup>345</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 51.

<sup>346</sup> As mentioned in the study, the early proclamation of Christ's resurrection can refer to two types: the disciples' proclamation after witnessing the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances; and the proclamation that emerged from the reception of the Holy Spirit which convinced believers and unbelievers that Jesus had resurrected. Only then was the church born and grew exponentially, through a doctrine founded on a high Christology as seen in the Acts sermons and the Pauline epistles. The second type of the resurrection proclamation is the one that contains the most evidence for the resurrection's historicity. The first type of proclamation is founded on the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, which present hurdles, as already studied. For this reason, the inference of the resurrection as the best explanation for this type of proclamation can be limited and unconvincing to skeptics. As the research will strive to establish, the second type of proclamation fares better in inferring the resurrection as the best explanation and consequently as a historical fact rather than mere belief.

<sup>347</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 52.

is such that “they honoured him as a god, employed him as a lawgiver, and entitled him a protector, though naturally coming after him whom they still worship—the man who was crucified in Palestine for introducing this new cult into the world.”<sup>348</sup>

The citation is significant as it emphasizes the pervasive presence of the Christian movement as an established and rapidly expanding religion in the early second century. Furthermore, the account makes explicit the view that Jesus’ followers considered Him to be God and were fully devoted to Him. The subsequent expansion of Christianity after the proclamation of Jesus’s resurrection is also attested in the biblical texts.

#### Biblical sources

The Pauline epistles provide ample evidence that Christianity was an established religion and that it was functioning according to a defined doctrine and specific norms within fifteen years of Jesus’s death. Indeed, Paul wrote to churches already in place, organized, and fully operating in the AD 50s<sup>349</sup> and as early as AD 48.<sup>350</sup> This fact emphasizes that it did not take long for Christianity to grow after the alleged resurrection of Christ and the proclamation of the event.

As Barnett asserts, Paul’s letters indicate that the Christian movement had its start immediately after Christ’s life.<sup>351</sup> If churches were created and organized within a decade and a half after Jesus’s death, one can infer that the Christian movement started shortly after His death. Consequently, it seems that the birth of Christianity and its growth are a direct offshoot of the

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<sup>348</sup> Charles D. N. Costa, trans., *Lucian: Selected Dialogues* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 77.

<sup>349</sup> Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology*, 24.

<sup>350</sup> Kruger, *The Question of Canon*, 92. Some scholars estimate that the date of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is as early as AD 48.

<sup>351</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 416.

resurrection being proclaimed in Jerusalem at an early date. As previously studied, Paul's epistles contain fragments that predate his writings<sup>352</sup> and therefore reflect the earliest Christian beliefs, doctrine, and customs. For the reasons mentioned, the Pauline documents fill the functions of not only revealing the immediate growth of Christianity after Jesus's life, but also the beliefs and habits of the earliest Christians.<sup>353</sup> On this matter, Loke emphasizes that since Paul's conversion dates between AD 32 and 34, it led him to become acquainted with what the earliest Christian thought and practice looked like, mainly through his associations with Peter, James, and Barnabas.<sup>354</sup>

The fact that Christians already lived according to beliefs put into practice in the late AD 40s reveals an extremely early birth and growth of the Christian church after Jesus's death. Hurtado mentions six features that characterized the ways early Christians put their faith into practice: hymns, prayers, the invocation of Christ's name, communion, confessing Christ, and prophecy in His name.<sup>355</sup> Paul's epistles make explicit that Christians sang hymns to Christ, as reflected in 1 Corinthians 14:26, Colossians 3:16-7, and Ephesians 5:18-20.<sup>356</sup> On this matter, the early fragment of Philippians 2:5-11 has been thought to be a hymn embedded in Paul's letter.<sup>357</sup> Early Christians also prayed to Christ, as seen in several New Testament passages (Acts 1:24-5,

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<sup>352</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 417.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 416-7. Barnett sees that such is the case for at least the earliest letters that Paul wrote: Galatians, Corinthians, Thessalonians, and Romans, which are thought to date between AD 48 and 56.

<sup>354</sup> Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology*, 24.

<sup>355</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 138-54.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 140, 144.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 141. Hurtado mentions other embedded Scriptures, such as Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 2:14-16, and 1 Timothy 3:16.

7:59-60; 1 Cor. 16:22).<sup>358</sup> Additionally, Christians invoked the name of Christ (Acts 9:14, 21, 22:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 10:13).<sup>359</sup> The act of calling upon Jesus's name underlines the presence of a high Christology in thought and practice among early believers, and likely the earliest Christian circles.<sup>360</sup> Early believers also partook in the Lord's Supper, as manifested in 1 Corinthians 11:23-6.<sup>361</sup> Communion predates Paul's letters and even conversion, as it emphasizes the receiving and passing of traditions.<sup>362</sup> Moreover, early Christians confessed the name of Christ (Rom. 10:9)<sup>363</sup> and prophesied in His name, as seen through the early prophet John (Rev. 1:17-3:22).<sup>364</sup>

The six features mentioned attest to the presence of a high Christology in earliest Christianity, and convey that the Christian faith was born and expanded rather quickly after the resurrection being believed and proclaimed. From the practices of early Christians, it is evident that they considered Jesus to be God. Indeed, they ascribed to Him a devotion that only belonged to the one true God.<sup>365</sup> As Loke emphasizes, the Lord's Supper establishes worship to other entities as idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14-22).<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 144. Many scholars have defended that the 1 Corinthians 16:22 prayer to Christ was addressed by Aramaic-speaking Christians who were the earliest believers due to the presence of the word *maranatha* (see page 147). As Hurtado observes, this verse reflects a high Christology that goes back to "the first stratum of Christian movement" (see page 148).

<sup>359</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 149.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-50.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.* See also Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 220.

<sup>363</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 151.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>365</sup> Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly God?* 49.

<sup>366</sup> Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology*, 43.

The Pauline epistles show that within a few years, Christianity had been born, established its doctrine, and spread to several parts of the Roman Empire. When considering the short timeline of such a colossal development, it becomes clear that the proclamation of Jesus's resurrection, which itself dates early, had immediate and far-reaching consequences. However, does the belief that Christ had resurrected—to the point that it became an overnight religion in radical expansion—indicate that the resurrection likely occurred?

The remaining part of the research will focus on determining how the early proclamation of the resurrection and its immediate consequences are best explained by Jesus's resurrection as a historical fact. Furthermore, the study will address how the defense of the resurrection through its early proclamation and its effects fares better than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. As previously mentioned, there exist two types of early proclamation regarding Jesus's resurrection. This differentiation is essential in defending the resurrection as a fact rather than a mere belief.

### **Two Types of Early Proclamation**

The empty tomb and postmortem appearances

There exist two types of early proclamation of Jesus's resurrection. The first is the one that emerged from the women and disciples after discovering the empty tomb and witnessing the risen Jesus. The Gospel accounts state that some of the women followers of Jesus were the first recipients of the two facts (Matt. 28:1-9, Mark 16:1-11, Luke 24:1-8, John 20:1-18). Moreover, the women were the ones who informed the disciples (Matt. 28:10, Luke 24:9-11), who subsequently witnessed the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ (Mark 16:12-20, Luke 24:12-53, John 20:19-25).

From these experiences, the disciples started proclaiming Jesus's resurrection (Mark 16:20). Early resurrection belief was the fruit of the perception of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances combined.<sup>367</sup> This type of early proclamation essentially affected the women followers of Christ, His disciples, and other individuals who came to believe in Christ's resurrection either through having witnessed His appearances (see 1 Cor. 15:6) or by having come to faith through the disciples' testimony. The Acts account mentions the existence of one-hundred-and-twenty believers by the time Christ ascended to Heaven (Acts 1:15) after appearing on and off to people over a period of forty days (Acts 1:1-3).

The early proclamation that emerged from the empty tomb and postmortem appearances solely affected a restricted number of people who had experienced the two facts. As mentioned, it is also possible that some came to believe in Christ's resurrection and proclaimed it after hearing the testimony of those who had seen the empty tomb and His postmortem appearances. It is unclear whether the five hundred individuals Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15:6 all came to faith and were included in the initial number of believers enumerated in Acts 1:15. Conversely, it is unclear whether the one-hundred-and-twenty believers reported in Acts 1:15 had seen the risen Christ or simply came to believe in Him through the testimonies of those who had witnessed the two facts.

In any case, the early proclamation of the resurrection that emerged as a result of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances only affected a small number of individuals, starting with a few women followers and the disciples. In stark contrast, another event triggered the resurrection being believed and proclaimed, but this time affecting thousands and leading to the birth and radical expansion of Christianity. This second wave of proclamation also dates

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<sup>367</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 693-6.

early, that is, fifty days after Jesus's death. It is this second type that is the most decisive when defending the resurrection's historicity.

