

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY, HISTORICAL JESUS STUDIES, AND MIRACLES:
THREE ROADBLOCKS TO RESURRECTION RESEARCH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
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LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA
MAY 2020

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THREE ROADBLOCKS TO RESURRECTION RESEARCH

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are too many people to name that have contributed in some way to this work. People have assisted in this project in a variety of ways that range from offering an encouraging word to technical academic engagement. To everyone who has contributed in any way there is a deep sense of gratitude, appreciation, and love for you.

I do want to single out my wife Rachel, however, and thank her specifically. She has encouraged me all along the way. She has endured the taking on of additional tasks so I could work on this project. She has been excited to see the results of this work and to see its completion. I'm very thankful and grateful for all that she does. I love you very much!

ABSTRACT

Jesus' resurrection is considered by many to be a historical event, but objections are often raised regarding to such inquiry into the past. Philosophy of history is thus an important field in which various roadblocks to resurrection research have been raised. These philosophical questions related to the study of the Jesus' resurrection have become more prominent recently and seek to undermine the very act of historical inquiry into Jesus' resurrection specifically and the past more generally. Accordingly, the issues addressed here have implications beyond resurrection research.

This work seeks to identify and assess three common roadblocks to such research. The first is the question related to the subjectivity historian and whether or not they can have objective knowledge of the past or whether our knowledge of the past is ultimately a mere construction of the historian. We note that both are possible and that what differentiates objective knowledge of the past or a construction of the past is whether or not virtues or vices have been cultivated by the historian. Second, since we can have knowledge of the past, two ways in which it is possible for one to have this knowledge of the past are then presented. We present the Minimal Facts Approach as one possible avenue and note the application of various historical criteria as a second. These are not the only two methods, but two that we believe to provide secure historical knowledge. Lastly, we argue that historians could, in principle, conclude that a miracle has occurred. After offering some philosophical analysis of the issue of miracles and the historian's craft, we identify and assess to objections to our conclusion.

We ultimately conclude that these are more like bumps in the road rather than actual roadblocks that prevent investigation into the past. They should be considered in historical

inquiry, but they certainly do not prevent one from investigating Jesus' resurrection in particular or the past in general.

CHAPTER ONE: THREE ROADBLOCKS TO RESURRECTION RESEARCH

There are three major challenges to answering that question [what led to the disciples' belief that Jesus rose from the dead?]. First, there is the question of whether historians have the proper tools to enable them to investigate an event that is miraculous in nature. The second pertains to the general ability of historians to learn about the past, given the many challenges they face with such an enterprise. And, finally, a few scholars have recently questioned the effectiveness of tools commonly employed by historians of Jesus known as the criteria of authenticity.¹

- Mike Licona

As one of the central claims of Christianity, Jesus' resurrection raises a significant number of historical questions. Was Jesus actually alive just a short time after being publicly crucified? Was the event considered to be historical by its earliest believers? Is it the type of event that only a Christian would accept as historical? Is it an event that skeptics reject as having occurred simply because they are not Christians? Does one's biases, either as a believer or skeptic, make their assessment of the past invalid? Do contradictory opinions about the resurrection show that we cannot know what actually occurred and that each explanation is simply a reflection of one's biases? How can one go about knowing anything historical about the events surrounding the end of Jesus' life? Must one accept the Bible as inerrant/inspired to accept the resurrection as historical? Can historians investigate miracle claims like the resurrection or does that belong to the realm of theology? What is the relationship, if any, between history and theology?

Such questions are as old as the reports of the resurrection itself and have not lost their significance today. For example, in a recent 2019 book on the historical Jesus titled *Jesus, Skepticism, and the Problem of History*, scholars raised many of these questions and did so not

¹ Michael R. Licona, "Jesus's Resurrection, Realism, and the Role of Criteria," in *Jesus, Skepticism and the Problem of History: Criteria and Context in the Study of Christian Origins*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and J. Ed Komoszewski (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 285.

just in regard to Jesus' resurrection in particular, but also to the life of Jesus and early church.²

Michael Licona's chapter specifically seeks to address three historical questions which he believes can be "major challenges" to belief in the resurrection.³ For him, these three issues are (1) whether historians can investigate purported miraculous events; (2) can one know the past in light of our differing historical-cultural contexts; and (3) whether the criteria are valid tools for knowing past events.

These three questions are, coincidentally, the very same three questions we came to believe as important to current historical investigations into whether or not Jesus rose from the dead independently of Licona. Instead of a chapter long treatment of all three questions, however, we will dedicate a chapter to each of these issues in an effort to add greater nuance and clarity, address reasonable concerns, and, hopefully, provide a way to advance the discussion. These three issues are all important and should be considered, but they do not provide an *a priori* objection to the inquiry of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection

We will be addressing these issues in a slightly different order than Licona. The questions we will be examining are the following (stated in their broadest sense):

- *Can* we know the past in light of our biases (i.e. our historical-cultural settings)?
- *How* can we know the past?
- *Can* we know a miracle has occurred in the past in light of historical methods?

² Darrell L. Bock and J. Ed Komoszewski, eds., *Jesus, Skepticism and the Problem of History: Criteria and Context in the Study of Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019).

³ Licona, "Jesus's Resurrection, Realism, and the Role of Criteria."

Recently other authors have been recognizing similar challenges to the study of the past in general and Jesus' resurrection in particular. Indeed, these issues are an underlying thread among the differing authors of *Jesus, Skepticism and the Problem of History*.⁴

An Outline of the Present Approach

The present project will dedicate a chapter to exploring each of the three issues mentioned above. It will do so by frequently “zooming in” on how these issues affect Jesus' resurrection in particular to “zooming out” and observing how they also affect history in general (e.g. historical Jesus studies and beyond). Thus, sometimes the discussion will be more tightly focused on Jesus' resurrection while at other times the questions surrounding Jesus' resurrection will function as a microcosm of larger issues also facing historical inquiry more generally and still at other times we will start with broader principles before “zooming in” to issues of Jesus' resurrection.

The first challenge considered is whether, and to a degree how, one can know the past given the limited and subjective nature of human inquirers. Although recent objections by postmodern critics have suggested that history is merely a reflection of the author, it will be argued that the subjective nature of the inquirer is *essential* to obtaining objective knowledge about the past. However, *to an extent* these critics are correct in that it is possible our biases can distort our evaluation of the past and that some have indeed used history as a means to further their own interests. It will, then, be argued that the subjective nature of the inquirer will affect their historical inquiry. The question is not *whether* it will, but *how* it will affect their work. We argue that it can affect one's research positively or negatively by identifying three virtues and

⁴ Similar concerns could also be identified, with the exception of the question regarding historians and miracles, in Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

three vices of the subjective role of the historian. Ultimately, when one is virtuous in their investigation of the past, they can have objective knowledge of the past despite the fact that they are doing so as a subjective inquirer from a limited historical-cultural perspective. Contrarily, one who has cultivated vices are more likely to present distorted descriptions of the past. Thus, we can know the past despite our limitations, and this is done by fostering and developing certain (epistemic and moral) virtues.

The second challenge moves logically from the first. If one can know the past, then one may reasonably ask, “How does one acquire knowledge about the past?” In this section, two avenues are presented in which one may begin to secure knowledge about the past. These are not the only ways, but they are two effective means by which someone can proceed. The first presents the “Minimal Facts Approach” (MFA) which we believe yields some of the strongest, if not *the* strongest, facts about the past. It will be argued that this is an effective method in beginning to investigate the past since it uses data that is (1) highly evidenced and (2) widely agreed upon by a diverse group of scholars. As such, it seeks multiple lines of evidence (i.e. arguments for how one can know a past event occurred) and agreement among scholars with differing, even contradictory, worldviews.

After considering the MFA, one may wonder what some of these multiple lines of evidence are or what is it that convinces scholars of these facts. One answer to both of these questions, as well as an answer to how we may know a past event occurred, is the use of historical criteria that are typically referred to as the criteria of authenticity. These criteria add probability to the historicity of a claimed event. Lastly, a brief examination into the claim that Jesus was crucified will be used as a test case for the criteria.

The third and final challenge investigates whether historians can conclude that a miracle occurred. Here we build off the first section and discuss that the virtues of an open and free methodology should allow the historian to investigate such claims. We do not argue for any miracle claim in particular, but rather argue that the historian would be within their epistemic rights to investigate such claims and it is possible that they could conclude a miracle has occurred if the evidence warrants it. We reach this conclusion by noting the failures of methodological naturalism and discussing the fact that historians already examine the actions and intentions of agents (including non-human agents) in order to show that the historian could identify the action of a divine agent given the right constellation of evidence.

It is believed that these three issues, if not properly addressed, could be used as *a priori* roadblocks to investigating the past in general and the resurrection of Jesus in particular.⁵ We thus want to clarify these issues in greater detail in order to allow for a free and open examination of the past in general and Jesus' resurrection in particular. We do not provide an argument regarding the actual historicity of the resurrection here but are seeking primarily to show that the door should be open and allow for engagement. Such engagement with the question is of vital importance for both believers and unbelievers alike as there is much at stake (1 Cor 15:12-19).

⁵ As noted, these issues are not strictly related to Jesus' resurrection or historical Jesus research in general. With the exception of the issue of miracle claims, Alan Spitzer helpfully discusses how some of these issues affect historical assessments in Alan B. Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies About the Past: Reflections on Dewey, Dreyfus, de Man, and Reagan* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORIAN AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST

The historical skepticism ignited by the careful study of the texts has been fueled by the multiplicity of diverse portraits of Jesus constructed by scholars, ranging from a fairly traditional understanding of Jesus as a servant and Son of God to Jesus as a political revolutionary, or as one who expected the immediate end of the world, or as the center of a mushroom cult. These widely divergent portraits, all claiming to be based on the use of an objective historical method, have reinforced the notion that we really cannot know much about Jesus at all, and the corollary notion that it is possible to construct almost any portrait of Jesus one wishes.⁶

-Marcus Borg

Rather than describing what occurred in the past, historians can be accused of constructing the past. One may consider such an objection as a “historical roadblock” since calls into question our ability to know past events more generally and the questions about Jesus and the resurrection more specifically.⁷ This chapter will argue that the subjective influences of the historian can positively (virtues) or negatively (vices) affect those investigating the past. Although we are subjective beings, we still have the epistemic ability to know objective truths about the past.⁸ Our conclusion will emphasize that historical knowledge is adequate, fallible,

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision—Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 9–10.

⁷ Indeed, the issue of the subjective nature of historical work has become so significant that in one recent work on the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, a scholar devoted over seventy pages to this topic Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 29–107. N. T. Wright devotes a few pages in his book in N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 3–31. However, this is the third volume in his series. In the first volume he dedicates almost 150 pages to the topic in N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 3–144.

⁸ When referring to subjectivity (or subjective elements, influences etc.) in this paper it can be used in a variety of ways and with different connotations. Anthony Thiselton’s comments may be helpful here. “To be sure, *pre-understanding* is a *negotiable* and *provisional* starting point, for which the word ‘presupposition’ may sometimes be misleading since it often seems to suggest fixed beliefs that cannot be changed.” He continues, “Nevertheless, the idea of *interest* goes even further than pre-understanding, because it denotes a specific kind of pre-understanding, namely, that which serves *self-interest* especially in terms of *power*, self-affirmation, or the gratification of desire by the self.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 32 (emphasis in original). The subjective influences of the historian will vary, and it will thus be best to understand whether we are using the word positively or negatively depending upon the context. Additionally, subjectivity could also refer to presently held probabilistic beliefs, personality traits, dispositions, and even moral

probabilistic and provisional which ultimately affirms that one can examine the past in general and the resurrection in particular (at least in principle).⁹

We will accomplish our goal by looking at how the issue of subjectivity has especially been raised in historical Jesus studies as well in the even broader discipline of history and other disciplines in general.¹⁰ From here we will note that those inquiring into a given research topic will have to wrestle with the reality that their limited and subjective position as an inquirer can be used as a virtue or a vice. We will highlight how the virtues of the inquirer are able to yield greater understanding and that those that are directed by vices are likely to distort the past. Thus, we will conclude that knowledge of the past is attainable and consequently so is, in principle, answers to the question regarding Jesus and whether Jesus died and rose again.

The “Bad Joke” of Historical Jesus Research

There have been an enormous number of attempts to write a historical account of Jesus’ life using strictly critical methods over the last few centuries. The late British classicist Michael Grant noted in his own depiction of Jesus that people “have been attempting to write lives of Jesus for a very long time. There have been more of them than of any other man or woman in history; 60,000 were written in the nineteenth century alone.”¹¹ Given Jesus’ impact, especially

outlooks. We should note that discussions on various types of bias (e.g. confirmation bias, anchoring bias, cognitive dissonance, etc.) will not be discussed directly or treated in depth, but some allusions to them will be made.

⁹ The question of whether the historian can investigate miracle claims as the third roadblock to investigating the question of Jesus’ resurrection.

¹⁰ While other considerations regarding postmodernism would be helpful, they are beyond the scope of this present work. For a helpful survey of the issues and how they relate to the issue of objective truth in general and historical truth in particular see Stewart E. Kelly, *Truth Considered and Applied: Examining Postmodernism, History, and Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011).

¹¹ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian’s Review of the Gospels* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 197. Hugh Anderson estimates “sixty thousand biographies” have been produced by liberal Protestant theologians. Hugh Anderson, *Jesus* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 16. Warren Kissinger humorously references John 21:25 regarding this plethora of publications. Warren S. Kissinger, *The Lives of Jesus: A History and Bibliography*

in Western culture, it may be unsurprising that so much attention has been given to studying His life. What has been surprising, however, is that these countless studies “have come to extraordinarily divergent conclusions.”¹²

The problem of “competent and even eminent scholars producing pictures of Jesus at wide variance with one another” has notably been referred to as “something of a scholarly *bad joke*” by NT scholar John Dominic Crossan.¹³ He believes that the “stunning diversity is an academic embarrassment.”¹⁴ Crossan’s comments can leave one wondering what explains the plurality of conflicting historical reconstructions, especially if one aspect of history is to present the “objective” truth about events that have occurred in the past.