### The coming of the Holy Spirit

It is significant that the church was not born nor grew through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances testimony. Instead, it was birthed and expanded radically when people started receiving the Holy Spirit after He came at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4, 41).<sup>368</sup> The sudden arrival of the Holy Spirit was not solely a manifestation open to all who were present to see (Acts 2:1-13).<sup>369</sup> Most importantly, it was an individually experienced manifestation with perceptible outside consequences, such as people coming to faith in Christ (Acts 2:41, 47, 16:30-1), proclaiming the faith boldly (Acts 2:14-39), and performing miraculous acts of healing (Acts 3:7).

The type of resurrection proclamation that changed the course of history and made Christianity a religion that expanded across the world in a short amount of time is the one that emerged from the Holy Spirit's coming. His arrival and reception within individuals created the resurrection belief that Jesus had risen from the dead. Indeed, the Holy Spirit was nothing but the deposit of Christ's resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:4-8). Unlike the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances, the Holy Spirit made the reality of Christ's resurrection available to all who were open to receiving Him. As Peerbolte observes, the Holy Spirit is not a mere

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<sup>368</sup> These passages display the initial pattern of explosive growth of the Christian faith after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and afterward, to this very day.

<sup>369</sup> The first sign of the Holy Spirit's arrival was the believers' sudden empowerment to speak in different tongues (Acts 2:3-4, 6-12).

theological concept but “a living reality that the earliest Christians experienced.”<sup>370</sup> One might object that this argument revolves around a mere individual religious experience and does not tell anything regarding the historicity of Christ’s resurrection. However, the effects of the Holy Spirit’s existence were outside realities available for all to perceive, as the book of Acts exemplifies. Furthermore, such manifestations are ongoing today. As Green affirms, the Holy Spirit is the “supreme agent” of the Christian mission.<sup>371</sup>

Unfortunately, the Holy Spirit’s existence and effects are often neglected when analyzing the conversion of early Christians<sup>372</sup> and the historicity of Christ’s resurrection.<sup>373</sup> As Green states, “Christians were convinced that the Spirit of Jesus had come into their midst and indwelt their very personalities.”<sup>374</sup> The early proclamation of Christ’s resurrection was born out of an intimate conviction through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and His manifest effects in the outside world. The Holy Spirit bore witness to the reality of Christ and His living presence. To that effect, it is worth noting Lanier’s description of the post-ascension new order: “After Jesus’ ascension, the church begins expressing, essentially overnight, the shocking idea that Christians are somehow—in a real way that remains perplexing even today—*united to Christ.*”<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Bert Jan Litaert Peerbolte, “‘Do Not Quench the Spirit!’: The Discourse of the Holy Spirit in Earliest Christianity,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 71, no. 1 (2015): 2, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.3098>.

<sup>371</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 129, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.* Green discusses the unfortunate lack of emphasis on the Holy Spirit when assessing early Christian conversion.

<sup>373</sup> As the research argues, the focus on the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances is not only problematic, but it also leaves aside what is possibly the most tangible and obvious factor when inferring the resurrection’s historicity: the Holy Spirit’s coming two millennia ago and His ongoing works today.

<sup>374</sup> Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 129.

<sup>375</sup> Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly God?* 54.



The doctrine and empowering effects of the Holy Spirit permeate the Acts sermons and Pauline epistles.<sup>376</sup> As previously mentioned, they testify of an early proclamation of the resurrection and a high Christology where the Holy Spirit is an essential entity. The Holy Spirit is not only the fruit of Christ's resurrection and ascension, but He is also the agent that convicts individuals, turns them to the saving knowledge of Christ, and empowers them to accomplish and perceive supernatural phenomena.

Although the disciples constitute the very first wave of believers through the experiences of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances, the Holy Spirit inaugurated the most crucial wave as His coming created the church and its radical spread across the world.<sup>377</sup> The proclamation of Christ's resurrection through the inner and outer manifestations of the Holy Spirit is significant when assessing the resurrection's historicity. Indeed, the early proclamation that emerged from such experiences affected all individuals who were open to experience Christ and put their faith in Him.

While the perceptions of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances were selective of a few witnesses, the Holy Spirit's coming was and still is a reality available to all. The Holy Spirit's arrival at Pentecost explains the exponential increase of believers from its initial number (Acts 1:15) to what started afterward (Acts 2:41).<sup>378</sup> Moreover, the Holy Spirit's coming transformed Jesus's disciples from timid, coward, and unlearned men, to bold and powerful speakers. The first significant change is seen in Peter through his first sermon (Acts 2:14-39).<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> This point will be expanded as the research progresses.

<sup>377</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 207. Barnett emphasizes the major effects of the Holy Spirit's coming through the birth of the Christian church and its subsequent rapid expansion.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-7.

<sup>379</sup> Smith, "He Appeared to Peter," 62. Despite being a skeptic, Smith recognizes the change that occurred after the alleged coming of the Holy Spirit.

The early proclamation of Christ's resurrection that emerged after Pentecost marked the birth and rapid expansion of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit's arrival is the ultimate agent responsible for the belief and proclamation that Christ had risen from the dead.<sup>380</sup> Indeed, His experienced reality within those who accepted Him<sup>381</sup> led to the resurrection belief and proclamation affecting thousands, and no longer a few as it had been the case with the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances claims. The subsequent rapid growth of the Christian faith that succeeded the resurrection belief and proclamation after Pentecost constitutes the strongest evidence for the resurrection's historicity.

#### The Growth of the Christian Faith as Best Evidence for the Resurrection's Historicity

### Supporting Background

The most crucial aspect of the rapid expansion of Christianity as an immediate result of the Pentecost resurrection belief is that Christ had promised the Holy Spirit and predicted His effects. In John 16:7, Jesus told His disciples the following: "But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." Jesus had made clear that the consequence of His departure would be the arrival of the person of the Holy Spirit. In Luke 24:49, Christ made a similar statement: "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." At the beginning of the Acts account, Jesus's words are recorded as such: "Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my Father promised [...] for John baptized

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<sup>380</sup> Francis J. Moloney, "Mission in the Acts of the Apostles: 'The Protagonist is the Holy Spirit,'" *The Australasian Catholic Record* 96, no. 4 (2019): 401, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/mission-acts-apostles-protagonist-is-holy-spirit/docview/2436133692/se-2>. The author emphasizes that believing audiences are the fruit of the Holy Spirit's filling.

<sup>381</sup> Peerbolte, "'Do Not Quench the Spirit!'" 2.

with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4-5). Perhaps the most important description of what would occur after the Spirit’s coming is conveyed through Jesus’s statement, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (Acts 1:8).

It is significant that the Holy Spirit’s arrival and transformative effects had been abundantly predicted and promised by Christ Himself. The Holy Spirit was to become Christ’s replacement. However, such an event needed His resurrection and ascension as necessary prerequisites. The Holy Spirit is nothing but a resurrection and ascension deposit.<sup>382</sup> Indeed, Christ had stated that unless He went away,<sup>383</sup> the Holy Spirit would not come. As Moloney observes, the promise of the Holy Spirit “dominates” the end of the Gospels and inaugurates the beginning of the Acts account.<sup>384</sup> As Christ had promised in the Gospels, the Holy Spirit eventually came at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

The prophesied coming of the Holy Spirit is the most compelling element of the likelihood that Christ rose from the dead. If the Holy Spirit had come unannounced, His nature as a post-resurrection and ascension event would not have been explicitly established. However, the Holy Spirit came after Christ told His disciples that he would be the consequence of His departure. Most importantly, the Holy Spirit appears in Old Testament texts through prophetic declarations of His future coming. The Old Testament stated the necessity of implementing a new covenant (Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4, 31:31-4; see Heb. 8:7-13) that would bring salvation through the Holy Spirit’s power and reception (Joel 2:28-32; see Acts 2:16-21). The New

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<sup>382</sup> Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 129. As the author states, the Holy Spirit is “the gift of the ascended Jesus.”

<sup>383</sup> Christ’s “going away” designates His death and ascension. However, the ascension implies a resurrection from the dead.

<sup>384</sup> Moloney, “Mission in the Acts of the Apostles,” 401.

Covenant departs from the Old in that it enables a change of heart and mind in those who would receive the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:19, 36:26-7; Heb. 10:15-6; 2 Cor. 3:3; Rom. 2:25-9; Col. 2:11-4; Phil. 3:3).<sup>385</sup>

One might object that the experience of the Holy Spirit is a subjective experience and that nothing proves His objective reality. However, as the research will strive to show, the Holy Spirit's inner experiences and outer manifestations are ongoing and have never ceased since Pentecost. Indeed, the church's rapid post-Pentecost growth had also been promised by Christ (Acts 1:8).

### **A Massive Expansion**

The Holy Spirit's coming was not the only thing that Christ had promised. He had also promised the expansion of the new faith "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8; see also Luke 24:47: "to all nations") through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (John 14:12, 16-17, 16:12-13; Luke 24:46-9). When the Spirit came at Pentecost, belief and proclamation of the resurrection started affecting masses and spread out uncontrollably. The Holy Spirit's arrival became intertwined with the conversion of Christianity into a fast-growing religion (Acts 2:41, 42-7; 4:4, 32-7; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31) far exceeding the initial number of believers (Acts 1:15).

The growth of the Christian faith is inseparable from the agency of the Holy Spirit and His empowering effects on those who received Him (Acts 9:31). The Holy Spirit taught and supernaturally led the disciples and new believers to accomplish miracles and speak of the resurrection with power (Acts 2:43-7, 4:33-4). The arrival of the predicted Spirit marked the

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<sup>385</sup> The New Testament emphasizes the connection between the Old Testament and Pentecost. Several New Testament Scriptures quote the Old Testament regarding the Spirit's regenerative nature. In that sense, He accomplishes what the Mosaic Law could not deliver (Deut. 30:6), that is, the transformation of one's heart and mind. The latter is most adequate for fulfilling God's will and commands.

beginning of both the early conviction of Christ's resurrection with contagious consequences "to the ends of the earth," and the visible manifestations of His presence through miraculous acts (Acts 5:12-6, 9:33-4, 14:8-10). As Moloney asserts, "believing audiences are the fruit of the ongoing Spirit-filled missionary church."<sup>386</sup> The word of God did not spread and convince people through the testimonies of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, but through the experience of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the main reason for the early "in mass" proclamation of Christ's resurrection and the rapid spread of the gospel across the world.<sup>387</sup>

After the Holy Spirit's coming, the church was born and grew exponentially.<sup>388</sup> Moloney identifies four major stages of the Holy Spirit-induced spread of the Christian faith: the Christian mission's initiation in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-8:3),<sup>389</sup> fulfilling Christ's promise of the church's start in Jerusalem before spreading out "to all nations" (Luke 24:47); its scattering through Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:4-40), thereby fulfilling Jesus's words in Acts 1:8;<sup>390</sup> its expansion to the Gentile world (Acts 9:1-11:18);<sup>391</sup> and Paul's Spirit-led mission "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 11:19-28), also fulfilling Jesus's promise in Acts 1:8.<sup>392</sup>

The rapid spread of the Christian faith is distinct from that of other religions as the Holy Spirit through whom it operated had been predicted in the Old Testament as an agent who would transform one's heart and mind. Additionally, Christ promised the Spirit's coming. In that sense,

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<sup>386</sup> Moloney, "Mission in the Acts of the Apostles," 401.

<sup>387</sup> Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 129.

<sup>388</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 207.

<sup>389</sup> Moloney, "Mission in the Acts of the Apostles," 402-3.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 403-4.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 404-5.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 405-9.

Christianity is unique and leaves little room for anything accidental. The predictions of both the Old and New Testaments constitute a compelling case for a divinely guided order. Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses do not see Jesus as God but as a created being, and deny the Holy Spirit, who is the deposit of Jesus's bodily resurrection.<sup>393</sup>

Furthermore, the Old and New Testament Scriptures emphasize the redeeming and regenerating nature of the Spirit on one's heart and mind, which both worldviews refute. Indeed, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses claim that one's redemption is not by faith alone but through certain works.<sup>394</sup> Christianity presents a more convincing case as the Old Testament reflects its view of Jesus as the divine Messiah (Isa. 7:14, 9:6, 53; Micah 5:2; Ps. 110:1) while introducing a prophetic theology of the Holy Spirit.<sup>395</sup>

Although the Old Testament does not explicitly mention the Holy Spirit as the Messiah's gift, Christ promised it as such (John 16:7), fulfilled the promise on Pentecost Day, and the Spirit's existence is manifest in today's Christianity.<sup>396</sup> The Old Testament predicts the Holy Spirit's coming and strongly seems to identify Christ as the divine Messiah. Since the New Testament echoes the Old Testament regarding Christ's messianic identity and the Holy Spirit's

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<sup>393</sup> Gould, Dickinson, and Loftin, *Stand Firm*, 189-193.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-8.

<sup>395</sup> Attention is given to Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses as both worldviews contain strong similarities with Christianity and have grown at fast rates. However, they significantly undermine orthodox Christianity's essential tenets (see Gould, Dickinson, and Loftin, *Stand Firm*, 183-199). Like these two religions, Islam also grew at a speedy rate. However, some of its claims are unsustainable. For instance, the alleged distortion of the New Testament documents is inconsistent with the rigid parameters for careful transmission of oral traditions, as studied in the first two chapters of the research. Furthermore, Islam denies Jesus's crucifixion, which is widely attested by the overwhelming majority of scholars and by early non-Christian sources as studied earlier. For a comprehensive and concise analysis of Islam's claims regarding Christianity, see *Christian Apologetics* from Douglas Groothuis, pages 604-11.

<sup>396</sup> The research will address today's continuity with Pentecost at a later point.

regenerative purpose, Christianity differs from other religions as it fulfills both elements (Acts 2:22-36).

### **An Expansion through a Supernatural Power**

The first wave of Christians portrayed in Acts became recipients of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the new hope<sup>397</sup> through the enablement of a power without which they could not have carried out the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). As Green observes, every initiative seen in Acts is prompted by the Holy Spirit who indwells believers.<sup>398</sup> Since the Holy Spirit is the gift of the ascended Christ,<sup>399</sup> He enables believers to accomplish Christ's will independently of human power but through His divine power. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate consequence of Christ's resurrection and ascension, and He came just as Christ had promised in the Gospels (John 16:7). His arrival granted immediate supernatural power to those who had already placed their faith in Christ, as manifested through the ability to speak in languages not known to the recipients (Acts 2:1-4). This outcome was so much out of the ordinary that the onlookers thought that the believers were inebriated (Acts 2:5-13).

The church's birth and growth are founded on the miraculous acts of the Holy Spirit. As Barnett recognizes, each miracle led to the growth of Christianity through the empowering effects of the Holy Spirit in believers.<sup>400</sup> The actions that Jesus performed while He was incarnate became a possibility once again through the effects of His departure deposit in the person of the

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<sup>397</sup> Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 129.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 207.

Holy Spirit.<sup>401</sup> On that matter, Christ had told the disciples that those who would receive the promised Holy Spirit would do greater things than He had shown them (John 14:12). The growth of Christianity stands as the consequence of the miracles performed after the Holy Spirit came and empowered believers (Acts 2:43-7, 4:4, 4:32-7, 5:14).

The Holy Spirit's reality was tangible as He revealed God's active presence in the lives of individuals and at a collective scale.<sup>402</sup> The power and authority displayed by early believers including the disciples only emerged after Pentecost. As Peerbolte describes, the early church was a "Spirited" community since every believer possessed the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9).<sup>403</sup> The initial disciples started accomplishing miraculous acts and spoke with power and authority only after having received the promised Spirit.<sup>404</sup> The supernatural presence that indwelt believers was the driving force behind the exponential growth of the Christian movement after the Holy Spirit's arrival on Pentecost.<sup>405</sup>

The church expanded radically through the Spirit's leading of believers and their ability to perform miracles. The Acts account shows that the pillars of the early church were directed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in all they did and wherever they went (Acts 3:6-16; 8:29; 13:2-4; 16:6-10; 20:22-3; 21:4, 11:13). Moreover, supernatural acts of healing abounded and contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity by bringing many to faith (Acts 4:21-2; 5:14-6; 8:5-8; 9:17-9, 32-5, 40-2; 19:11-20), as well as acts of miraculous intervention (Acts 16:25-

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<sup>401</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 207.

<sup>402</sup> Peerbolte, "'Do Not Quench the Spirit!'" 2, 4.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 4. The Holy Spirit's presence is found in every person who has been redeemed in Christ by accepting Him as his or her personal Lord and Savior. What occurred on Pentecost inaugurated a new order.

<sup>404</sup> Peerbolte, "'Do Not Quench the Spirit!'" 7.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.



34). The church's expansion was made possible through the Holy Spirit's prophetic insights and healing powers working in and through believers.<sup>406</sup>

The Holy Spirit enabled the early proclamation of the resurrection to bear witness to Christ's resurrection. Indeed, the Holy Spirit had been a promised reality that eventually occurred, and its occurrence bore fruits according to Christ's predictions. The empowerment of believers and exponential growth of the faith "to the ends of the earth" were only consequences of the Holy Spirit's existence, and therefore also of Christ's resurrection and ascension.

Regarding the kerygma, Edwards states the following: "Kerygma was a truth that could be lived, and its lived expression, both individually and corporately, was the greatest witness to its truth."<sup>407</sup> The gospel's rapid expansion was made possible by the Holy Spirit's work and was the greatest testimony of Christ's resurrection.<sup>408</sup> When considering the rapid expansion of

Christianity, it is worth quoting Origen's words:

Could it have happened apart from God's providence that in so few years Jesus, desiring to spread his teaching and message, has been able to do so much that in many parts of the contemporary world a large number of Greeks and barbarians, wise and stupid, have been so disposed towards his doctrine that they fight for Christianity to the point of death to avoid abjuring him, which no one is related to have done for any other doctrine?<sup>409</sup>

As Origen expresses, the rapid expansion of Christianity is unlikely apart from a divine intervention, especially when taking into account the radical transformation of many of the new

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<sup>406</sup> Johannes Van Oort, "The Holy Spirit and the Early Church: The Experience of the Spirit," *HTS Theologiese Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012): 1-2, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i1.1154>.