Throughout the twentieth century scholars have sought to explain this “stunning diversity” by placing the blame on the *historian*. In 1906 Albert Schweitzer, who wrote one of

(New York: Garland, 1985), 3. NT scholars Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright observed that the period between 1860-1900 alone produced a significant number of diverse lives of Jesus. Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986*, New Ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 120. James Charlesworth points out that the number of volumes continued to expand throughout the mid-1900s. James H. Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” in *Images of Jesus Today*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 1. More recently the German scholar Gerhard Lohfink noted that “since the time of the Enlightenment the gospels have been dissected as no other text of the world’s literature has been.” Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 1.

¹² Grant, *Jesus*, 1. It should be noted here that there is a difference between a multitude of descriptions is not *inherently* a bad thing. See, for example, the comments in Beth M. Sheppard, *The Craft of History and the Study of History* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 16–18. For similar comments about a multitude of descriptions, but in disagreement about the imposition of the historian, see Walter P. Weaver, “In Quest of the Quest: Finding Jesus,” in *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perceptions*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, Brian Rhea, and Petr Pokorny, The Second Princeton-Prague Symposium on Jesus Research 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014), 29. The difference that we are highlighting here is between a plurality of historical descriptions and a plurality of *mutually exclusive* (and thus contradictory) descriptions.

¹³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), xxvii (emphasis added). Similarly Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 8-9 (“To the outsider, theories about Jesus must seem to crisscross each other to create a maze of contradictions. For the portraits... are to large degree not complementary but contradictory.”).

¹⁴ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxviii.

the most influential works on the historical Jesus, observed that the “professedly historical Jesus is not a purely historical figure, but one which has been artificially transplanted into history....What is admitted as historic is just what the Spirit of the time can take out of the records in order to assimilate it to itself and bring out of it a living form.”¹⁵ Later, in 1913, George Tyrell famously charged Adolf von Harnack of searching for the historical Jesus at the bottom of a deep well only to find the reflection of his own “Liberal Protestant face.”¹⁶ While, in 1923, A. C. Headlam recognized that “a cause of failure in many scholars” is that “instead of following their texts, they allow themselves to be overpowered by some mastering idea, and then pour the history into that mould....Many strands of varied colour are woven together into the Gospel narrative, and we do not explain it by allowing ourselves to see only one colour.”¹⁷ In the middle of the twentieth century, German scholar Günther Bornkamm stated that it had become “alarmingly and terrifyingly evident” that historians would inevitably bring the “spirit of his own age into his presentation of the figure of Jesus.”¹⁸

These observations have persisted in recent years. In 1991 the historian John P. Meier echoed Tyrell when he observed that there are a “legion of scholars who have peered

¹⁵ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 309. Schweitzer opens his work by describing the Jesus produced by historians as a “kaleidoscope figure” (vii).

¹⁶ George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1913), 44. Tyrell’s notable phrase is one that continues to be used by scholars. See, for example, Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁷ Arthur C. Headlam, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus the Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 164.

¹⁸ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James M. Robinson, (NY: Harper and Row, 1960), 13. German version Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus von Nazareth* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1956).

narcissistically into the pool of the historical Jesus only to see themselves.”¹⁹ Crossan, in 1993, observed that it is “impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.”²⁰ Grant similarly, in 1995, wrote that historians have been unable “to dissociate themselves from their own environment and age, these writers have all superimposed upon the history of the first century AD something which more properly belongs to their own time.”²¹ While in 1998 scholars Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz argued that the “multiplicity of pictures of Jesus is reason to suspect that they are in reality self-portraits of their authors.”²²

Similar explanations continue in the twenty-first century. In 2009 NT scholar Craig Keener pointed out that Jesus scholarship is “often driven by scholars’ assumptions, which are in turn often the product of the ideas dominant in their own era. Biographers and historians addressing other ancient figures might interpret their subjects sympathetically, but Jesus scholarship has developed this tendency more than most.”²³ While in 2014 Daniel Moore

¹⁹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: The Roots and the Problem of the Person, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 3.

²⁰ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxviii. See also Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York : Toronto: Scribner Book Company, 1993), 5.

²¹ Grant, *Jesus*, 197. Similarly Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright observed that in 1860-1900 a significant number of diverse subjective lives of Jesus were produced. Neill and Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986.*, 120.

²² Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 13.

²³ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 3. Allison asks “Which Jesus should baptize our theology?” Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, 9. Luke Timothy Johnson similarly notes a connection between historical realities for theological conclusions Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Go* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 55. Similarly See also pg. 48.

observed that this “penchant to reduce Jesus to a mirror image of the reconstructor is a constant hazard and dogged critique of the historical Jesus quest.”²⁴

Beyond Historical Jesus Research, Beyond History

As this survey indicates, historical Jesus studies have been concerned about historians who *inappropriately impose* themselves into their historical work.²⁵ The situation is similar for historians beyond this specialization. Indeed, in 1934 the socio-political historian Charles Beard rhetorically asked: “Has it not been said *for a century or more* that each historian who writes history is a product of his age, and that his work reflects the spirit of the times, of a nation, race, group, class or section?”²⁶ Two notable thinkers during the period referenced by Beard were Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884).²⁷ These issues have been debated more recently by thinkers such as Hayden White and Richard Evans.²⁸

Long before these discussions, ancient writers were similarly not oblivious to these problems nor their negative consequences. Thucydides prefaces his work by noting a concern

²⁴ Daniel F. Moore, “Jesus, an Emerging Jewish Mosaic,” in *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perceptions*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, Brian Rhea, and Petr Pokorny, The Second Princeton-Prague Symposium on Jesus Research 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014), 71.

²⁵ The key phrase here is *inappropriately imposing*. There are appropriate assumptions that can be made by the historian. As will be seen, this phrase will be important throughout the chapter. For a discussion of inappropriate impositions see Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 34, 89. For a description of appropriate assumptions for the historian see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 156.

²⁶ Charles A. Beard, “Written History as an Act of Faith,” *The American Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (1934): 220 (emphasis added).

²⁷ Michael Maclean, for example, points out that Droysen “frequently cites the tendency of historians to read their own ideas into the past as one of the greatest dangers facing the discipline.” Michael J. Maclean, “Johann Gustav Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics,” *History and Theory* 21, no. 3 (1982): 361. For an overview of these debates see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, Third Edition*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 228–47, 268–290.

²⁸ Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Fulcrum.Org* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000). One may find the older debate between the following two helpful as well. E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961); G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967).

that his own potential impressions of an event could be distorted while also pointing out the partiality of some of his sources.²⁹ Polybius recognizes the biases of Philinus and Fabius and adds that historians should not shrink from criticizing friends or complimenting enemies when reporting the truth of the past.³⁰ Plutarch provides a discussion on how to delineate between historical works that show signs of being affected by prejudice and those that attempt to be more objective.³¹ Tacitus recognized that the truth of history can be damaged or impaired (*infracta*) due to one's biases and partiality (typically due to flattery or hatred).³² Both Josephus and Lucian similarly identified the temptation of selfishness, especially flattery, as an inhibitor to the truth of the past.³³ These ancient writers knew very well that the historians could present one-sided, partial, or even blatantly false descriptions of the past.³⁴ These concerns were also noted by early Christian writers as well.³⁵

²⁹ Thucydides, *History*, 1.22. See also Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Letter to Gnaeus Pompeius*, 3-4 who views Thucydides as being biased towards Athens, causing him to enlarge failures and omit victories.

³⁰ Polybius, *Histories*, 1.14; 12.25. Similarly, Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 21.17.1-3 (complains against Timaeus for adding bad qualities and ignoring successes).

³¹ Plutarch, *On the Malice of Herodotus*. See also, for example, where Plutarch refers to Antiphon's noted unfair hatred and abuse of Alcibiades (Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 3.1).

³² Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.1.

³³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, Pref.1; Lucian, *How to Write History*, 13, 41.

³⁴ Lucian shares a notable account where a historian tried to flatter Alexander by including a fictitious battle into the historical report. The historian's reward, however, was that he was threatened to be tossed into the Hydaspes River for presuming to fight battles for Alexander! Lucian, *How to Write History*, 12.

³⁵ For example, Irenaeus of Lyons complained against Gnostics for their distorted description of Jesus. He writes that "Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should re-arrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1. See also Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 7.4 [cf. 1.18]). The Gnostics, according to Irenaeus, had turned the image of Jesus and Christianity into a reflection of their own creation. More recently, Kevin Vanhoozer has noted an interesting connection between early Gnosticism and postmodernity. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 120-21.

The problem regarding the improper influence of the inquiring subject and preconceived conceptual frameworks into their “object of inquiry” is not restricted to history but extends itself into other disciplines as well.³⁶ For example, in the middle of the twentieth century two notable works were written in which the authors highlighted how subjective factors that played a valuable part in advancing (or rejecting) scientific theories. In his book *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958), Michael Polanyi argued strongly that the subjective component of the scientist was essential to their work but also a potential cause for error.³⁷ While Thomas Kuhn’s famous *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) emphasized that the horizons of scientists impacted their work in a way much more significant than was generally believed.³⁸

These comments illustrate how scholars writing at different times, in different contexts, and even in different disciplines have identified a significant factor that has been persistently tempting scholars and distorting conclusions.³⁹ Historians, as well as those in other disciplines,

³⁶ As a result of this, throughout this work we will refer to the broadest possible: “object of inquiry.” The reason for this is that our approach is not solely limited to history and we want to keep that in mind throughout the work, but since our main focus is the historical component often times when we refer to the historian’s “object of inquiry” in will generally refer to a written source. For more see fn. 61 below.

³⁷ For some of his most valuable discussions on interpretations and science see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974 [1958]), 3, 11, 19–20, 60, 138, 142–43, 150–60, 265, 268, 286–94. More recently, the atheist philosopher of science Bradley Monton repeatedly identified aspects of subjectivity (as well as distinct bias and prejudice) affecting current scientific discussions. Bradley Monton, *Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design* (Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press, 2009), 48–49, 51–52, 59, 64–5 71–2.

³⁸ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1962]). He notes that “one of the things a scientific community acquires with a paradigm is a criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions” (37). Of course, these paradigms have the potential to “insulate the community” from important questions “because they cannot be stated in terms of the conceptual and instrumental tools the paradigm supplies” (37). Another interesting work in this area is by Bernard Barber who identifies three cultural influences and three social influences that affect scientists and, subsequently, the scientific advancements. Bernard Barber, “Resistance by Scientists to Scientific Discovery,” *Science* 134, no. 3479 (1961): 596–602.

³⁹ Many of these comments predate the recent and major postmodern movements of the 1970s. Timothy McGrew finds little benefit from recent discussions on postmodernism and argues, more strongly, when he writes

must avoid the belief that they can study their object of inquiry (e.g. the past, chemistry, etc.) as though they do not have worldview or paradigm.⁴⁰ Not only is such a belief the very first fallacy in David Hackett Fischer's classic *Historians' Fallacies* ("Baconian Fallacy"), but also because it is *impossible do so*.⁴¹

Importantly, despite the claims of some, this emphatically does *not* mean that therefore all truth is relative, all interpretations are equally true, or all historical descriptions are equally true.⁴² Rather, many historians have recognized a balanced synthesis that takes objective and

that scholars of the "stature of J. B. Lightfoot [for example] do not need the nattering of would-be literary critics infected with bad epistemology to teach them to be judicious." Timothy J McGrew, "Inference, Method, and History," *Southeastern Theological Review* 3, no. 1 (2012): 27.

⁴⁰ Worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, is the broadest term that encompasses all our beliefs. Although sometimes other words may be used in place of worldview, we are using it here in the sense that it our fundamental beliefs about the world. These sorts of beliefs buildup various horizons, conceptual frameworks, biases, presuppositions, paradigms, and preconceived notions within one's worldview. From these fundamental beliefs we interpret the world around us. Simultaneously, the world around us can also inform our worldview. Within one's worldview, we hold to various beliefs with different levels of certainty and probability, but sometimes probabilistic beliefs can be held so tightly that they become certain beliefs in practice (i.e. they *only* interpret the world and are not open to revision or reevaluation) or because have a blind spot that prevents us from recognizing that such views can be revised or reevaluated. Thus, one's worldview does not just depend upon or is shaped by fundamental epistemological assumptions, but it is also affected by probabilistic beliefs that have also shaped one's worldview to some degree. Additionally, although the terms conceptual framework, paradigm, and preconceived notions may have different connotations (i.e. "paradigm" may frequently be associated with the sciences vis-à-vis Kuhn), they will be used synonymously in the sense described above. In short, worldview refers to an entire web of beliefs while the other phrases refer to a portion of the web and how its interconnected to other beliefs and contributes to the entire web of beliefs. We will be arguing that both the web and the interconnectedness between beliefs within the web should not be improperly imposed when conducting an inquiry. For more information on worldviews see famously James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). For a recent overview on the definition of worldview, see James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 23–69.

⁴¹ David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 4–8. Carl Trueman writes that "we must acknowledge at the outset that history written without a standpoint is not simply practically impossible—it is also logically inconceivable." Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 26. Michael Grant reminds us that it was just a futile for ancients to attempt to write histories devoid of a perspective. Michael Grant, *Greek and Roman Historians: Information and Misinformation* (London: NY: Routledge, 1995), 68.