<sup>407</sup> James R. Edwards, *From Christ to Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the Church in Less than a Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 116-7.

<sup>408</sup> Avery C. Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco, USA: Ignatius Press, 2005), 43, 70. In his studies on the Church Fathers (see chapter 2), Dulles mentions the dominant theme of the rapid expansion of Christianity as bearing witness to the truthfulness of Christianity. Unfortunately, this element is often neglected in current scholarship when defending the resurrection's historicity.

<sup>409</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ed. Henry Chadwick (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 26.

converts. Although these observations apply to the early church and Origen's time, what can be said about today's state of affairs?

### **Contemporary Effects of Pentecost**

The proclamation of the resurrection that emerged after Pentecost with the Holy Spirit's coming affected masses and no longer a few.<sup>410</sup> The Holy Spirit's major consequences were the birth and rapid expansion of the Christian church through "signs and wonders."<sup>411</sup> In his letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is given to those who put their faith in Christ and that He enables believers to live a supernaturally empowered life (Gal. 3:2-5, 14).<sup>412</sup> The most determining factor in the defense of the resurrection's historicity is that the Holy Spirit's actions are still occurring today. His effects are tangible and accomplished under the same theology proclaimed two millennia ago. His actions in history since Pentecost have not ceased.

The Holy Spirit is claimed to live in every believer (Rom. 8:5-9, 14) to sanctify them (Rom. 15:16, 1 Thess. 4:8, 2 Thess. 2:13).<sup>413</sup> As the deposit of the ascended Christ, He works in believers to bring about the life that Christ desires but that they cannot accomplish through self-reliance (Gal. 5:22-5).<sup>414</sup> It is through the empowering effect of the Holy Spirit that believers can accomplish supernatural endeavors (Mark 16:18-9), which can range from inducing miraculous

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<sup>410</sup> Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 196-7.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>412</sup> Paul insists on the Holy Spirit as a gift given to those who have faith in Christ and that was consequently not sent until after His resurrection. The Holy Spirit marks a sharp distinction between the Old Testament and the New Covenant. Most importantly, the Spirit's manifestations are evident and marked by miraculous works emanating from those whose souls He inhabits.

<sup>413</sup> J. Lyle Story, "Pauline Thoughts about the Holy Spirit and Sanctification: Provision, Process, and Consummation," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18, no. 1 (2009): 68, 82, 85, <https://doi.org/10.1163/174552509X442165>. In this article, Story establishes the timeless application of the Holy Spirit's purpose in believers.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 86.

healings to loving one's enemies effortlessly (John 14:25-6).<sup>415</sup> The Holy Spirit is a deposit given to all who accept Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, and bears witness with them that they are God's adopted children through Christ's redemptive power (Rom. 8:16, Eph. 1:13-4).<sup>416</sup>

As Paul's epistles specify, each believer has been granted at least one spiritual gift selected by the Holy Spirit to further Christ's eternal kingdom (Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:4-11). The book of Acts is notorious for the emphasis on the rapid expansion of the early church through the charismatic gifts of healing and prophecy.<sup>417</sup> Such gifts are not superior to other gifts. Nevertheless, they stand apart as they bear stark signs of divine action. For instance, healing is almost unanimously seen as a sign of God's power, especially when occurring after prayers for healing in Christ's name.<sup>418</sup> The gift of prophecy also permeates the New Testament and symbolizes the Holy Spirit's presence.<sup>419</sup> It is a multifaceted gift as it involves speaking to edify, encourage, and comfort believers (1 Cor. 14:3). Furthermore, prophecy is used to convey specific revelations to others (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 14:26, 15:51; Rev. 2-3, 22:6-19) and speak of things to come (Acts 11:27-8, 27:33-4).<sup>420</sup>

One might object that the alleged acts of prophecy and healing displayed in the Acts account could potentially be fabricated events, and that their mention does not infer Christ's resurrection or the Holy Spirit's existence as a deposit of His departure. The issue with this

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<sup>415</sup> The Holy Spirit is often referred to by Christ as the "Advocate" because of His helping and empowering nature.

<sup>416</sup> Story, "Pauline Thoughts about the Holy Spirit," 84.

<sup>417</sup> Van Oort, "The Holy Spirit and the Early Church," 1-2.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

statement is that such acts of the Holy Spirit are still occurring today through the same theology proclaimed two thousand years ago. The effects of Pentecost are still tangible. As Robbins states, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is “rapidly spreading” and “can be counted as one of the greatest success stories of the current era of cultural globalization.”<sup>421</sup>

Just as it occurred in the Acts accounts, individuals are not converted by force but by “powerful conversion experiences.”<sup>422</sup> Although not all believers accept Christ and become born again through such supernatural experiences, many of them do. Acts of miraculous healing in the name of Christ and through Holy Spirit-guided prayers permeate today’s Christian circles, as well as fulfilled prophetic statements.<sup>423</sup> In other words, Acts 2 is still part of today’s events.

Other striking phenomena include the spontaneous messages spoken in tongues by a congregation member amid church services with subsequent words of interpretation by another member, without even the two parties knowing each other, and prophesying over a third-party member also unknown to them.<sup>424</sup> The spiritual gifts of tongues and interpretation also figure among Paul’s list (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:2, 27-8).

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<sup>421</sup> Joel Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2004): 117, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.061002.093421>. As Robbins defines it, Pentecostal Christianity refers to the Holy Spirit’s gifts imparted to believers, and charismatic Christianity encompasses charismatic gifts such as healing, prophecy, and tongues (see also Van Oort, “The Holy Spirit and the Early Church,” 2).

<sup>422</sup> Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” 120.

<sup>423</sup> As Robbins emphasizes, such events were already dominating the Christian church by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Holy Spirit’s gifts (charismatic and other) have never stopped in history since Pentecost, Robbins shows that a revival in Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity was in place at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>424</sup> I have personally experienced this specific event in a church service. As the pastor was delivering his message, an individual stood up and started uttering a message in tongues, which was immediately interpreted by another church member across the room, with both men not seeming to have known each other. When the interpreter translated the message to the audience, words of encouragement were destined for the congregation. Furthermore, a specific message was meant for a church member who was afraid to go on a missionary trip (we found out through the interpreter’s words), and the Holy Spirit empowered the interpreter to call the individual by name and instruct him to move forward with his missionary journey without fear. It did not seem that all three members even knew one another (the church I was attending at the time was a mega-church, and many people were unknown to most of the audience).

The specificity of these events is that they are claimed to emerge from the Holy Spirit, who had been predicted and promised by Christ beforehand. It is one thing to have the Spirit's arrival and works narrated in the Bible. But it is another to perceive similar works today. Since the Holy Spirit is the gift of the ascended Christ, there are reasonable grounds to believe that today's manifestations are the ongoing deposit of His resurrection. Furthermore, Christ had promised and predicted the expansion of His gospel across the world (Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8), which has been occurring in history and started at a rapid pace after Pentecost.

The early proclamation of Jesus's resurrection after Pentecost was not inspired by the events of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances but by the experience of the Holy Spirit. Although believers held the disciples' accounts as truthful events, individuals started becoming born again by the thousands only after the Holy Spirit's arrival. It was the experience of the Holy Spirit that convinced individuals of the truthfulness of Christ's resurrection, and that persists as such to this day. Although the accounts of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances affected a few, the Holy Spirit affected many and is the main agent in today's conversion experiences. Most importantly, the works performed in the Holy Spirit's name such as miraculous acts of healing and fulfilled prophecies are tangible realities available for all to see, even if everyone is free to disregard them as convincing elements of Christ's resurrection.

If the Holy Spirit had not come, Christianity would not have gotten off the ground and expanded to this day. The empty tomb and postmortem appearances could not have accomplished what Christ's Spirit has manifested across history. Groothuis' observation is worth noting when he claims the following: "The fact that millions of Christ's followers around the globe for the last two thousand years have testified to the reality of their risen Savior's claims,

lends credibility to the reality of the resurrection.”<sup>425</sup> As Lanier mentions, it is after Pentecost that believers started professing “overnight” the idea that Christ was united to them, in a way that is still in place today.<sup>426</sup> The Holy Spirit’s reality is an inner-felt manifestation that also produces tangible phenomena, as seen through the spiritual gifts imparted to believers.

The question of the place that the empty tomb and postmortem appearances ought to occupy in the defense of the resurrection’s historicity remains. The research does not deny the historicity of the two facts, nor does it deny the possibility of Jesus’s resurrection as their cause. Instead, the research has attempted to show that their weak attestation from early non-Christian sources and their limitations in inferring Jesus’s resurrection as their best possible explanation are problematic for defending the resurrection’s historicity. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the two facts are useless for the defense of Jesus’s resurrection.<sup>427</sup> This matter will be studied in the next section.