⁴² David Hackett Fischer lists five objections to the idea of such relativizing history in a footnote as he believes such a view has been "sufficiently exposed." Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 41–43 (esp. 42 fn. 4). These errors include: confusion between the way knowledge is acquired and validating that knowledge; relativism conflates being incomplete with being false; false distinctions between history and natural sciences; believe that relativist supporters are exempt from the charge of relativism and thus inconsistent; relativist uses of subjectivity are literal nonsense. For fuller treatments see, Evans, *In Defense of History*; C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Perez Zagorin, "History, The Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism

subjective components seriously when studying the past.⁴³ As the historian Thomas Haskell rightly observed, one ought not to confuse *objectivity with neutrality*.⁴⁴

Subjectivity: A Hypostatic Union with Objectivity?

N. T. Wright helpfully reminds us that to “discover that a particular writer has a ‘bias’ tells us nothing whatever about the value of the information he or she presents. It merely bids us be aware of the bias (and of our own, for that matter), and to assess the material according to as many sources as we can.”⁴⁵ There are a number of factors that all contribute to the historian’s “bias” which legitimately shape the selection, arrangement, and description of past events.

Now,” *History & Theory* 38, no. 1 (February 1999): 1–24; Thomas L. Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*,” *History & Theory* 29, no. 2 (May 1990): 129–57; Perez Zagorin, “Rejoinder to a Postmodernist,” *History & Theory* 39, no. 2 (May 2000): 201–9; Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 79–89 (esp. 86–87).

⁴³ Gary Habermas notes that since around the middle of the twentieth century historians have accepted a synthetic approach whereby historians explicitly sought to take both objective and subjective elements into account. Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub., 1996), 265. Fischer addressed the issues of extreme objectivity and extreme subjectivity as older problems which occasionally resurface. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 4–8, 41–43.

⁴⁴ Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality,” 134; Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies*, 27–28, 30, 66. One might similarly suggest that having bias is not the same as being biased.

⁴⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:89 (emphasis added). Trueman writes “it is not a historian’s motivation which renders his or her analysis invalid; it is improper use and interpretation of evidence which does so” (Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies*, 30). Early, Gary R. Habermas likewise wrote that “it is undeniable that everyone generally operates within his or her own concept of reality and usually views information through multicolored lenses.” Gary R. Habermas, “Did Jesus Perform Miracles?,” in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 126. Jewish NT scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes “bias in scholarship is inevitable and, more, it need not be a deterrent to good historical work: one can be biased and correct” (Amy-Jill Levine, “Christian Faith and the Study of the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 [January 2011]: 97). Haskell writes that “among the influential members of the historical profession the term objectivity has long since lost whatever connection it may once have had with passionlessness, indifference, and neutrality.” Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality,” 131. He adds, similar to Levine, that polemicists could, for example, be objective so long as they properly engage their opponents (135). Paul Barnett likewise finds that “subjectivity does not imply falsehood.” Paul Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 5. James Tabor notes, “All historians come to their investigations with selective criteria of judgment forged by both acknowledged and unrecognized predisposed interests and cultural assumptions. There is no absolutely objective place to stand.” James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 316. Joel Willitts similarly views subjectivity as something that can be positive. Joel Willitts, “Presuppositions and Procedures in the Study of the ‘Historical Jesus’: Or, Why I Decided Not to Be a ‘Historical Jesus’ Scholar,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 1 (January 2005): 101.

Cambridge Historian Richard Evans writes that it is “an illusion to believe otherwise.”⁴⁶ The fact that historians (and their sources) cannot escape their own historical-cultural setting is something that good historians recognize and take into account.⁴⁷

Historians need to “be aware” of a number of different worldviews or paradigms that can affect their work. They must not only deal with (1) their own personal points of view, but also those of (2) their sources and (3) other scholars who have also written on that topic as well (4) possible new vantage points from which to evaluate the data and even (5) the audience to whom they will be writing. These five areas could be further subdivided into additional categories, but the main point is that all of these factors place high demands on this historian, but such are the demands of wise judgment and good history which properly take into account the rich complexities of the past.⁴⁸

No one person has a “God’s eye” point of view (i.e. exhaustive knowledge of all factors involved from every perspective) of the past or the present. This has led some historians to use photographs as an analogy to historical descriptions in order to help illustrate that our

⁴⁶ Evans, *In Defense of History*, 217. Historian Carl R. Trueman writes that “it seems to be obvious (though it is paraded as some sort of profound, brilliant insight by too many these days) that no historian writes a neutral history and thus that every historical narrative reflects the author’s own approach in some measure, both as to selection of evidence, shaping of story, and various emphases and purposes.” Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies*, 66. See also 21, 25, 62.

⁴⁷ W. H. Walsh, “The Limits of Scientific History,” in *Philosophical Analysis & History*, ed. William H. Dray, Sources in Contemporary Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 73. In another essay, Walsh provides four “factors which actually make for disagreement among historians” and they are: personal likes and dislikes; prejudices and assumptions; conflicting theories of historical interpretation; and different moral beliefs and anthropologies. W. H. Walsh, “Can History Be Objective?,” in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time: An Anthology*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 216–17. In 1934, Beard wrote that “Every student of history knows that his colleagues have been influenced in their selection and ordering of materials by their biases, prejudices, beliefs, affections, general upbringing, and experience particularly social and economic.” Beard, “Written History as an Act of Faith,” 220. More recently James Dunn argues that “critical scholarship is never critical enough unless it is also *self-critical* and with equal vigour.” James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 34 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁸ We should add to these challenges that the complexities of the past are exacerbated when the historian must judge between competing “voices” of the past according to their different sources.

epistemological limitations are *limitations* and not epistemological *eliminations*. Despite our limitations, we can still obtain, albeit partial, knowledge of the past. Just as each photo is taken from an angle or vantage point, so too is each historical work written (or read) from a perspective.⁴⁹ Photographs are able to nevertheless present objective and truthful information despite the fact that it is taken from a subjective position which is inherently limited. It is similar with historical descriptions. In 1961 E. H. Carr argued that it “does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes.”⁵⁰ A plurality of portraits of Jesus (i.e. historical descriptions), then, is not *inherently* problematic any more than a plurality of photographs.⁵¹

More recently, historian Beth Sheppard has argued that a plurality of portraits is an important feature of historical research.⁵² The numerous historical depictions of Princess Diana are perfectly reasonable because one “particular author might focus on her role as a mother, while another might emphasize her work for charity.... Still one more writer might examine Diana’s impact on hairstyles or fashion. The point here is that no single biography and no single historian will ever create the sole complete portrait.”⁵³ Of course discussions and debates will

⁴⁹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 61.

⁵⁰ Carr, *What Is History?*, 30–31.

⁵¹ It should be noted that just as some historical descriptions distort the past, so too can some images distort the image or create optical illusions. For helpful analogies between optical illusions related to our thought processes see Mahzarin R. Banaji, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Bantam Books, 2016), 3–21.

⁵² “Different historians, using different presuppositions or methods, may analyze the same evidence but still provide divergent pictures of a single event or person.... One scholar may emphasize some bits of the available information more than other pieces.” Sheppard, *The Craft of History*, 16–17.

⁵³ Sheppard, 17–18. Adding, “There will always be room for additional, valid biographical portraits that employ, as it were, different brush strokes, different pigments, or a slightly different sense of composition” (18). See also Headlam, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus the Christ*, 164; Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, 12–13.

arise when one portrait is emphasized too much, too little, or where there are mutually exclusive portraits.

An inherent limitation of taking a photo from a certain position is that it will inevitably have various blind spots.⁵⁴ These blind spots can be more or less relevant depending upon the inquiry.⁵⁵ “Some ‘meanings’ or ‘interpretations’ will be...more appropriate than others....some angles of vision do less justice to the information than others,” argues Wright.⁵⁶ Importantly, while we may often see the blind spots of others much more easily, it is important to make sure that we do not ignore the reality of our own potential blind spots.

James Tabor writes that when it “comes to the quest for the historical Jesus our need to be aware of our own prejudices seems particularly acute. No other figure in history elicits such passionate responses nor engenders such opposite conclusions.”⁵⁷ We do well, then, to acknowledge the potential limitations (blind spots) of our own perspective as well as the limitations of others.⁵⁸ This fact should lead one to *humbly and critically* consider other perspectives. If one fails to take these considerations into account, they may become more

⁵⁴ Wright comments that “All accounts ‘distort’, but some do so considerably more than others. All accounts involve ‘interpretation’; the question is whether this interpretation discloses the totality of the event...or whether it squashes it out of shape.” Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:92.

⁵⁵ For example, if one is wondering what color the apple is on the table, vantage points from above the table will provide a distinctively better vantage point than those under the table. The blind spots of those viewing the top of the table are not relevantly significant for the question of the color of the apple. For an example in historical Jesus studies see Benjamin C. F. Shaw, “What’s Good for the Goose Is Good for the Gander: Historiography and the Historical Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 15, no. 2–3 (December 11, 2017): 295.

⁵⁶ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:91.

⁵⁷ Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty*, 316–17.

⁵⁸ These discussions may well remind one of R. G. Collingwood’s memorable comment, “The tailless fox preached taillessness,” R. G. Collingwood, “An Autobiography,” in *R. G. Collingwood: An Autobiography and Other Writings: With Essays on Collingwood’s Life and Work*, ed. David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 46. For the fox could *only* see the world through the lens of “taillessness” and was thus interpreted (and preached) through the *singular, rigid, and dogmatic* outlook.

susceptible to forms of ethnocentrism (failing to consider one's own limitations) or xenocentrism (failing to consider the limitations of others).⁵⁹

A “community of conscience” is a great tool in helping to reflect upon multiple perspectives as well as making one more aware of possible tensions or blind spots within their own view and those of others.⁶⁰ Not only does it cause us to be more self-reflective and self-critical of our own position, but we are also presented with other alternatives that we may challenge or that may challenge us. In order to have a greater and more robust understanding one must be able to consider a multitude of perspectives.

The photograph analogy, therefore, is particularly helpful for demonstrating the importance of both the objective and subjective poles of historical reconstruction. Important distinctions should be seen between the ontological reality of the past with our epistemological access to that reality. There is something that has objectively occurred apart from the individual recording or describing the event (i.e. the *object* being photographed) and there is also an epistemological limitation (i.e. the *angle* taken by the photographer). This analogy allows one to recognize and avoid the extremes of subjective relativism and the impossible dream of neutral objectivity. Objectivity is not neutrality.

⁵⁹ Problems that confront ethnocentrism similarly confront xenocentrism. Jörn Rüsen helpfully offers the reminder that while ethnocentrism raises various dangers, so does its inverted form where the “other” is made superior. Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*, trans. Diane Kerns and Katie Digan, Making Sense of History 28 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 207–10.

⁶⁰ Torrance refers to a “community of conscience” which is important for helping point out blind spots in our thinking. For example, when we think we have eliminated inappropriate intrusions upon the object of inquiry but in reality have not, then the community can help bring this to our attention. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 202. See similarly Mark Allan Powell, “Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies: Final Reflections,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 127; Willitts, “Presuppositions and Procedures in the Study of the ‘Historical Jesus,’” 101–2; Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 54–56.

Although historians and their sources have worldviews, presuppositions, and biases which influence how they interpret the world (and subsequently the past events), these elements do *not* prevent one from accurately knowing (or describing) the past. People can simultaneously have biases and objective knowledge about the past. However, in the context of historical investigation, one may think of a historian's accepted paradigm as a double-edged sword.⁶¹ They can be an asset, but one must not forget that they can be a liability that may cause damage. Just as fire can both cook and burn food, so too can a horizon shed light or bring darkness to our understanding.⁶² A few important considerations will now be made regarding the active role of the inquirer into the past so that one may embrace the benefits while avoiding the dangers.⁶³

Subjectivity as a Double-Edged Sword: A Virtue or a Vice

This section will begin by discussing how one's subjectivity could be a *virtue* before considering its potential as a *vice*. The reason for this is because some of the vices may seem (at least initially) odd, abstract, or possibly over dramatic. Hopefully, by providing a description of the virtuous application of subjectivity first, the vices will then be made clearer by their deviations from the virtues. By discussing this issue and contrasting these characteristics, the

⁶¹ If one wishes to analyze worldviews, one will need to move beyond just the discipline of history. Although history is important in shaping one's worldview and can certainly have an impact, it cannot be the sole arbiter.

⁶² The free will defense often employed by theists as an explanation for the existence of evil may also be an analogy for knowledge of the past. To have free will, it is argued, humans must have the ability to do both good and evil. Analogously, to know the past, humans must also have the ability to see the world from their worldview as well as the worldviews of others.

⁶³ While the book is primarily warns of several historical fallacies historians *to avoid*, there is also some excellent advice for historians *to follow* in Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 38-9, 62-3, 99-100, 128-130, 160-3, 183-85, 213-15, 240-42, 258-59, 277-81, 305-6. See also Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 52-62. He suggests several ways to help historians address their own subjectivities: method, publicizing their horizons, peer pressure aimed at impartiality, submitting ideas to unsympathetic experts, accounting for relevant historical bedrock, and detachment.

significance of how subjective factors can affect the quest for objective truth will hopefully be made clearer as well as provide some insight on factors involved in the application of historical virtues and vices.

Subjectivity as a Virtue

Three virtues of subjectivity will be examined to help demonstrate how the subjective elements of the historian can positively affect their ability to obtain objective knowledge of the past. First, one should make the choice to avoid inappropriate *a priori* projections. Second, one should be willing to bracket their worldviews. Lastly, one should make the decision to submit or follow-after the data itself.