## The Empty Tomb and Postmortem Appearances in Light of the Early Resurrection Proclamation

### Status of the Three Facts

The empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances led to the earliest proclamation of Jesus’s resurrection. However, their historical and epistemological limitations emphasize that

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<sup>425</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 554. The author asserts that the “necessary consequence” of Jesus’s resurrection is the continued “salvation, empowerment and success” of His church throughout history. See also Dulles’ study on Patristics (*A History of Apologetics*, chapter 2).

<sup>426</sup> Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly Divine?* 54. The author qualifies the post-Pentecost continued experience of feeling united to Christ as “perplexing.” Indeed, it occurred instantly at Pentecost and has persisted to this day.

<sup>427</sup> The research does not deny the plausibility of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances. Instead, it has strived to point to some weaknesses in emphasizing them in the defense of Christ’s resurrection. The resurrection’s early proclamation and its effects across history provide a stronger case through the ongoing effects of the Spirit who was prophesied by Christ and by the Old Testament Scriptures. This fact reinforces the plausibility of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances claim, and establishes them as likely to have occurred. In that sense, the early proclamation and its effects provide stronger grounds for asserting the historicity of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances.

they are more reflective of the resurrection belief of those who claimed to have witnessed the two events than the resurrection as a historical fact. The second type of early proclamation through the Holy Spirit's coming reflects not only the resurrection belief of the first Christians but also that of today's believers. This second type emphasizes the resurrection as a likely historical event and not a mere belief. Indeed, the promised effects of the Holy Spirit are still occurring all over the world.

Although one might object that the Acts account reflects an invented narrative, the ongoing activity of the Spirit through the same theology proclaimed two millennia ago leads to deducing the likelihood of Christ's resurrection. One does not need to be a born-again Christian to acknowledge that some extremely unusual and unexplainable events such as acts of instantaneous healing and fulfilled prophetic words through tongues and interpretation do exist.<sup>428</sup>

The continued action of the Holy Spirit in history confers to the empty tomb and postmortem appearances a stronger degree of credibility. Although the two facts have some limitations when considered under a specific scope,<sup>429</sup> they become plausible entities when evaluated in light of the persisting effects that the Holy Spirit has had since the early

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<sup>428</sup> Although not all unbelievers will have the opportunity to experience such facts, they are made available to some. As for those who have not witnessed such events, they can be accessed through reliable testimonies and in some instances video recordings, especially since churches are now taking full advantage of the technological means at their disposal and the use of social media to streamline their services.

<sup>429</sup> The empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances can present some hurdles in defending Christ's resurrection for reasons mentioned in chapters one and two. The research does not deny their historicity or plausibility but points to major objections skeptics encounter in their consideration. In summary, one can conceive of an indefinite number of potential scenarios other than the resurrection and the disciples' theft to explain the empty tomb. However, it is impossible to establish a complete inventory and compare them to the resurrection hypothesis. As for the resurrection appearances, a collective delusion from bereavement remains a plausibility in the skeptic's mind. For instance, the famous Miracle of the Sun phenomenon displays the potential for collective hallucinatory experiences. The research does not assert that the postmortem appearances are the fruit of hallucinations, but that the hypothesis remains plausible among skeptics and that their case is not completely unconvincing.

proclamation of the resurrection that emerged after Pentecost. If Christ's resurrection is likely true, then the accounts of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances are also likely to be true. As studied in chapter one, miracles are not impossible events. Furthermore, Jesus's resurrection is the best possible explanation to account for the ongoing manifestations of the Holy Spirit and the continued growth of the Christian faith through the same theology as two thousand years ago.

Most importantly, the Holy Spirit had been promised as a gift that would be sent only after Christ's resurrection and ascension. Although one might object to the truthfulness of the Holy Spirit's existence in the Acts account, His contemporary effects undermine this claim. Not only Christ had promised the Holy Spirit's coming, but He had also predicted the expansion of the new faith across the world. It is undeniable that His words have been fulfilled.

The church grew rapidly only after the sending of the Holy Spirit. The empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances could not have produced this overnight expansion and the continued salvation of individuals to this day. The inference of Christ's resurrection as the best explanation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances must be done in a backward fashion by considering the early proclamation of the resurrection from Pentecost and the subsequent expansion of the faith through the Holy Spirit to this day, to then infer the likelihood of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. If Christ's resurrection best accounts for the early proclamation and the rapid expansion of the Christian faith, it is a likely event; and the empty tomb and postmortem appearances are also more likely to be historical and caused by the resurrection, As Groothuis observes, the continued success of the church in history is the element without which all other historical elements on behalf of the resurrection are of "little account."<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 554.



Just as the empty tomb and postmortem appearances have potential naturalistic explanations, the early proclamation of the resurrection is often accounted for by the legend theory. Legend theories claim that the resurrection narrative is the fruit of embellished stories that grew apart from the original accounts.<sup>431</sup> To another extent, the resurrection account is also claimed to be an intentionally fabricated story.<sup>432</sup> The resurrection proclamation that emerged after Pentecost can hardly be explained by deceits of legends. Christ's resurrection has no correspondence with pagan myths and ancient Judaism.<sup>433</sup> Invented stories or involuntary distortions would not lead to the idea of a resurrected Messiah. Furthermore, the Pentecost event occurred only fifty days after Jesus's death,<sup>434</sup> which did not give enough time for any voluntary or involuntary distortion to develop, especially given the lack of proper background.

One might also argue that the blooming stage of Christianity after Pentecost emerged from distorted teachings of its original accounts. However, the research has shown that the Christian church was born and grew immediately after Pentecost. The lack of time gap leaves no room for any legendary development from the initial accounts. The Pauline epistles and the Acts sermons date extremely early, which implies that their teachings founded on a high Christology through Christ's resurrection reflect the earliest Christian belief. In that sense, the assumption that the resurrection belief took a long time to emerge is flawed.<sup>435</sup> Additionally, the oral

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<sup>431</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 84.

<sup>432</sup> Johnson, "Inference to the Best Explanation," 39.

<sup>433</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 595, 597-9.

<sup>434</sup> Smith, "He Appeared to Peter," 62.

<sup>435</sup> Johnson, "Inference to the Best Explanation," 40. The author claims a slow development of the resurrection belief.

traditions that predated the New Testament writings were marked by a thorough process of transmission to avoid distortions.<sup>436</sup>

For the reasons mentioned, the claim that Christianity is the fruit of lies or legendary developments<sup>437</sup> is unconvincing. Not only the resurrection belief and proclamation that started at Pentecost took place only a few weeks after Jesus's death; but its expansion started immediately following Pentecost Day. This element shows that Christianity was directly born from the confirmation of Christ's resurrection at Pentecost and expanded immediately afterward through the Holy Spirit's coming. Most importantly, the ongoing effects of the Holy Spirit attest to the likely historicity of the resurrection. Today's events make the Acts account likely to be true, and they confer to the empty tomb and postmortem appearances a higher degree of likelihood.

### **Evaluation of the Legend Hypothesis**

To better assess the resurrection theory as bearing more historical weight than its naturalistic legend theory counterpart, McCullagh's methodology is a helpful tool. McCullagh recognizes seven criteria according to which a hypothesis possesses historical justification to account for an event.<sup>438</sup>

The first criterion is that the hypothesis, in conjunction with other statements already held to be true, must imply other statements describing observable data.<sup>439</sup> The research claims that

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<sup>436</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 220. See also Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 92-3.

<sup>437</sup> Skeptics often argue that the current state of Christianity is the consequence of developments that differ from what it truly was at its inception. However, the research has emphasized the early dating of several pre-Pauline fragments claiming a high Christology and Christ's resurrection. Furthermore, such teachings were transmitted through a reliable oral tradition (1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:1, 3).

<sup>438</sup> C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19. The seven criteria that the author offers establish the foundation for one to be rationally justified in believing that a statement is true.

<sup>439</sup> McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 19.

the resurrection hypothesis (RH) accounts for the early proclamation of the resurrection. A statement recognized as true is that legends take time to develop<sup>440</sup> and do not occur overnight. Christianity was not the fruit of lengthy developments as its theology is the same as the one that emerged two thousand years ago. The resurrection theory combined with this fact both imply the observable data that Christianity exists as a direct offshoot of Pentecost. Christianity thrives only because of the continued effects of the Holy Spirit who was first sent at Pentecost. This observation reinforces that something must have occurred for the resurrection to have been proclaimed in mass starting Pentecost. It is more likely than not that Christ resurrected since the Holy Spirit was the promised deposit of His resurrection, and His effects are persisting today.

The second criterion for rationally justified belief is that the hypothesis in question must be of greater explanatory scope than other incompatible hypotheses by implying a wider variety of observation statements.<sup>441</sup> In other words, RH must imply more observed truths than LH. While LH could be the cause of the early proclamation of the resurrection, it fails to account for the short amount of time (roughly fifty days) it took for the resurrection to be widely believed and proclaimed starting Pentecost.

Although a legendary development remains slightly possible and could also account for the expansion of the Christian faith afterward, it fails to explain the ongoing manifestations of the Holy Spirit's works as seen through miraculous healings and fulfilled prophecies uttered in tongues, interpreted in the name of Christ, and founded on the same theology as in Acts.

Furthermore, the expansion of Christianity occurred immediately after Pentecost and led to today's state of affairs. This fact implies that Pentecost Day had something out of the ordinary

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<sup>440</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 84.

<sup>441</sup> McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 19.

occur since it has led to the birth and exponential growth of Christianity to this day. This observation makes LH weaker than RH in accounting for the early proclamation of the resurrection.

The third criterion for justified belief is that the hypothesis must be of greater explanatory power by making some observed facts more probable than its rival theory.<sup>442</sup> If RH is the cause of the early proclamation of the resurrection, then today should be marked by the actualization of Christ's promises of the church expanding "to the ends of the earth" and continued miraculous acts through the Holy Spirit's power (John 14:12). The legend theory fails to account for the fulfillment of Christ's words regarding the gospel's expansion and the accomplishment of "signs and wonders" by invoking the Holy Spirit's help.

The fourth criterion for rationally justified belief is that the hypothesis must be implied by a greater variety of accepted truths than its rival.<sup>443</sup> Once the prejudice against the possibility of miracles is set aside, RH is not less plausible than LH and is implied by more accepted truths.<sup>444</sup> For instance, legends need time to develop and there was not enough time between the original events and the early proclamation of the resurrection nor between the proclamation and the rapid growth of Christianity. Moreover, lies or involuntary distortions do not produce the fulfillment of prophecies such as the Holy Spirit's arrival at Pentecost. Additionally, the church's success since that day through acts performed by praying for the Holy Spirit's empowerment can only imply that RH is likely true and the cause of the early proclamation of the resurrection.

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<sup>442</sup> McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 19.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>444</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 605-6. Craig mentions the stigma positing the supernatural as being outside the scope of accepted truths. The lack of reasonable grounds for dismissing the possibility of miracles has been studied in chapter one of the research. Accepted truths such as scientific knowledge do not discredit miraculous events as potentially historical entities.

The fifth criterion for justified belief stipulates that the hypothesis must be less ad hoc than its rival by including fewer new suppositions about the past not already implied by existing beliefs.<sup>445</sup> Once one recognizes that the existence of God and miracles are not impossible entities, the criterion of complying with “existing beliefs” is biased as it prohibits the existence of the supernatural. Supernatural phenomena are not comprised within the scope of accepted beliefs. However, if the bias against the supernatural is removed, LH implies new suppositions about the past not included in accepted knowledge.

For instance, LH presupposes that what fulfills prophecies is unlikely to have been the result of a prophetic word but is a random occurrence. While this might be true in some instances, it remains implausible in other situations. In other words, LH entails that the church’s continued expansion prophesied in Luke 24:47 and Acts 1:8 through the empowerment of the promised Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8, John 16:7) who eventually came as predicted, are accidents. The issue with this statement is that the church only grew when the Holy Spirit was sent, who happened to have been promised beforehand. One can doubt the reality of the Holy Spirit, but the fact that people today accomplish what Christ had promised by claiming the Spirit’s power (John 14:12) undermines the legendary nature of Christianity. The present reality of the church makes it likely that the early proclaimed resurrection was caused by Christ’s resurrection. Since accepted truths such as scientific knowledge cannot disprove the possibility of miracles, Jesus’s resurrection does not conflict with accepted truths. In conclusion, RH is less ad hoc than LH.

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<sup>445</sup> McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 19.

The sixth criterion for justified belief is that the hypothesis must be disconfirmed by fewer accepted beliefs than its rival.<sup>446</sup> The two previous points regarding the flawed characterization of accepted beliefs also apply here. If one sets aside the unfounded assumption that miracles are impossible, RH does not have reasonable grounds for being rejected by accepted beliefs. Indeed, accepted beliefs such as scientific knowledge cannot rule out the possibility of miracles and therefore that of RH as the cause of the early proclamation of the resurrection. In contrast, LH is disconfirmed by the accepted belief that fabricated accounts cannot produce the fulfillment of prophetic words with tangible extraordinary effects in the world, and to the benefit of many.

The seventh criterion claims that the hypothesis must exceed its rival by so much from steps two to six that it leaves little chance for its rival to exceed it. The legend theory is far less tenable than the resurrection hypothesis, especially regarding the criterion of explanatory power. Either Christianity emerges from Christ's resurrection and is true, or it has been a legend from its inception to this day. Nevertheless, the present state of the church through the various works that Christ had promised and that are done in the name of the Spirit that He also had promised, all testify to the credibility of the early proclamation of the resurrection as having been caused by Christ's resurrection. Indeed, today's phenomena are a continuity of the early proclamation from Pentecost. The present state of affairs leaves the resurrection as the most adequate explanation and works its way backward. Indeed, it makes the Acts accounts likely to have occurred and emerged from the actual resurrection of Christ, and the disciples' claim of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances that preceded Pentecost more credible.

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<sup>446</sup> McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 19.

For this reason, Ehrman's description of the state of Christianity is flawed when he claims the following:

Christianity as we know it did not, in any event, spring into being overnight. It emerged over a long period of time, through a period of struggles, debates, and conflicts over competing views, doctrines, perspectives, canons, and rules. The ultimate emergence of the Christian religion represents a human invention—in terms of its historical and cultural significance, arguably the greatest invention in the history of Western civilization.<sup>447</sup>

The contemporary state of the church and the fact that it is founded on the same theology as in the very beginning after the Spirit came on Pentecost, hinder the credibility of Ehrman's assessment. Christianity has an extremely high probability of being the result of Christ's resurrection. Most importantly, Christ's resurrection manifests itself through the continued fulfillment of His promises and visions for His church across the world. Unlike other religions, Christianity cannot survive without the effects of the resurrection power of His founder in the person of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate deposit of His resurrection.

### **Further Criteria for Historical Justification**

It has been argued that the postmortem appearances and empty tomb are not sufficient conditions for the resurrection as a historical fact. However, a similar objection could be presented against the early proclamation of the resurrection. The research maintains that the early proclamation of the resurrection fares better than the two often-used facts when defending the resurrection's historicity. Indeed, the empty tomb and resurrection appearances reflect the belief of the disciples and a few other followers.

The same could be said about the early proclaimed resurrection by asserting that it only emerged from the mere belief of the first Christians who claimed to have received the Holy Spirit

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<sup>447</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 267-8.

starting Pentecost. Nevertheless, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the miraculous works that led to the exponential growth of the church had all been prophesied by Christ, thereby testifying to the likelihood of His resurrection.

The Holy Spirit could not be sent without Christ's resurrection and ascension (John 16:7, Act 1:8, Luke 24:46-9). Since the prophesied effects of the Spirit (John 14:16-7, Mark 16:15-9) eventually occurred as seen in Acts, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the resurrection took place and stands at the cause of its early proclamation after Christ's crucifixion. Most importantly, the events narrated in Acts find more solid grounds for the resurrection as their cause when evaluated in light of today's continued manifestations of the Spirit's works claimed in Christ's name. As Groothuis observes, "one necessary consequence of the resurrection of Jesus is the salvation, empowerment and success of the church throughout history."<sup>448</sup> He also adds that "the church itself stands as evidence for the resurrection of Jesus."<sup>449</sup>

The church's existence could not have occurred without the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in believers. Christ's predictions and promises for the church would not have come to pass without the Holy Spirit, and it was only after His coming that the church grew rapidly across the globe. Today's state of affairs reflects the necessary consequence of Christ's resurrection. Moreover, the continued miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit suffice to conclude that the resurrection has an extremely high probability of having occurred, been proclaimed early after Christ's death upon the promised Holy Spirit's arrival, and led to the birth and exponential growth of Christianity through that same Spirit.

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<sup>448</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 554.

<sup>449</sup> This citation is taken from the second edition of Douglas Groothuis' *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), ProQuest Ebook Central, 703.



The objection could be made that the Holy Spirit is too mysterious and invisible of an entity to be claimed as having any place in historical justifications. However, as chapter one of the research has attempted to show, supernatural entities are not impossible. Nothing in nature can demonstrate that God and supernatural entities do not exist, nor that miracles are impossibilities. Although the Holy Spirit is not visible, His actions are visible. One does not need to have received Him to recognize the supernatural phenomena performed by believers by relying on Him. Such works are more manifest in the form of charismatic acts as seen with the speaking and interpretation of tongues, miraculous healings, and fulfilled prophecies.

The continued works of the same Holy Spirit professed two millennia ago lead to infer Jesus's resurrection as the cause of its early proclamation since it emerged from the Holy Spirit's fulfilled coming and empowerment with tangible effects still occurring today. Today's state of affairs reinforces the likelihood that Jesus rose from the dead and that the Acts events reflect truthful matters. In that sense, the resurrection hypothesis fares significantly better than the legend hypothesis.