1. Choosing free/open disclosure by rejecting a priori projections

As noted above, the objectivity/subjectivity issue affects a wide range of disciplines so it is important to remember that these principles extend beyond history and into other realms of knowledge. Allowing the object of inquiry to disclose itself on its own terms, free from *inappropriately imposed a priori* biases, prejudices, or conceptual frameworks of the inquirer is vital in any inquiry.

Although he was largely concerned with theology and science, the late theologian Thomas F. Torrance provided an important argument in which he warns against projecting one's own "inflexible conceptual structure" upon their object of study. In any discipline, one's object of inquiry *must not* be forced to accord with *prefigured* conceptual schemes.⁶⁴ With respect to NT studies Torrance writes

⁶⁴ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 9. John Morrison provides a helpful summary of Torrance's concern, "the object is reckoned as relative to the subject, *affected by the subject*, so that in the subject-object relation it is the subjective pole that becomes *masterful, intruding itself on the object*." John D. Morrison, *Knowledge of the Self*

But it does mean that I am not prepared to allow the socially conditioned paradigms of one community to apply as interpretative rules for another, very different in time, place and culture, or to allow a set of theoretical and methodological ideas thrown up out of our own cultural trends and philosophies of life to *distort* what I read in the ancient texts, but *insist* that we must be quite *ruthless* with ourselves in *discarding all assumptions* of an *a priori* or extraneous derivation, in attempting to penetrate into the conceptual forms and patterns at work in the actual empirical stream of tradition in which the text being interpreted is to be found. We must do our utmost to allow these texts to *bear witness* to themselves as far as possible *out of themselves* and their own inherent demands, and to let them *impress upon us* the *appropriate* frame of reference for our understanding of them, so that we may interpret them from within their own natural coherences.⁶⁵

How is one to be “ruthless” in preventing the imposition of improper *a prioris* on the object of inquiry?⁶⁶ Torrance argues that one must think after (*nachdenken*) and submit to the free disclosure of the object to the inquirer.⁶⁷ Free disclosure can only occur when it is not limited or controlled by the presuppositions of the inquirer. This enables the object of inquiry to honestly

Revealing God in the Thought of Thomas Forsyth Torrance (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 4 (emphasis added). This also helps us to identify when one’s bias has gone too far and abandoned objective inquiry.

⁶⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 4 (emphasis added). Torrance adds,

That this kind of objectivity is not served by assuming from the very start, as for example Rudolf Bultmann insists in his various essays on hermeneutics, that we cannot but operate with an outlook upon the universe as ‘a closed continuum of cause and effect’, or by setting aside arbitrarily any idea that God’s self-utterance in word has left its profound imprint upon the shape and content of the biblical Scriptures, for that is to bring to the task of biblical interpretation an essentially closed mind which can only result in some sort of scientific or sociological reductionism.

⁶⁶ It should be noted that some may want to draw different connotations from what we will refer to as “objects of inquiry” and the “Other.” For example, some “objects of inquiry” can refer to physical, non-personal objects while the “other” refers to human beings who are different from ourselves in some relevant way. However, in this paper we will be using these terms synonymously and are not making such a distinction. For example, if someone today is studying the Thucydides then Thucydides is simultaneously the *object of inquiry* (as a goal and as a source) as well as the *other* (as an individual with inherent human worth and a different understanding of the world than that of modern inquirers).

⁶⁷ Torrance argued that after the Reformation the term “*dogmatic science*” was applied to describe new physics, [and was a] positive form of science” whereby the emphasis was placed on an *a posteriori* approach rather than *a priori*. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 89. Torrance asserts that this phrase was taken from the Greek distinction, made by Sextus Empiricus, between *dogmatikoi* (“one who asked questions of the kind that yielded positive results”) and *skeptikoi* (“one who asked merely academic questions *without* any intention of getting positive answers”). Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 339.

and openly be understood on its own terms. Torrance, like several others, emphasizes that this necessitates the inquirer's *active* role in acquiring true knowledge.⁶⁸ Only an active subject can be "ruthless" in its questioning and doubting of its own assumptions which, in turn, allows them to properly discard any inappropriate *a priori* preconceptions.⁶⁹ Thus, one must allow their thinking to follow after (*nachdenken*) its object of inquiry while refusing to allow their own inappropriate *a priori* prejudices, which are foreign to the inherent nature of the object, to distort their understanding of the object.⁷⁰

The argument here is, of course, not new. It is reflected, for example, in a comment made in a novel written in the 1860s by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In his *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov receives a letter from his mother warning him of the pitfalls of prejudice because he will soon meet his sister Dunia's fiancé, Luzhin. Raskolnikov's mother warns him that "in order to understand any man one must be deliberate and careful to avoid forming prejudices and mistaken ideas, which are very difficult to correct and get over afterwards."⁷¹ Raskolnikov is thus encouraged to make the decision to impartially judge the character of Luzhin. He has a personal choice to make when meeting his sister's fiancé. It is this choice which inquirers have

⁶⁸ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 31, 40. Torrance is indebted to the work of Michael Polanyi. In Polanyi's classic work he writes that the personal coefficient is a "vital component." Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, viii. Ben Meyer, whose work in many ways mirrors Torrance, writes that the "ontological home of truth is the subject." Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, PA: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1989), 139; Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 97.

⁶⁹ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 8–9, 115–19.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 89. Examples of these *a priori* prejudices are "external authorities or metaphysical prejudices or alien dogmatisms" (34).

⁷¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: MacMillan, 2017), 58. J. M. Ross similarly points out the difficulty of removing prejudices of NT scholars. He writes that when "a hypothesis is firmly believed in, any explanation that fits it will be gladly accepted, while the evidence that does not fit can be quietly ignored." J. M. Ross, "The Use of Evidence in New Testament Studies," *Theology* 79, no. 670 (1976): 214. These comments may also reflect the challenges posed by anchoring bias.

and which allows them to refuse (or, contrarily, to indulge) prejudices and submit to the intelligibility of its object as it freely discloses itself.⁷² It is precisely to such an act that to which Raskolnikov's mother appeals.⁷³

One must, as difficult as it can be at times (including meeting a sister's fiancé), make the decision that a subjective being can, namely, to refuse to inappropriately project their views upon the data. Indeed, Anthony Thiselton stresses that this is essential in hermeneutics. "The interpreter of texts is not a neutral observer," he writes, "*Understanding* in the fullest sense demands *engagement and self-involvement*. Virtually every exponent of contemporary hermeneutics supports this view."⁷⁴ Not only is it a mistake to seek "neutral" or "value-free" judgments, but knowledge "demands" the active involvement of the subjective individual to submit to the conceptual frameworks of their object.⁷⁵ They must deliberately choose to follow after (*nachdenken*) their object of inquiry in an *a posteriori* manner. Only such an *a posteriori*

⁷² See, for example, Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 139–40; Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality," 133–34.

⁷³ Of course, one may see this example as ironic since Raskolnikov's initial assumptions were indeed correct. Thus, although he was biased, his biases happened to be correct in this instance. The example is nevertheless helpful since Dostoyevsky illustrates an awareness, prior to the linguistic turn, of a novelist who recognized the difference between a balanced judgment and a prejudiced judgment (See also fn. 34 above). Moreover, Polanyi notes how scientists have been inadvertently correct on some theories in a similar way. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 10–15. As we will see below, we are not advocating that one avoid having a preunderstanding or working hypothesis or that such is even possible. The issue is whether such preunderstandings are unchangeable, imposed, restrictive, etc.

⁷⁴ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 8 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁵ This is also a major theme for Polanyi's view of science. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*. For a shorter summary on this point see Michael Polanyi, "Scientific Outlook: Its Sickness and Cure," *Science* 125, no. 3246 (1957): 480–84. This virtue is also important in light of the multiform nature of truth itself. "In one sense, to speak of factual truth, historical truth, existential or personal truth, poetic truth, and moral truth, is to speak of different things. Yet in another sense, there is a closer relation between these different uses of the word 'truth' than mere family resemblances." He clarifies that, "On the one hand, truth is multiform, and criteria for different kinds of truth may vary. On the other hand, the truth of God lays claim to a universality which somehow undergirds and holds together particular expressions and experiences of truth in thought and life." Anthony C. Thiselton, "Truth," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Brown Colin, vol. 3 (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 894. The multiform nature of truth may be seen in the sciences. Physicists would not, for example, examine the truths of their discipline by using the tools of a geologist.

approach will allow the data to freely reveal itself to the inquirer such that the inquirer may then apprehend objective knowledge that is revealed from the object itself (instead of the subject).

2. Bracketing worldviews and “loving thy neighbor”

Historians have recognized the danger of imposing one’s preconceived ideas upon the data and another way to minimize this threat is to allow the sources, as best as possible, to speak for themselves and *on their own terms*. By respecting or “loving thy neighbor” (cf. Mark 12:31), one is enabled to bracket their own views and allows their source to freely reveal itself on its own inherent intelligibility and thus to be truly understood on its own conceptual framework. The late Ben Meyer noted this when he wrote, “Good will is an antecedent disposition of openness to the horizon, message, and tone of the text.”⁷⁶

However, to do this one must be willing to bracket their own views and allow the other to reveal itself freely to the inquirer.⁷⁷ Indeed, as Haskell has argued, one of the most powerful arguments a historian can provide is one in which the author has momentarily bracketed their own perceptions in order to properly assess competing descriptions.⁷⁸ Notre Dame professor of European history Brad Gregory has likewise argued that if one wishes to better know the past, then it is *crucial* to understand individuals of the past on their own terms.⁷⁹ For Gregory, the “key distinction to be made is not between ...our conviction and assumptions, *whatever they are*,

⁷⁶ Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 92. Similarly, Licona encourages historians to seek a “full understanding of and empathy for the opposing view.” Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 60–61.

⁷⁷ “History is as much about the obviously other as it is about the seemingly familiar. It is about bridging a series of gaps, in time, culture, and experience, through the use of a disciplined historical imagination.” Evans, *In Defense of History*, 184.

⁷⁸ Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality,” 135–36. NT scholar Mike Licona similarly argues that such bracketing is “nonnegotiable” for historians. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 58–62.

⁷⁹ It should be added that the same fact applies to studying things in the *present* as exemplified in the psychological example provided below.

and those of the people we want to understand. The first prerequisite is one of the most difficult: we must be willing to set aside our *own* beliefs – about the nature of reality, about human priorities, about morality – in order to try to understand *them*.⁸⁰ In order to understand someone, the inquirer *must* be willing to enter into their mindset and try to understand them on their own terms.⁸¹ This is a decidedly subjective decision that is virtuous for one to make as it requires respect for the other or “loving thy neighbor” and assists in attaining greater understanding of the past.⁸² The greater extent that a historian can bracket their own views, the greater they can understand others and the greater their ability to identify and describe the complexities and interrelationships of the past.

This decision should occur from the very beginning of one’s historical investigation. For example, questions framed by the historian should be asked in such a way that is not leading or constrictive. Both Fischer and Torrance are adamant that within the process of inquiry, questions should be *open-ended, flexible, and open to refinement*.⁸³ A constrictive question, on the other

⁸⁰ Brad S. Gregory, “The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (2006): 147 (emphasis in original).

⁸¹ For those who may think such a task impossible, the very existence of the genre of non-fiction demonstrates the possibility of entering into foreign (and often fantastic) conceptual frameworks. In works of non-fiction readers must frequently enter into the worldview of the work in order to understand the work itself. Thus, if one wishes to understand Star Wars, for example, they must enter into the world presented and which “the force” is an active and important part of the reality of that story. The ability to enter foreign and fictional framework is something human beings across the world have demonstrated the ability to do. Thiselton notes a similar point regarding parables. Thiselton, “Truth,” 898–99.

⁸² Vanhoozer writes that “one must be encouraged to keep on persevering after meaning and significance in light of one’s infinite obligation to the voice of the other.” Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 466.

⁸³ Fischer argues that questions should be operational, open-ended, flexible, analytical, explicit and precise, and testable. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 38–39, 160–61; Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34–35.

hand, is one in which conceptual schemes have been woven into the question such that inappropriate, constrained, or disfigured answers are yielded.⁸⁴

The very purpose of inquiry, Torrance points out, is to obtain *new* information and therefore a “genuine question is one in which you interrogate something in order to let it disclose itself to you and so reveal to you what you do not and cannot know otherwise. It is the kind of question you ask in order to learn something *new*, which you cannot know by inferring it from what you already know.”⁸⁵ In other words, an inquirer is one who is seeking an answer, not one who already has it. The noted NT Princeton professor James Charlesworth warns that it is “imperative to choose and employ the best methods and then to be self-critical, seeking to ensure that our search has not been detoured by marred circuitous questioning....we have accomplished nothing if we allow a wish to be the parent of a result. This warning applies to all research scholars.”⁸⁶ It is therefore important that we do not begin an investigation by improperly imposing ourselves upon our object of inquiry at the outset by asking “loaded” questions. It is thus desirable that our questions allow for the free disclosure of the object and are open-ended, flexible, and able to be revised as the inner logic of the data is disclosed to the inquirer.

The bracketing of one’s paradigm is thus essential from the beginning to the end of historical research because it allows that which is *external* to the inquirer to be properly understood, examined, and evaluated rather than merely being a reflection of the *internal* (i.e. “biographical”) beliefs of the inquirer. To do this the questioner should be vigilant (“ruthless”) in

⁸⁴ The first section of Fischer’s work identifies ten fallacies of question-framing with examples of each. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 3–39.

⁸⁵ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34 (emphasis in original).

⁸⁶ James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 15.

their refusing to project any inappropriate *a priori* conceptual constraints upon their object of inquiry. Importantly, bracketing of own's own views respects the "voice" of the other by allowing them to speak without any (tyrannically) imposed restraints. One should, then, "love thy neighbor" by following and thinking after (*nachdenken*) its object of inquiry rather than restricting it by the intrusion of the inquirer's inappropriate and distorting *a priori* prejudices and conceptions which are foreign to the inherent nature of the object.

3. Humility to follow-after the data

"Historical research," Evans writes, "is a dialogue between historians and their sources, for historians cannot read into them anything they wish."⁸⁷ In any dialogue there must be at least two different voices in the conversation. One must not only be willing to allow the other voice to speak freely but must also be *willing to submit* to the conceptual frameworks which it reveals. As noted above, this means bracketing of one's own worldview and entering into the framework of another in order to identify, examine, and appraise it. This also includes *nachdenken* the conceptual framework of the object of inquiry.

By allowing the object of inquiry to freely disclose itself, one engages the process by which empirical evidence plays an important role in inquiry.⁸⁸ Evidence, which in this context is that which is freely disclosed by the object of inquiry, is exactly what should contribute to the shaping our conceptual frameworks rather than our conceptual frameworks *inappropriately* imposing themselves. Evidence is presented because of its ability to disclose itself in such ways that it is believed to be able to impress itself upon others when examined. If the object discloses

⁸⁷ Evans, *In Defense of History*, 188. See also Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:117.

⁸⁸ Paul Roth's article is helpful here. Paul A. Roth, "The Disappearance of the Empirical: Some Reflections on Contemporary Culture Theory and Historiography," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 1, no. 3 (2007): 271–92.

itself, at least to some degree, then the historian cannot simply read anything into it they wish.

The object of inquiry ultimately reveals something about itself to the inquirer.

This does not mean that we approach the data without a perspective, but we should avoid the extreme that eradicates the object's evidential qualities. Regarding the *dialogical relationship* between the conceptual framework and data, Torrance writes that

the physicist is not free to think what he likes...He is *bound* to his proper object and compelled to think of it in accordance with its nature as it becomes revealed under his active interrogation....[H]e is humbly submitting his mind to the facts and their own inner logic. So with the science of pure theology, in which we let the nature and pattern of that into which we inquire impose themselves upon our minds. It is positive, dogmatic science, but not authoritarian or 'dogmatical.'⁸⁹

There is an important emphasis on the inquirer being *bound* to their object of inquiry. The inquirer must submit themselves to the data and follow-after (*nachdenken*) the disclosure of the object. This requires the inquirer to acknowledge ignorance, a humble and personal act, and to submit to the object's free disclosure of itself.

So too must the historian be *bound to their sources* such that they first are accurately reflected rather than *binding the sources* to their own conceptual framework. Here Torrance argues that a rigorous

scientific procedure makes it incumbent upon us first to essay an interpretation of the Bible within its own distinctive framework, on its own intelligible grounds, and try to make rational and religious sense of what it has to say about God and the world and his saving activity in history, *without prejudging all that from an alien framework of thought, and certainly without automatically excluding its supernatural message as academically unthinkable for 'modern man.'*⁹⁰

This does not mean that one must necessarily and naively accept the testimony of those from the past, but they must allow their voice to be properly and honestly heard on their own terms and

⁸⁹ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 341 (emphasis added). See fn. 62 above regarding the Torrance's view on a proper "dogmatic science."

⁹⁰ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 5 (emphasis added). Torrance does not appear to be arguing that one must accept claims to supernatural intervention, but merely that they must merely be open to such claims rather than dismissing them *a priori*. Such claims may be dismissed, just *a posteriori*.

within their own proper conceptual schemes. In short, it must be honestly understood prior to any assessments or evaluations. Historians, then, should first seek to understand their sources independently on their own terms and then begin to consider the various interrelationships between them and their descriptions of the past. In the words of Tabor, “conscious humility before evidence is absolutely essential.”⁹¹

Church historian Carl R. Trueman has similarly argued that evidence is generally able to provide some, no matter how minimal, coherent interpretive framework for itself. He writes that the “important thing for a historian is that a balance be maintained between an *a priori* model that allows an identification and interrogation of evidence, and an acknowledgment that the evidence itself may require a modification or even an ultimate rejection of the model.”⁹² For him it is clear that “good historians operate with hypothetical explanatory schemes that are subject to correction by the evidence gathered.”⁹³ These “hypothetical explanatory schemes” are held provisionally and can also be modified in light of new evidence.

Trueman provides a significant and helpful example from church history of the occurrence of such faithfulness to the evidence.⁹⁴ In the 1500s Huldrych Zwingli was accused of sexual impropriety. The Catholic church used this accusation, for which there was no known corroborative evidence at that time, to argue that the Reformers were more interested in escaping

⁹¹ Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty*, 317.

⁹² Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies*, 107. Trueman then adds the following warning. “The denial [Oxford historian] Christopher Hill that there were ever famines in Russia should be a salutary warning that all historians, however talented, need to be aware of how their own ideological commitments, left unchecked, can lead to ridiculous and, in some circumstances, downright sinister places.” University of Nottingham professor Anthony Thiselton comments that “Preliminary understandings and responsible journeys into fuller understanding leave room for renegotiation, reshaping, and correction in the light of subsequent wrestling with the parts and the whole.”

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63–65.

the bonds of priestly celibacy than theology. In the 1800s Johannes Schulthess, who was an admirer and scholar of Zwingli, found a letter in which Zwingli admitted to his unchastity. Was Schulthess' response to then immediately change his understanding of Zwingli? No!

Temptations and emotions pulled at him to such an extent that he began to burn the letter!

Fortunately, Schulthess regained his composure and removed the letter from the fire to preserve it. Trueman rightly highlights that when Schulthess was

confronted with a text that simply could not be assimilated to the Zwingli-as-godly-hero paradigm to which Schulthess was committed, Schulthess neither twisted the text (short of claiming it was a forgery, it is hard to see how he could have done such a thing) nor destroyed it (which he was very clearly tempted to do). No, he changed his mind. He took account of the evidence and reworked his understanding of Zwingli as a result.⁹⁵

This is an excellent example of how our worldviews can be both a vice or a virtue. Schulthess initially succumbed to vice in such a charged moment which radically confronted his initial beliefs regarding Zwingli. The enticement to not only distort the past, but in this case go so far as to destroy evidence, highlights the reality and strength of this temptation.⁹⁶ If a lesser person discovered the letter, it might have very well ended up in the flames and lost forever. However, it is equally important to note that it was the same subjective components of Schulthess that ultimately enabled him to make the decision to humbly (and properly) follow after the evidence rather than seek to retain his previously held position by an inappropriate destruction of evidence (and thereby distorting our understanding of reality, namely that of Zwingli's behavior).⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Trueman, 64–65.

⁹⁶ Helpful here, but a seemingly overlooked concept, is what Licona refers to as risk assessment. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 192. One may very well be satisfied with 51% probability of an obscure event occurring, but would require a significantly higher amount of probability if their job, important relationship, or life are on the line.

⁹⁷ Another example of a scholar who was willing to tentatively hold his own view, consider other theories, and follow-after the evidence, is Richard Burridge who initially “was unimpressed with the arguments put forward by New Testament scholars, especially in America, to demonstrate the biographical genre of the gospels. Therefore a negative result was expected [in his own research], exposing the biographical hypothesis untenable. However, as

While it is impossible to come to the data without some sort of conceptual framework, our emphasis has been that these frameworks can be bracketed, tested, and refined/revised as they dialogue with the evidence. The historian is inquiring into the past precisely because they believe the past is able to disclose something of itself that currently exists beyond the present knowledge of the inquiring historian. If this were not the case, then it would make little sense to make inquiries into the past (or in the sciences, etc.).⁹⁸

Subjectivity as a Vice

This discussion of vices implicitly acknowledges that the objection to historians as potentially writing “biographies” is, *to a degree*, warranted. The virtues listed above will help provide an important and valuable contrast to the vices we will identify. Some of the vices were indirectly mentioned above and will be elaborated further here. The significance and severity of the vices are important for us to be aware of and their severity becomes more noticeable when contrasted against the virtues.⁹⁹

The three vices to be discussed here are in many ways the inverse of the virtues. The first vice examined is when one imposes their conceptual framework and thereby limits the open and free disclosure of their object. Second, they are not willing to bracket their worldview and risk

the work developed I have become increasingly convinced that...it is indeed the right one.” Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 101. See also 252-253, 283. Burridge’s work has gone on to become a standard work in its field.

⁹⁸ In Matthew 11:16-19, Jesus points out that there are such people that, no matter what evidence is presented, will ever be satisfied. Today we might call this the “Heads I win, tails you lose” game. In such scenarios, the outcome is determined well in advance, there is no consistent application of reason, nor a serious regard for positive evidence.

⁹⁹ Prior to this discussion, it should be noted that not all distortions should be understood as vices. For example, undoubtedly all historians have “blind spots” that limit their perspectives. What an object of inquiry discloses to the inquirer in those situations, but the perspective of the inquirer cannot properly understand, is “muffled” rather than silenced or inappropriately distorted.

refusing to “love thy neighbor.” Lastly, one who describes past reality according to their own conceptual frameworks and is unconcerned to follow-after evidence or revise their frameworks in light of the data.

1. Choosing limited disclosure by imposing one’s conceptual schemes on the data

While the parent of an athlete during a close call has a perspective (and this perspective does not necessarily invalidate their opinion), they can become less objective if the desire to see their child be successful in that moment takes the priority over the truth. This is a microcosm of what can also occur in historical inquiry. All history, Evans writes, “has a present-day purpose and inspiration, which may be moral or political or ideological. The question is, *To what extent is this purpose paramount?*”¹⁰⁰ His answer to this question is instructive:

Ultimately, if political or moral aims become paramount in the writing of history, then scholarship suffers. Facts are mined to prove a case; evidence is twisted to suit a political purpose; inconvenient documents are ignored; sources deliberately misconstrued or misinterpreted. If historians are not engaged in the pursuit of truth, if the idea of objectivity is merely a concept designed to repress alternative points of view, then scholarly criteria become irrelevant in assessing the merits of a particular historical argument.”¹⁰¹

If the interpretation of the past is constrained to the needs, hopes, or desires of an ideology which are (consciously or unconsciously) prioritized over truth, then the evidence will merely be used in order to fit the preconceived notions made in advance by the historian.

¹⁰⁰ Evans, *In Defense of History*, 168 (emphasis added).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 188. Nobel Peace Prize winner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observes a moral component that appears relevant, “Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and other’s eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors....Thanks to *ideology*, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956 An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 174 (emphasis in original).

Of course, the enticement of such a temptation comes with the nature of historical inquiry. Our subjective passions understandably motivate us as we study the past. We generally study the past in order to make some sort of informed judgments in the present or to help understand our orientation and identity within the world.¹⁰² Even curiosity and a desire to learn the past will be guided by the present to the extent that certain topics or questions we select were chosen, at the very least, due to a curiosity that was shaped by present-day concerns.

Yet, when these concerns are used to illegitimately justify the present, then, as the Oxford historian Margaret Macmillan notes, the “danger is that what may be an admirable goal can distort history either by making it into a simple narrative in which there are black-and-white characters or by depicting it as all tending in one direction...Such history flattens out the complexity of human experience and leaves no room for different interpretations of the past.”¹⁰³ Thus even if one starts with honorable motives when studying the past, these motives can be corrupted by the imposition of our own *a priori* judgments.

An example of this can be something as simple as the questions we ask regarding the past. Fischer considers questions that impose improper restraints on our knowledge of the past as “confusing an interrogative with a declarative statement.”¹⁰⁴ Clearly, declarative statements are those which intend to state something about reality and not discover something about it.¹⁰⁵ It is one thing to hypothesize before making an inquiry and it is another thing entirely to decide the

¹⁰² Rösen warns that “When one demands that historical thinking and its disciplinary rationality be separated from all aspects of our cultural orientation, then historical studies, and metahistorical thinking itself, become conceptually misguided.” Rösen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 3.

¹⁰³ Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 114.

¹⁰⁴ Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Thiselton provides a helpful discussion on “pre-understanding” in Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 13–16.

conclusion in advance. Fischer writes that “If a historian goes to his sources with a simple affirmative proposition that ‘X was the case,’ then he is predisposed to prove it. He will probably be able to find “evidence” sufficient to illustrate his expectations, if not actually sustain them.”¹⁰⁶ This warning demonstrates how easily one’s investigation can be affected from the very outset by declaring in advance, according to one’s own preconceived notions, what “has” occurred while giving the appearance of a impartial inquiry.¹⁰⁷

Moreover, as noted above, one’s identity, way of life, pride, politics, moral outlooks, etc. can be other possible vices that lead one astray from a proper and robust knowledge of the past. The incident regarding the Zwingli’s infidelity produced within Schulthess a desire to burn the letter and distort the past since it conflicted so much with his own personal convictions and admiration for Zwingli. Undoubtedly there are those who have succumbed to the temptation which can vary from the extreme of destroying (or ignoring) evidence that conflicts with an ideology to not recognizing the proper weight of counterevidence or counterarguments to asking leading questions.¹⁰⁸ In Evans’ terms, when aspects of one’s worldview become *paramount* then

¹⁰⁶ Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 24. We should note that such a question could be appropriate in some contexts (i.e. heuristic, exploratory, etc.). Nonetheless, when investigating the truth of the past, one cannot assert a truth prior to knowing the past unless they are seeking to define the past according to their own subjective desires (see the final vice below).

¹⁰⁷ We can note here a distinction between those who have studied a topic and are familiar with the various evidences and then go on to provide a positive argument for their position and those who are beginning a study and are susceptible to confirmation bias. Of course being familiar with the various evidences does not alleviate one from holding on to their conclusion so tightly that they become unable to revise or re-evaluate their positions if needed. Schulthess is a good example of someone who was well researched on Zwingli and knew the arguments but was still tempted to destroy evidence in order to retain his original conclusions regarding Zwingli’s behavior.