Despite reasonable grounds for inferring Jesus's resurrection as the best explanation for the observed phenomena, some objections can persist. As Licona and Van der Watt observe, the argument that historians cannot conclude that a miracle such as the resurrection has occurred is flawed. For instance, the principle of analogy is often used to state that events from the past do not differ from those of the present, and since there are no miracles in the present, there were none in the past.<sup>450</sup> This statement is fallacious on at least two levels. First, one can only know that no miracle has ever occurred by investigating each miracle report ever made, which is

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<sup>450</sup> Licona and Van der Watt, "Historians and Miracles," 58-9.

undoable.<sup>451</sup> Secondly, the presence or absence of miracles from one timeline does not transfer to another through a necessary connection. Additionally, miraculous events are happening today through various acts of supernatural healing, fulfilled prophecies, as well as speaking in the Spirit's language and interpreting it, oftentimes accompanied by prophetic words later fulfilled. In those instances, miraculous events of the present testify to the likelihood of miraculous events from the past, that is, Christ's resurrection.

One could also object that the resurrection's historicity is undermined by miracle claims from religions other than Christianity.<sup>452</sup> However, the continued actions of the Holy Spirit constitute a reasonable ground for claiming Christianity as extremely likely to be truthful. Regarding miracle claims in other religions, they do not necessarily disqualify Christianity from being truthful. Since Christ's desire is to save souls, He likely permits miracles in other religions to stir up the idea that there is more to life than the physical realm of things. On a different note, the past miracle reports in other religions do not equal those of Christianity in quality.<sup>453</sup> For instance, the overwhelming majority of scholars from all theological backgrounds claim that Jesus was a miracle worker.<sup>454</sup> Furthermore, His miracles are attested by early non-Christian sources such as Josephus and are found in every Gospel.<sup>455</sup> In contrast, Muhammad's miracles are not narrated in the Qur'an and appeared at a much later date.<sup>456</sup> Similarly, reports of Hanina

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<sup>451</sup> Licona and Van der Watt, "Historians and Miracles," 58-9.

<sup>452</sup> Michael Licona and J. G. Van der Watt, "The Adjudication of Miracles: Rethinking the Criteria of Authenticity," *HTS Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009): 66, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.130>.

<sup>453</sup> Licona and Van der Watt, "The Adjudication of Miracles," 66.

<sup>454</sup> Licona and Van der Watt, "Historians and Miracles," 57.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>456</sup> Licona and Van der Watt, "The Adjudication of Miracles," 66.

ben Dosa's miracles appeared 150 years later, unlike those of Jesus, which were narrated within thirty years.<sup>457</sup>

### **Solutions for a Successful Defense of the Resurrection's Historicity**

As McCullagh states, historians prefer hypotheses that imply a greater variety of evidence.<sup>458</sup> The resurrection hypothesis implies the church's continued empowerment, the ongoing salvation of many, and the persisting miraculous works of the Holy Spirit.<sup>459</sup> The legend theory fails to account for the persisting charismatic works performed by believers through an ultimate reliance on the Holy Spirit through the same theology professed two thousand years ago. Most importantly, the church's growth and the resilience it has had to this day were prophesied and promised by Christ. However, these promises only turned into realities after the predicted Holy Spirit came. Today's continuation of the Pentecost event is perhaps the most decisive and tangible element testifying to the truthfulness of all that precedes and its causation by Christ's resurrection.

In and of themselves, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances reflect the resurrection belief of the disciples and a small number of other individuals (Acts 1:15). Only the Holy Spirit turned them into effective witnesses and created the explosive growth of the resurrection faith. However, the persisting effects of the Holy Spirit especially through His miraculous works, render the disciples' early resurrection belief likely to have been caused by the actual resurrection. In that sense, the Holy Spirit's actions today make the empty tomb and postmortem appearances accounts more credible.

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<sup>457</sup> Licona and Van der Watt, "The Adjudication of Miracles," 66.

<sup>458</sup> McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 20.

<sup>459</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 554. The author even mentions the idea of "necessary consequence."

When defending the resurrection's historicity, one ought to focus on the most tangible phenomena that can be traced back to the resurrection as a historical fact. These phenomena comprise the charismatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing fulfillment of Christ's promises for His followers. Groothuis refers to these contemporary elements as being perhaps too "subjective."<sup>460</sup> Although the Holy Spirit's presence in believers is indeed felt in the first person and is not transferable to others, the actualization of traits promised to those who rely on him presents a solid indication of His reality and by extension of that of the resurrection. On that note, it is worth mentioning Groothuis' words:

Although it may be discounted as merely subjective, it should be remembered that Jesus and his apostles promised his followers abundant life (John 10:10), spiritual victory (Ephesians 6:10-18) and the advance of his kingdom through history on the basis of his life, death and resurrection (Matthew 19:18; 28:18-20). Without the death-defeating and life-conferring reality of his resurrection, these realities would not be available (1 Corinthians 15:14-19).<sup>461</sup>

The field of apologetics is primarily destined for skeptics and seeks to address the obstacles that hinder them from coming to faith in Christ. Although it is the Holy Spirit's task to save souls and transform them, Christ desires believers to use reasoning in their apologetic duties (1 Pet. 3:15-6). Such endeavors should strive to build bridges with skeptics and not add further intellectual hurdles. For this reason, it seems preferable to offer a line of defense of Christ's resurrection that emphasizes elements that are the most tangible and obvious to onlookers.

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<sup>460</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 554.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid. It is necessary to emphasize that although today's state of affairs is a necessary consequence of Christ's resurrection, it does not imply that the resurrection is historical or that Christianity is true. The implication of the first does not necessarily work conversely. Instead, one must look at today's state of affairs as part of a cumulative case for the resurrection and the reliability of Christianity. The research has emphasized the relevance of the early proclamation of the resurrection and its consequences in history in inferring the resurrection as the best possible explanation. As such, it makes the empty tomb and postmortem appearances claim stronger and more likely to have occurred. In that sense, all three cumulated facts confer a strong historical plausibility on the resurrection.

## Chapter Conclusion

The chapter has attempted to establish that the early proclamation of the resurrection represents the strongest evidence for the resurrection's historicity. The subsequent rapid expansion of the faith unfolded through the coming of the promised Holy Spirit whose works are still in action and tangible today. The explosive growth of the church is evidenced by biblical and early non-Christian independent sources. The legend theory is inadequate in accounting for such a phenomenon, especially when considering the ongoing manifestations Christ had promised through the Holy Spirit.

Two types of early resurrection proclamation characterized the beginning of Christianity. The first came through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances and affected a few. The second type was held by multitudes after the promised Holy Spirit's arrival on Pentecost and led to the exponential growth of the faith up to this day. Today's state of affairs provides reasonable grounds for believing that the Acts accounts reflect truthful events and that the resurrection belief of Christians starting Pentecost and even that of the disciples before them, were likely caused by Christ's actual resurrection. The continued success of the church stands as the most indicative of the adequacy of the resurrection hypothesis and strongly undermines the legend theory.

## Conclusion

The thesis is motivated by the need to solve a specific issue that some skeptics encounter when hearing the defense of Jesus's resurrection through an emphasis on His empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances. The study has identified two areas that can cause skeptics to doubt the resurrection's historicity when considering the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. The first deals with the empty tomb and the objection that although the disciples' theft theory is unconvincing, there exists an indefinite number of possibilities for what could have happened to Jesus's body other than His disciples' theft or His resurrection. The second deals with the postmortem appearances and the objection that although the hallucination theory is implausible since hallucinations are private events, the disciples and other witnesses could have been the recipients of a collective delusion. Indeed, reports of collective experiences of miracles have always been part of the world's affairs, as is the famous Miracle of the Sun phenomenon.

The study does not claim that such objections undermine Christianity or the historicity of Jesus's resurrection. However, it does recognize that these objections are not irrational for those who are not born-again Christians and who are striving to reconcile the empty tomb and postmortem appearances claims with the historicity of Jesus's resurrection. Although the research does not bear in mind skeptics who have decided they will not believe no matter the facts presented, it does show concern for those who are open to belief but who find themselves caught in the intellectual struggle mentioned above.

Moreover, the accounts of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances do not enjoy a solid historical attestation from early non-Christian sources. The empty tomb appears in the Christian accounts of Justin Martyr and Tertullian, although indirectly through the stolen body polemic. As for the postmortem appearances, they appear in the much-debated account of

Josephus, whose words are claimed to have been manipulated by a Christian scribe. An early non-Christian attestation is not necessary for defending the resurrection's historicity.