¹⁰⁸ MacMillan provides several examples in her book. Perhaps some of the most enlightening are those regarding nationalism. One example is the how “history was used as a weapon” in order to “undermine the legitimacy of the Treaty of Versailles.” MacMillan argues that this “distortion and misuse of history served Hitler well in two ways: by bringing him supporters and by feeding the appeasement policies of his potential opponents.” MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*, 97-100. See also 22-25, 63, 67-69, 81-90. The changing historical assessments of the French Revolution in the twentieth century could be another example of politics driving historical assessments. William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 98-108.

truth will be sacrificed at the altar of one's conceptual framework. It will be guided by the impulse to use evidence rather than be informed by it.

2. Refusing to "love thy neighbor"

We saw above that by loving one's neighbor they are respecting the other by allowing them to freely disclose their own inherent rationality.¹⁰⁹ For Torrance, those that impose inappropriate conceptual frameworks upon the data are "unable to break out of the teenage mentality in which they are engrossed with their own self-fulfillment, and are unable to reach the maturity of those who love their neighbours objectively for their own sakes."¹¹⁰ In history one can prevent their neighbor (i.e. source, colleague, etc.) from free expression, by forcing their neighbor to say only what one's own conceptual framework will allow. Objective and free disclosure from their neighbor is thus restricted and distorted because they are not understood on their own terms.¹¹¹ Trueman rightly notes that the "danger comes when the theory becomes less a means of penetrating history and more a prescriptive, Procrustean bed into which the evidence must fit or be twisted to fit."¹¹² By distorting the voice of one's neighbor, a false testimony is created since it does not truthfully nor faithfully represent their neighbor.¹¹³ If one spreads a false

¹⁰⁹ We have used the word "other" here to signify persons as our subject of inquiry. However, as will be noted below, if we fail to respect the conceptual framework of an impersonal object of inquiry in the natural sciences, we may risk bearing false testimony.

¹¹⁰ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 41, 50, 54, 52–53, 70, 76–77, 116. See similarly Meyer's hermeneutic of consent. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 64–68.

¹¹¹ Vanhoozer provides a helpful, but horrific, description of some types of "interpretive violence" have been advocated for or have already occurred. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 161–65. One may, however, find new significance for the disclosure. Here E. D. Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance may be helpful. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

¹¹² Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies*, 107.

¹¹³ Schweitzer refers to the "historic violence which in the end injures both religion and history" when the historic Jesus and Germanic spirit are forced together. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 312.

message about their neighbor, they are failing to be faithful to them as well as failing to love or respect them appropriately. Such traits do not assist in providing accurate knowledge of the past nor are they virtuous characteristics becoming of those trying to portray the past as accurately as possible.

A surprising example of this is found in a recent article by University of Dallas psychology professor Amy Fisher-Smith. She describes how this temptation exists in psychology, specifically in the psychological interpretation of clients.¹¹⁴ While she acknowledges the important training and education a psychologist must go through before working with clients, she also notes that such training has potential to encourage psychologists to *impose* the various psychological classifications upon clients that they learned during their training. Smith writes, “[M]ost therapists have a working knowledge of the diagnostic and classificatory system of mental illness. If the clinician presumes to ‘know’ the client through the category ‘depression’, for instance, *the danger is (at least theoretically) that the client cannot be or act otherwise than what this categorization and intellectual conceptualization would suggest.*”¹¹⁵ Psychological classifications can be imposed to the extent that a client’s words and actions are interpreted through a specific, *yet incorrect*, classification which can have significant impact upon treatment.

Smith is similar to Torrance when she writes, “The ego/self *appropriates and subordinates* all elements in an effort to understand them and make them sensible [in light of a

¹¹⁴ The importance analogous relevance here is that just as it is important for psychologists to understand *and interpret* their clients past and present behavior, so too must the historian properly interpret the actions of agents in the past.

¹¹⁵ Amy Fisher-Smith, “Naturalistic and Supernaturalistic Disclosures: The Possibility of Relational Miracles,” *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 10, no. 2 (October 1, 2010): 7 (emphasis added). See also 10. Her arguments using primarily the works of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas.

particular psychological classification].”¹¹⁶ In other words, the client is subordinated in order to be made sensible *according to the clinician’s diagnosis* (and psychological classification) rather than an ongoing dialogue and constant re-evaluation of the client.

She observes that this is a *very subtle* temptation for her and her colleagues which can often go unnoticed.¹¹⁷ More forcefully, she argues that it “attempts to contain the Other, either physically or intellectually, constitutes ‘totalization’ by the ego/self, and totalization is equivalent to *committing violence* against the other.”¹¹⁸ Violence, the opposite of loving one’s neighbor, is thus occurring as a result of *forcing* the individual fit the interpretive model rather than allowing the individual’s behavior to dictate the proper interpretive model through constant dialogue and evaluation.¹¹⁹

If one thinks that she is being overly harsh or dramatic, she then proceeds to give a case study where *she was the perpetrator* and describes how easy it was for her to unintentionally project a diagnosis on one of her clients.¹²⁰ Her suggestion in response to this temptation is to be vigilant (or, as Torrance would say, “ruthless”) in recognizing clients as having inherent value while being open and humble enough to follow after the data while constantly willing to revise

¹¹⁶ Fisher-Smith, 6 (emphasis added). Adding that “Others are never viewed as resources or as means to maximize personal ends....Others are treated as ends in themselves given the a priori reason of the ethical obligation.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 10 (emphasis added). She also notes that “it is seductively easy to intellectually (and tacitly) attempt to contain clients within the categories themselves....it is easier than we might think to overshadow and even dominate clients with these frameworks.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁹ There are several references to “violence” in Fisher-Smith, 6–7, 10. “This kind of egological appropriation does not allow for the Other to be recognized as a truly separate other, and a functional-instrumental relationship is more likely to occur.” Fisher-Smith, 7. In other words, the ego of the inquirer can appropriate the “Other” in order to use them as a means to some end rather than respecting them for their own sake. See also Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 380–81.

¹²⁰ Fisher-Smith, “Naturalistic and Supernaturalistic Disclosures,” 7–10.

their evaluations in light of new data.¹²¹ Although it is important not to disregard their background knowledge and training, it is equally important that the training does not dominate the client. Her solution is in many ways similar to following virtues noted above by Torrance and others.

A historical example of this temptation can be found in the work of the Yale historian Timothy Snyder who has made “an eloquent plea for the historian’s obligation to understand even those who commit unspeakable crimes.”¹²² This plea occurs in the following comment by Snyder regarding World War II, its victims, and its perpetrators:

It is easy to sanctify policies or identities by the deaths of the victims. It is less appealing, but morally more urgent, to understand the actions of the perpetrators. The moral danger, after all, is never that one might become a victim but that one might be a perpetrator or a bystander. It is tempting to say that a Nazi murderer is beyond the pale of understanding.... To yield to this temptation, to find other people to be inhuman, is to take a step toward, not away from, the Nazi position. To find other people incomprehensible is to abandon the search for understanding, and thus to abandon history.¹²³

Snyder’s point is that by refusing to properly understand those who are considered evil, they are dehumanizing them and risk becoming more like the very ones they disdain.¹²⁴ There is a strong

¹²¹ Fisher-Smith, 6, 9, 10.

¹²² Borden W. Painter Jr., *The New Atheist Denial of History* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 43.

¹²³ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 400. We may note that some might refuse to love the other in some circumstances because they may believe that such people are not deserving of it. In addition to the reason Snyder notes above, as well as Solzhenitsyn and Tzu below, the adage “two wrongs do not make a right” should be kept in mind.

¹²⁴ A similar and very important warning is made by Solzhenitsyn who famously wrote, “And just so we don’t go around flaunting too proudly the white mantle of the just, let everyone ask himself: ‘If my life had turned out differently, might I myself not have become just such an executioner? It is a dreadful question if one really answers it honestly.’” “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. *But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.* And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 1:160, 168 (emphasis added). Christopher Browning of the University of North Carolina points out that those involved in the holocaust were human beings and that “I must recognize that in the same situation, I could have been either a killer or an evader—both were human—if I want to understand and explain the behavior of both as best I can....What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to

similarity here with that of Smith above regarding those who commit acts of “violence” on others such that in both cases the love or respect of other human beings has been sacrificed to an interpretive scheme.¹²⁵

If one refuses to understand other people as they disclose themselves, they potentially (knowingly or not) risk dehumanizing them. Such silencing of the other has been considered violent, tyrannical, or narcissistic as it imperialistically imposes itself on the object of inquiry.¹²⁶ Moreover, in the act of inappropriately constricting the beliefs of others, one is bearing false witness through misrepresentation.¹²⁷ In each of these instances there is an absence of learning something new that is external to the inquirer since the inquirer has already determined in advance what will and will not be accepted.¹²⁸

excuse, to understand it to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving.” Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Revised (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), xx.

¹²⁵ The importance of this continues even in the context of military battles where literal bodily violence might be done to others. Sun Tzu offers the following military advice stressing the importance of *truly* knowing one’s opponent: “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 3.18. These comments provide another illustration (albeit a pragmatic one) of why it is important to faithfully know people that may even be considered their enemy.

¹²⁶ Evans argues that, “Postmodernism’s legitimation of the subject in the historian’s work encourages historians to intrude their own presence into the text to such a degree that in some cases it all but obliterates the historical subject.” He concludes that historians who follow this route and believe that they are *more important* than those whom they are writing about, “then inflated self-importance, solipsism, and pretentiousness can be the only results. A return to scholarly humility is surely called for here.” Evans, *In Defense of History*, 173.

¹²⁷ When we bear false witness (lie), we are trying to re-define past reality according to our own subjective desires. Schulthess, for example, would have been bearing false witness regarding Zwingli if he would have destroyed the letter and continued promoting Zwingli as having been innocent of a charge that he was admittedly guilty of having committed.

¹²⁸ Although the late Walter Wink was discussing the Bible, he rightly warns about approaching an inquiry with an “attenuated sense of what is possible” only to “diminish it by the poverty of their own experience.” Walter Wink, “Write What You See,” *FourthR* 7 (May 1994): 6.

When properly interpreting, one must make an honest effort to account for all of the complexity of the data (i.e. the things liked and the things disliked) rather than merely only accounting for those that accord with a doctrine, dogma, or desire.¹²⁹ This is often easier said than done. Nevertheless, the words of Lucian are helpful, even if one “personally hates certain people he will think the public interest far more binding, and regard truth as worth more than enmity, and if he has a friend he will nevertheless not spare him if he errs.”¹³⁰

3. Playing God and defining reality

The last vice of subjectivity refers to the temptation to, *in some sense*, play the role of God by defining reality or, more specifically, (re)defining *past* reality. It will be important to begin by considering various ways in which this temptation has been described and raised as a criticism. This will help highlight the reality of this temptation before we briefly consider the problems it raises with respect to knowing the past.

For Torrance, this is a constant temptation which goes all the way back to Genesis 3. He writes,

But in and behind it all, one can hear the old demonic whisper, ‘Ye shall be as gods’, that it, the original sin of the human subject in projecting himself into the place of ultimate reality, thus rejecting God by eclipsing Him from himself. But in so doing man deprives himself of the light in which to see his own mistakes, and so becomes incarcerated in the darkness of his own self-deception.¹³¹

¹²⁹ There is no such thing as a disinterested party in this context. Those who are engaged in these processes of interpretation *do have* preferences and desires. As noted above, these are not *inherently* a bad thing, so long as they are open to re-evaluation and possible revision.

¹³⁰ Lucian, *How to Write History*, 39. See also 41.

¹³¹ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 52. See also 29-55.

The doctrine of original sin, for Torrance, is one that remains present for people today. We seek to be in control and define reality and in so doing, take the prerogative of God.¹³² One takes the role of God when they impose on their objects of inquiry and become masters over them such that they accord with our desires of their inquirer.

While some may balk at this theological/harmartiological interpretation, the concern is surprisingly not very far from postmodern concerns (especially the will to power).¹³³ For example, atheist postmodern professor of religion Mark Taylor does not appear very far from Torrance in this regard. Taylor argues that Friedrich Nietzsche's famous description of the death of God meant that *theology* was ultimately transformed into *anthropology* (i.e. mankind seized God's authority to define reality).¹³⁴ In Nietzsche's account, the "Madman" was proclaiming the death of God and mankind as the replacement.¹³⁵ One of the prerogatives of God is that God has the *authority* to define reality as the Author of creation. If God has died, so the argument goes, then mankind must now take the role of God and become the one who defines reality.¹³⁶ Taylor goes even further and suggests that a result of the death of God is the death of history itself.¹³⁷

¹³² Schweitzer refers Germanic spirit being imposed upon the historical Jesus in such a way that Jesus is made in the historian's image. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 312.

¹³³ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 18. Although instead of the doctrine of original sin, some postmoderns may prefer the notion of autonomy where everyone does what is right in their own eyes (cf. Judges 17:6 and 21:25).

¹³⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 6–7, 19–25 (esp. 20), 32; Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 89–93.

¹³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Thomas Common (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), 90–91 (Book 3, Section 125).

¹³⁶ Of course questions are raised as to which members of mankind get to define reality. If all, then there would be billions of realities thereby relativizing reality. If some, then how does these elect few obtain their position? One of the frequent concerns of postmoderns is the use (or abuse) of those who try to define reality and hold others accountable to it. Such descriptions of reality are often considered as attempts to dominate and control others.

¹³⁷ Taylor writes that "the death of God was the disappearance of the Author who had inscribed absolute truth and univocal meaning in world history and human experience." Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology*, 90, 96.; Taylor, *Erring*, 52–53 ("End of History"). Historians have noticed the connection between God, history, and

Ultimately, despite having two vastly different worldviews, both Torrance and Taylor, among others, recognize that the death of God lead to the elevation of mankind and that this leads to forms of “terror.”¹³⁸ Indeed, as Thiselton observes, recent postmodern concerns have recognized “the illusory nature of value-neutral perception and value-neutral horizons coheres precisely with biblical insights into the deceitfulness of the human heart and the realities of human bondage to sin as self-centered.”¹³⁹ It is perhaps worth noting that well before the postmodern era, Thucydides had already observed such occasions where men redefined reality and the “ordinary acceptance of words in their relation to things was changed as men thought fit. Reckless audacity came to be regarded as courageous loyalty to party, prudent hesitation as specious cowardice, moderation as a cloak for unmanly weakness.”¹⁴⁰

This issue of taking the place of God may be further highlighted in that various historical works have appropriated religious language or imagery. For example, Although MacMillan believes that history is not *necessarily* replacing the divine, it *is* seeking to be the transcendent authority above and beyond humankind. For her, “History with a capital *H* is being called in to

deconstruction too. For example, Dunn writes that “history (the discipline) and faith have made uncomfortable bedfellows, each usually trying to push the other out of the bed, it has also demonstrated that history and hermeneutics are close companions, Siamese twins perhaps. That will no doubt be part of the reason for the failure of history and faith to bed well together: hermeneutics is the too little acknowledged third partner – a somewhat uncomfortable *ménage à trois*.” Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 1:99.

¹³⁸ Taylor argues that although mankind became free from the tyranny of God, it became subject to a different and more dangerous tyranny of mankind which frequently seeks to oppress others. In short, “absolute freedom” from God became “absolute terror.” Taylor, *Erring*, 22, 32.

¹³⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics : The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton* (London: NY: Routledge, 2006), 634. Thiselton sees Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion as related to notions of human sin. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 33–34. Kevin Vanhoozer both draws similar connections between Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault regarding the notion of sin and God as the Author of reality. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 70–71.

¹⁴⁰ Thucydides, *History*, 3.82. For the full account regarding the changing of several definitions see 3.82–3.84. Cf. 2.51–53 which offers a similarly observation regarding the behavior of those during the plague.

fill the void.”¹⁴¹ Yet it is precisely human beings that write history and when one calls their history the “(H)istory” (with the capital H), it is difficult to avoid making the connection between the historian seeking to take the role, or power, of God when writing their “(H)istory”¹⁴²

Indeed, Macmillan is aware of this temptation (and danger) when she writes “History has shaped humans’ values, their fears, their aspirations, their love, and their hatreds. When we start to realize that, we begin to understand the power of the past.”¹⁴³ The very purpose of MacMillan’s book is to identify various instances of the uses and abuses of history. She observes that history “can be helpful; it can also be very dangerous.”¹⁴⁴ Yet how is one to know when (H)istory is being helpful or dangerous? Another issue appears to be that in the absence of such a transcendent, what constitutes abuse by one historian may be considered a legitimate use by another.¹⁴⁵ MacMillan is also aware of this, she writes, “When people talk, as they frequently do, about the need for “proper” history, *what they really mean is the history they want and like.*”¹⁴⁶ Yet it’s not clear how she addresses this complaint given her views on (H)istory. If (H)istory has

¹⁴¹ MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*, 20. Two additional examples may be found in MacMillan. The role of God as a moral law giver appears to be given to historians. For in a secular world, “history takes on the role of showing us good and evil, virtues and vices....[history] “can vindicate us and judge us, and damn those who oppose us.” (20). One’s identity and value is provided by historians as well. The reason for this is because “all of us, the powerful and weak alike, history helps to define and validate us” (53). Additionally, the creation for identity is not only for the individual, but extends even to nations: “For all the talk about eternal nations, they are created not by fate or God but by the activities of human beings, and not least by historians” (83).

¹⁴² One may recall in Book 3 of Plato’s *Republic* the request for the “noble lie” in order to obtain political ends.

¹⁴³ MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*, 8.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., x. Adding that “Sometimes we abuse history, creating one-sided or false histories to justify treating others badly, seizing their land, for example or killing them” (xi).

¹⁴⁵ Polanyi notes this issue in the sciences whereby competing paradigms compete against one another by trying to show their opponents as unreasonable. He also describes how ingenuously we are able to defend our frameworks in order to remain consistent (even though they may be consistent fictions). Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 150–60, 287–88, 294.

¹⁴⁶ MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*, 113 (emphasis added).

replaced God, then, like Torrance and Taylor point out, historians become the definer of past reality and history cannot help but become more and more relativized according to the number of people who comment on the past. In short, it is hard to distinguish how a historian writing (H)istory is different from historian who is taking the role of God by describing reality as though they were its author.

University of Chicago professor Constantin Fasolt is more emphatic than MacMillan. He believes that “History conflicts with the historical religions because it *is* religion, a rival religion.”¹⁴⁷ Not only is it a rival religion, in the modern world, Fasolt believes it is one of the most important.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, (H)istory is a religion and historians are the new priests.¹⁴⁹ Such language is consistent with the reality of the temptation to define past reality (as opposed to describing past reality) as it confronts the historian. Although Fasolt appears celebrate the autonomous freedom history provides without religious authority, Taylor’s warnings about “absolute freedom” turning into “absolute terror” should be kept in mind along with Mark Cladis’ observation that in arguing for *historians* to become the new priests in the modern world, some may rightly find it troubling that Fasolt himself is a *historian*.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Constantin Fasolt, “History and Religion in the Modern Age,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (2006): 25 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 11, 22, 26.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 26. Rüsen rightly identifies that historians have believed that they could give a value-free or neutral description of the past in order to “see and present themselves *as high priests of truth*.” Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 48 (emphasis added). See also 56, 63, 73, 201–10.

¹⁵⁰ Fasolt, “History and Religion in the Modern Age,” 25; Taylor, *Erring*, 22, 32. Mark S. Cladis, “Modernity in Religion: A Response to Constantin Fasolt’s ‘History and Religion in the Modern Age,’” *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (2006): 101–2. Cladis, 100.

Evans designates an entire chapter to the issue of power in his *In Defense of History*.¹⁵¹ Although he does not make the theological point we have highlighted, he nevertheless recognizes the possibility of historians who seek to define past realities according to their own needs, wants, and desires. He writes, “If the intentions of the author of a text are irrelevant to the text’s meaning—if meaning is placed in the text by the reader, the interpreter—and if the past is a text like any other, then the historian is *effectively reinventing the past* every time he or she reads or writes about it.”¹⁵² In such circumstances, the “past no longer has the power to confine the researcher to the bounds of facts. Historians and critics are now omnipotent.”¹⁵³

Historians, then, must consider the question of power with respect to their descriptions and the possibility to, consciously or un-consciously, seek the power of God in defining reality. For example, Evans highlighted the famous controversy regarding Paul de Mann in order to show the immense significance of history, relationship to postmodernism, and why one may wish to “reinvent” the past.¹⁵⁴ In normal language, one may simply call such redefining “lying” and it is a temptation that no historian, indeed no person, is above.¹⁵⁵ From a different angle, Schweitzer pointed out that historical theologians had become “intoxicated with their own

¹⁵¹ Evans, *In Defense of History*, 165–92.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 172 (emphasis added).

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 202–6.

¹⁵⁵ Alan Spitzer is even more emphatic on the issue of lying in this regard and similarly discusses the de Mann controversy. Alan B. Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies About the Past: Reflections on Dewey, Dreyfus, de Man, and Reagan* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 61–96. It should be noted here that it is certainly not the case that every time someone inappropriately imposed an *a priori* they are doing so with malice. One might, for example, have a blind spot that prevents them from recognizing that they are in fact imposing *a priori*s into their work. Thiselton, following Torrance and Karl Rahner, helpfully identifies that a reverence for truth that demands “openness towards it, and submission to its leading” and that “self-defensiveness and self-assertion give rise to falsehood.” Thiselton, “Truth,” 901.

ingenuity...[and had]come to believe that the world's salvation depends in no small measure upon the spreading of its own 'assured results' broad-case among the people."¹⁵⁶ A final point should be noted that in contradistinction to the virtuous method listed above, there are those who believe it their *duty* to read into such objects their own subjective interests.¹⁵⁷ These provide three different reasons, among many others, as to how historians could potentially fall into the this vice.

Summary

The subjective nature of the inquirer can be either a virtue or a vice. We sought to divide these two categories into three subcategories in such a way as to highlight some key facets that could affect our investigations for better or worse. The sub-categories are interrelated with one another and therefore overlap in certain respects. Sometimes we may commit these vices or virtues consciously while other times unconsciously (e.g. blind spots). Nevertheless, an effort can, and should, be made to be virtuous and avoid vices.

¹⁵⁶ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 311. In a scathing review of Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (NY: Random House, 1986), Alvin Plantinga notes a similar "quest for novelty." Alvin Plantinga, "Sheehan's Shenanigans: How Theology Becomes Tomfoolery," *Reformed Journal* 37, no. 4 (April 1987): 21.

¹⁵⁷ Torrance's suggestion above highlighted the potential dangers of projecting one's worldviews onto the data (thereby distorting it) while he proposes that those engaged in the quest for truth should humbly follow after (*nachdenken*) their object and submit to its intelligibility as it is revealed to the inquirer. This is a stark contrast from the postmodern philosopher Mark Taylor who questions the notion inherent rationality (*logocentrism*), especially within written texts. Mark C. Taylor, "Deconstruction: What's the Difference," *Soundings* LXVI, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 392–93, 396. Taylor is also considerably graphic in his description of how one should impose themselves upon their object. The very title gives one an indication of how we should approach texts. Mark C. Taylor, "Text as Victim," in *Deconstruction and Theology*, ed. Thomas J. J. Altizer (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 64–66. Vanhoozer's describes Taylor's method as "interpretive rape." Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 161–62. See also Evans' understandable complaint about postmodernisms encouragement for "historians to intrude their own presence into the text to such a degree that in some cases it all but obliterates the historical subject." Evans, *In Defense of History*, 173. He then provides an example of a historian who refers to "I," "me," or "my" in their work "no fewer than *eighty-eight times* in the *first four pages*" (173, emphasis added).

To be virtuous one should make the decision to be diligent in their efforts to prevent the imposition of foreign and inappropriate conceptual frameworks upon their object of inquiry. We recognize the limitations of our own knowledge and humbly respect our object of inquiry by being able to bracket our own views or hypotheses. When we make this choice, it allows the genuine understanding of our object, based on its own free and unobstructed disclosure, as it reveals itself to the questions of the inquirer. We must then be humble and follow the internal coherence of the object. These virtues help provide us with greater understanding that is derived from outside the inquirer since they follow-after the free and open disclosure of its object. This following-after, however, should not be understood to be done uncritically. This is particularly evident in historical sources or testimonies which involve a number of interrelationships between different lines of evidence (each understood on their own terms) that need to be properly weighed. However, it is nevertheless important to understand those sources on their own terms prior to making any assessments about them.

The vices are an ever-present reality. One can, with surprising ease, approach the data and impose their own conceptual frameworks. In so doing, the object will only be able to reveal things that appear to agree with this foreign framework and silenced in areas where it disagrees. Distortions occur when we force the object to artificially accord with foreign frameworks. We also risk refusing to love our neighbor when we tyrannically impose our conceptual frameworks upon them in such that it distorts or disregards their open and free disclosure. By imposing our preconceived notions in ways that silence the disclosure of our object of inquiry we also risk taking the prerogative of God by defining (past) reality as we see fit by becoming the author of past reality instead its discoverer.

What we have been arguing in favor for regarding the virtues are essentially derived from critical realism stresses retains the value of both the subjective and objective components involved in the process of obtaining greater understanding. The subjective element of history has long been acknowledged and it should not be surprising to recognize that everyone has their own perspectives. Our worldview contributes to the filter through which they understand the world. We wear “worldview glasses” which filter how we see the world and sometimes we need to adjust our lenses. Having the ability to take one’s glasses off and put on a different pair in order to see how the world looks through a different lens assists in gaining greater understanding. Sometimes new lenses help us see more clearly and sometimes they do not. Even if the new pair does not provide a clearer picture, new knowledge and greater understanding may still be obtained.¹⁵⁸

Historical Epistemology, Hermeneutics, and Resurrection Research

We have emphasized important philosophical elements concerning history in order to show that although the historian might improperly distort history and the historical Jesus scholar might contribute to the ongoing “bad joke” mentioned by Crossan, historians may also approach the past virtuously and attain genuine understanding. We have noted a distinction between the ontological issue, which is the reality of past events, and the epistemological issue, which corresponds to our ability to know that past reality. After having examined these various aspects of human subjectivity with respect to our ability to understand (or interpret) our objects of

¹⁵⁸ Mark Powell writes that although Darrell Bock did not change his mind on an issue, “I did learn some things from the arguments he posed.” Powell, “Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies,” 127. Similarly, if not more so, in science the hypothesis of an experiment is essentially the equivalent of trying on glasses. Torrance argues that this is essentially what occurred during the transition to modern physics where a new set of lenses was used to see the world, by those like Clerk Maxwell and Albert Einstein, instead of the older Newtonian lenses. He writes “It was new knowledge that could only be grasped, affirmed and assimilated within a new outlook of which it constituted the intelligible basis.” Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 17.

inquiry, we must now offer some concluding remarks regarding our epistemological access to the past in general and the resurrection of Jesus in particular while adding some important nuances along the way.