Nevertheless, skeptical audiences often object that the empty tomb and postmortem appearances are essentially derived from Scripture, or as Stephen Smith argues, "faith-based documents."<sup>462</sup>

The research has attempted to offer another pathway for defending the resurrection's historicity, yet without denying the plausibility and historicity of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. As the thesis has identified, Christian scholarship tends to leave aside a defense of the resurrection founded on contemporary and evidential elements traceable back to the early proclamation of Jesus's resurrection, which dates fifty days after His resurrection. The defense presented does not pretend that it has proved the resurrection, nor that it will necessarily convince the skeptics who find the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances unconvincing. The thesis has attempted to present another alternative to defending the resurrection's historicity, which is deemed a more suitable path for those who encounter difficulties with the empty tomb and postmortem appearances under the specific scope stated above.

When considering the scope of particular limitations previously delineated, the thesis claims that the early proclamation of the resurrection is a stronger candidate than the empty tomb and postmortem appearances for the resurrection's historicity, as it is correlated to a rapid expansion of the Christian faith that is better historically attested, tangible today, and best explained by Christ's resurrection. Instead, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances attest more to the resurrection belief of the earliest Christians who were the disciples and a few others (Acts 1:15) than to the resurrection as a historical fact. The first chapter of the study has offered answers to skeptics' objections to miracles through arguments from science and history. A

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<sup>462</sup> Smith, "Seeing Things," 690.

defense of the resurrection's historicity necessitates addressing whether miracles are possible and if they can be investigated by the historian. The chapter has argued that science cannot disprove the possibility of miracles such as Christ's resurrection. Science can only describe and predict natural phenomena through laws formulated from observed patterns. For this reason, miracles are outside the purview of science since they are by definition exceptions to the laws of nature. Historians are within their professional rights and abilities to investigate miracles and infer them as historical when providing the best explanation for an event or residue of the past.

Chapter One has also addressed two limitations that can occur in skeptics' minds regarding Jesus's empty tomb and the postmortem appearances, and the consequential hurdles for the resurrection to be inferred as their best explanation when it comes to these two specific objections. The minimal fact of the early proclamation of the resurrection has been declared of interest due to its traces of early dating within the New Testament documents, and its continued effects across history. Paul's letters contain several fragments that predate him and go back to earliest Christianity. Similarly, the Acts sermon summaries date within the 30s AD.

Although in and of itself the early declaration of Christ's resurrection does not establish the resurrection's historicity, it remains unlikely that a lie or legend may have been the cause for this proclamation. There was not enough time between Jesus's crucifixion and His resurrection being proclaimed for the latter to have been the result of lies or involuntary distortions, especially given the absence of background in ancient Judaism and pagan myths, and the reliability of the oral traditions that preserved the resurrection teachings. Moreover, the early dating of the declaration of Jesus's resurrection does not solely restrict itself to the disciples but also comprises the wave of the first Christians from the birth of the church at Pentecost and afterward. While the disciples' claim of Christ's resurrection was founded on their experience of



His empty tomb and postmortem appearances, the resurrection claim that emerged starting with Pentecost encompassed that of thousands (Acts 2:41).

Chapter Two has emphasized that the resurrection declaration from the disciples was more indicative of their belief in the resurrection than of the resurrection as a historical fact. Indeed, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances on which they relied for their assertion can present limitations regarding the resurrection's historicity: the empty tomb can be potentially explained by just about any theory outside the disciples' theft and the resurrection hypothesis, all of which cannot possibly be all vetted. As for the postmortem appearances, a type of hallucination under the bereavement category through a collective delusion remains a possibility to account for the appearances. Moreover, the lack of substantial attestation for the empty tomb and postmortem appearances from early non-Christian sources adds to the challenge faced by skeptics.

In contrast, the early proclamation of the resurrection is a more compelling fact when defending the resurrection as a historical fact. Josephus' first-century account claims that Jesus's followers had not given up on Him after His crucifixion, and that at the end of the first century, Christianity was fully established and growing. In his letter to emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger asserts that some Christians had told him they had given up on their faith several decades prior. Since Pliny the Younger writes at the beginning of the second century, it is reasonable to think that Christianity was already established much earlier, that is, in the first century. Josephus' and Pliny's writings display the presence of a high Christology among the Christians of their time, and emphasize that Christianity had been established for a long time and more likely soon after Jesus's crucifixion, as emphasized by Josephus' account.

The biblical attestation of Jesus's resurrection being declared at an early date is manifest in several Pauline fragments that seem to predate Paul (1 Cor. 8:6, Rom. 1:1-4, Phil. 2:5-11) and in multiple Acts sermons (Acts 2:14-40, 3:11-26, 4:5-12, 10:34-43, 13:16-41, 17:22-34). Not only was the resurrection proclaimed early after the crucifixion, but the church grew immediately after, thereby indicating that the Christian movement was birthed from original and non-legendary teachings. Most importantly, the resurrection belief and proclamation from Pentecost was born through the prophesied Holy Spirit's coming (Acts 2:1-4) and was marked by immediate effects of explosive growth of the faith (Acts 1:15, 2:41).

Chapter Three has defended that the rapid expansion of the Christian faith is best explained by Jesus's resurrection. Five early non-Christian sources testify about the rapid spread of Christianity: Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, and Lucian of Samosata. Furthermore, Paul's letters were addressed to churches already operating around a set of doctrines and a theology founded on high Christology as early as AD 48, that is, fifteen years after Jesus's crucifixion. If churches were already organized by then, one can infer that the resurrection belief and teachings dated early after Christ's death.

The church was not born nor grew through the empty tomb and postmortem appearances testimonies, but out of the actual coming of the prophesied Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit as a deposit of His resurrection and ascension (John 16:7), whose regenerative nature was also prophesied in the Old Testament (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:19, 36:26-7) and confirmed under the New Covenant (Heb. 10:15-6, 2 Cor. 3:3) through the theme of heart circumcision (Rom. 2:25-9, Col. 2:11-4, Phil. 3:3).

The reception of the Holy Spirit enabled an inner-felt confirmation of Christ's resurrection with external manifestations of this reality through the empowerment of Christ's

followers to perform miracles, as He had promised (John 14:12). The disciples were radically transformed only at Pentecost through the Spirit's indwelling presence, as displayed by Peter's first sermon (Acts 2:14-39). The most significant aspect of the Holy Spirit's arrival is that His effects have never ceased. Unlike the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, they are tangible and contemporary realities. Although one may not necessarily come to believe in the resurrection by observing miracles performed by relying on the Holy Spirit, they strongly point to the resurrection's reality and therefore remain compelling phenomena for any observer.

Even if today's state of affairs is the necessary consequence of the resurrection, it does not prove it. However, today's realities give reasonable grounds for claiming the Acts accounts as truthful, as well as the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Once one finds plausibility in today's events as being caused by the resurrection, it becomes less challenging to accept the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. In that sense, the early proclamation of the resurrection and its effects in history to this day, coupled with the likelihood of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, confer on the resurrection a high degree of historicity. Moreover, the legend theory fails to account for the fulfillment of the prophesied Holy Spirit's effects, and is particularly weak in terms of explanatory scope and power.

If the resurrection never took place, one ought to explain why today's Christianity is marked by the occurrence of supernatural phenomena performed through a reliance on the Holy Spirit who was first claimed fifty days after Christ's resurrection. Since the Holy Spirit is Christ's prophesied deposit (John 16:7) whose effects are manifest today, they are the most tangible elements of His resurrection. The Old Testament prophecies of the transformative nature of the Holy Spirit also add substantial weight to this claim. Today's state of affairs finds its origin at Pentecost, and it is only starting Pentecost that the resurrection proclamation affected no

longer a few as it had been the case under the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, but thousands overnight with an unending growth. Such growth is inseparable from the Holy Spirit's activity, and His prophetic status makes Christianity's rapid expansion different from that of other religions.

The research findings have emphasized the importance of utilizing current and observational phenomena in the defense of Jesus's resurrection. Skeptical audiences often need tangible elements, in part due to their naturalistic presuppositions and their rejection of the supernatural. Although the thesis is motivated by the lack of consideration given to empirical realities when defending Christ's resurrection, it does not imply that the empty tomb and postmortem appearances should not be used as part of a cumulative case for the resurrection's historicity.

When it comes to the two limitations some skeptics encounter regarding the empty tomb and postmortem appearances, a possible way forward would be to study their claimed emergence from eyewitness testimony, which was preserved through reliable oral traditions.<sup>463</sup> Although the present research has emphasized the importance of using tangible elements when addressing skeptics, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances claims become tangible phenomena if their transmission can be established as being the fruit of eyewitnesses whose accounts were transmitted through protected oral transmissions before the New Testament texts were written.

Although the thesis essentially addressed a specific issue that can arise among skeptics while taking into consideration their naturalistic presuppositions and disbelief in the supernatural, its findings can be beneficial to all audiences. The defense of Christ's resurrection

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<sup>463</sup> On this matter, Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, would be of great importance when considering this specific research.

often tends to solely focus on events of the past while overlooking the most present and tangible evidence, which can also be traced back to the very beginning of Christianity. For this reason, it would seem to be of great benefit to employ an apologetic method comprised of both remote and present facts.

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