Hermeneutics, History, and Critical Realism

Thiselton offers important insight on the relationship of our subjective nature and are ability to gain understanding and knowledge about the world around us. He writes,

‘Everything depends on your presuppositions.’ This is often a cheap way of foreclosing further discussion...But a greater familiarity with hermeneutics reveals that negotiating between a given view and provisional pre-understanding is not in any sense a matter of warfare between nonnegotiable fixed presuppositions. Preliminary understanding and responsible journeys into fuller understanding leave room for renegotiation, reshaping, and correction in the light of subsequent wrestling with the parts and the whole.¹⁵⁹

It is a mistake to assume that one’s presuppositions are like prison which their subjects cannot escape and thus mechanistically predetermines how one will interpret the world.¹⁶⁰ However, as

Thiselton points out, that

exponents of hermeneutics commend as a more fruitful starting point for ‘understanding’ what has come to be denoted by the technical term *pre-understanding* [*Vorverständnis*]. The English might more idiomatically be rendered *preliminary understanding*. It denotes an initial and provisional stage in the journey toward understanding something more fully.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 14–15. The references to the parts and the whole open the door for a helpful analogy. Just as a map can be helpful, one must know both the part (*the street* they are looking for) and the whole (the right street *in the right state/country*). If one is so “zoomed in” on the map, they could overlook the fact that they may be looking at the right street name despite that it is in the wrong different jurisdiction. Similarly, if one only looks at the map from a “zoomed out” perspective, they will never see close enough to see the actual street or its interconnections to nearby streets. Thiselton refers to the work of Grant Osborne regarding the hermeneutical spiral, “We cannot arrive at a picture of the whole without scrutinizing the parts or pieces, but we cannot tell what the individual pieces mean until we have some sense of the wider picture as a whole” (14). Indeed our chapter here has attempted to move from the parts (Jesus’ resurrection), to the collection of parts (historical Jesus studies), and then the whole (historical studies) only to move back from the whole, to the collection of parts, to the particular. Also recall Wright’s similar comments on pg. 15 above.

¹⁶⁰ While it also fails to take into account those who have had “conversions” from one worldview to another, the objection itself may reflect anchoring bias.

¹⁶¹ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 12 (emphasis in original).

Such a description is consistent with the virtues described above more generally as well as Trueman's comment's in particular. Recall Trueman urged the use of a *provisional* model that can then be modified as it follows after the evidence.¹⁶²

When studying the past, one may have certain ideas or hypotheses, but these must in no way dictate our investigation. To do so is to risk confirmation bias. Our inquiries, while guided by a *provisional preliminary understanding* must not be held dogmatically so as to allow the evidence to speak and we must be willing to submit to it and follow it where it leads (i.e. *nachdenken*).¹⁶³ Kevin Vanhoozer offers a particularly helpful analogy by comparing the dialogue of one's preliminary understanding with their interpretation to that of being a resident in a city.¹⁶⁴ He suggests that we should avoid regarding worldviews and presuppositions as a prison. Instead, our worldviews are more analogous to a city. In our case, the historian is a resident of that city and, just like any city, there is an overall structure and those within it have ability to move freely in it but, most importantly, they can also renovate it when necessary.

This analogy highlights two important considerations. First, if the city (i.e. our worldviews or presuppositions) can be renovated, then we do not have certain nor exhaustive knowledge. As Vanhoozer has helpfully reminded us, our knowledge is fallible and can be

¹⁶² See p. 30 above.

¹⁶³ Thiselton continues by noting that the "very purpose of speaking of *preliminary* understanding is to underline that it offers no more than a *provisional way* of finding a bridge or starting point toward further, more secure understanding. From the very first it is *capable of correction and readjustment*. It signifies the initial application of a tentative working assumption to set understanding going and on its journey toward a fuller appreciation of all that this might entail." Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 13 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶⁴ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 202.

corrected¹⁶⁵ Evidence or arguments can be given that cause us to want to renovate the city (i.e. re-evaluate and/or revise our worldview).

Second, the fallibility of our knowledge does *not* mean that, therefore, knowledge is unattainable. James D. G. Dunn helpfully reminds us that probability “is *much more integral to daily living* than was previously understood.”¹⁶⁶ We therefore do not need to embrace the false dichotomy between absolute knowledge or absolute skepticism. “We do not have absolute knowledge,” writes Vanhoozer, “only *human* knowledge... We have, that is to say, *adequate* knowledge.”¹⁶⁷ Such limitations are not a flaw, but the result of being human beings who have by their very nature a limited perspective of reality. Dunn adds that historians have “learned the danger of thinking of the past in straightforwardly ‘objective’ terms. So they are well aware that account has to be taken of such bias in their own handling of historical sources – including their own bias! This is simply integral to the skill and art of all history writing.”¹⁶⁸ We can critically evaluate the biases of our sources while also being equally critical of our own biases. In short, cities can be renovated, worldviews can be changed.

Thiselton and Vanhoozer provide valuable insight from hermeneutics. While their focus is on the interpretation of texts, their advice applies to the art of interpretation more broadly. Yet for historians, especially those of antiquity, the interpretation of texts is one of their primary tasks. Thus, the application of these hermeneutical principles for the historian is that historical

¹⁶⁵ Vanhoozer, 300–302.

¹⁶⁶ James D. G. Dunn, “Response to Darrell L. Bock,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 299 (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁷ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 300 (emphasis in original). See also 139–140. Similarly, Wright points out the fact that a “human mind has to organize and arrange the material does not ‘falsify’ the history. This is simply what ‘history’ is.” Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:85.

¹⁶⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 4.

knowledge is not absolute, but adequate. Not perfect, but fallible. Not certain, but probabilistic. Not exhaustive, but provisional.

Historical Jesus Research and Jesus' Resurrection

We opened this chapter with a survey of the “bad joke” of historical Jesus research. Scholars from different eras, geographical locations, and theological views identified a similar problem. The problem was the surprising number of historians who made Jesus in their own image.¹⁶⁹ Scot McKnight expresses a common sentiment when he writes that, “Everyone wants Jesus on his or her side.”¹⁷⁰ If historians are accused of treating Jesus in a manner similar to a ventriloquist in order to keep Jesus on their side, then there is a serious problem.¹⁷¹ If this is truly the case and historical Jesus research is autobiography as Crossan suggested, then this research ultimately falls into a form of solipsistic self-expression. If historical work in general is merely the reflection of the individual historian, and if historical Jesus work in particular also suffers from this malady, then historical investigations into the question of whether Jesus was dead and then later alive will all also be a reflection of the desires of the historian.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Ross notes that the variety of interpretations of Jesus is “probably greater than in any other field of academic study.” Ross, “The Use of Evidence in New Testament Studies,” 214. Similarly, Australian NT scholar Paul Barnett noted that the tendency in recent decades of “agenda-driven” scholars who infuse their subjectivity in their scholarship is “particularly true in Jesus studies.” Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, 3:6.

¹⁷⁰ Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne, eds., “Jesus of Nazareth,” in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 149.

¹⁷¹ As noted above, one of the vices of subjectivity is the temptation for the inquirer to seek to play the role of God to some degree. In historical Jesus studies, the same problem occurs when scholars have a conceptual framework they are seeking to justify via Jesus as their intermediary. Vanhoozer provides an example of this which he experienced during a panel he attended. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 3.

¹⁷² P. J. W. Schutte comments that when it “comes to a topic such as the resurrection, the argumentation sometimes goes beyond the exegetical and the scientific. There is always an autobiographical dimension. The arguments touch the improvable arenas of the spiritual and the belief.” P. J. W. Schutte, “The Resurrection of Jesus: What’s Left to Say?,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 62, no. 4 (2006): 1514. Later concluding “Every theologian, in fact every believer has his or her own opinion. When, at the conclusion of this article, I want to make a few comments, I cannot do it *objective and scientific*. I cannot do biblical criticism without a personal and autobiographical dimension.” (1524, emphasis in original). Schutte, appears to have overlooked Haskell’s notion

The death of historical research is the death of the historical inquiry of the resurrection. The same philosophy of history questions that have significant implications in the quest for the historical Jesus have obvious and equal implications on whether or not one can investigate the question of Jesus' resurrection. If we cannot know anything about Jesus, or the past in general for that matter, because it is merely a reflection of the historian, then we similarly cannot actually know about the resurrection. Thus, it has been essential that we engage these philosophical issues that have direct impact on how we understand the past.

The historian's subjectivity is a *constant hazard but not be a death sentence*. Our ability to know somethings about the past in general, Jesus, or the resurrection in particular is not impossible simply because we approach the evidence from a limited perspective. As we have seen, they can be vices and distort our knowledge of the past or they can be virtues which enable us to adequately, but fallibly, know the past. The late Ben Meyer used the following analogy to help clarify, "To understand a lecture on colour in an objective way, it is no advantage to be blind. Therefore, experience (including sense data, images, and affects), intelligence, and judgment are not only an advantage but a *sine qua non* condition of coming to understand."¹⁷³ Indeed, our perspectives do not inhibit investigations into the past, which include inquiry into Jesus' life more broadly or Jesus' resurrection specifically.

that objectivity does not mean neutrality, but more importantly he appears to argue for a form of historical relativism in that the autobiographical dimension *appears* to serve as a determinative factor that cannot be altered. A further concern is his comment that the areas of the spiritual and belief are unprovable. The skeptic Quentin Smith observed the desecularizing of academia occurred in the second half of the twentieth century where it "became apparent to the philosophical profession that...realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists." Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism," *Philo* 4, no. 2 (2001): 196.

¹⁷³ Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 97.

CHAPTER THREE: TOOLS FOR KNOWING THE PAST

“The question is how to ferret out the historically accurate information from the later alterations and inventions.”¹⁷⁴

- Bart Ehrman

In the last chapter we asked whether we *can* know the past in light of our worldviews and limited positions as subjective agents. In this chapter we will focus on *how* historians can begin to know the past. This will be done by first looking at an approach that seeks to mitigate the potential vices of bias by (1) only using data that is highly evidenced and (2) agreed upon by a significant majority of scholars with wide-ranging backgrounds and presuppositions. The second part of this chapter evaluates criteria that can be used to add probability that an event occurred which is also an aspect of its being highly evidenced.¹⁷⁵ Our goal is to present two interrelated ways in which historians can identify that an event has occurred. These two ways are connected in that the first approach can, and does, utilize the historical criteria when considering facts that have multiple lines of evidence.

Common Ground Approaches

How, then, is the historian to proceed in knowing the past? One *initial* way to begin is by considering data that is widely agreed upon by scholars with differing worldviews. New Testament scholar Mike Licona makes the following suggestion, “Given the pitfall of horizons that await a haphazard historian painting a historically responsible portrait of Jesus requires the

¹⁷⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 94.

¹⁷⁵ It should be noted at the outset that this chapter will, in effect, present a breakdown and defense of aspects of the “Minimal Facts Approach” in which facts must be highly evidenced and accepted by a strong majority of scholars from diverse backgrounds. While there are other ways of approaching questions concerning the past, this approach seeks to establish the most secure historical facts.

use of historical facts that are regarded as virtually indisputable.”¹⁷⁶ The reason, he argues, historians should use these facts, which he calls “historical bedrock,” is that by “requiring hypotheses to account for the historical bedrock, a check is placed on the explanatory narratives that are constructed.”¹⁷⁷ The logic is that agreement among a heterogeneous consensus of scholars is a good indication that they are well evidenced and do not require an idiosyncratic worldview in order to be accepted.¹⁷⁸ Historical bedrock are thus those facts that are so strongly evidenced that they have convinced a significant number of those from wide-ranging backgrounds of their historicity.¹⁷⁹

Licona is by no means alone in this suggestion.¹⁸⁰ Several scholars have included a list or description of generally accepted facts as historical bedrock. Both Günther Bornkamm and E. P. Sanders provided lists of “indisputable facts” about Jesus.¹⁸¹ Paula Fredriksen of Boston University similarly refers to “indisputable facts” and, like Licona, suggests that reconstructions

¹⁷⁶ Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 277.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 65–66. Cf. the “community of conscience” mentioned in p. 19 above.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 56, 57 fn. 107.

¹⁸⁰ Stephen Davis appears to criticize such an approach (or at least way in which it is worked out). Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 170–74. He nevertheless uses such an approach himself and appeals to historical bedrock as well (15–16, 180–185. See also Stephen T. Davis, “The Question of Miracles, Ascension and Anti-Semitism,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact Or Figment? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann*, ed. Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 76.). Ultimately, Davis’ concern is the extent to which these facts can be pushed with respect to interpretive frameworks. For further discussion on this aspect see Stephen T. Davis, “Is It Possible to Know That Jesus Was Raised from the Dead?,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1984): 147–59; Gary R. Habermas, “Knowing That Jesus’ Resurrection Occurred: A Response to Stephen Davis,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1985): 295–302; Stephen T. Davis, “Naturalism and the Resurrection: A Reply to Gary Habermas,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1985): 303–8.

¹⁸¹ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James M. Robinson, NY (London: Harper and Row, 1960), 53–55. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 11. Cf. 321–322, 326. Sanders specifically refers to his list as “bedrock” (10). For a slightly longer list of facts see E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 10–14.

need to meaningfully take account of these facts if they wish to be persuasive.¹⁸² The noted Jewish scholar Géza Vermès highlighted “non-controversial facts concerning Jesus’ life and activity, and [endeavored] to build on these foundations.”¹⁸³ Robert Funk of the Jesus Seminar presented a variety of “assorted facts to which most critical scholars subscribe.”¹⁸⁴ In his introductory work on the NT, Bart Ehrman also offers a brief list of accepted facts about Jesus.¹⁸⁵ NT scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has likewise provided a list of facts that historians can assert “with the highest degree of probability.”¹⁸⁶ More recently, in a work discussing the limitations of historical criteria, the former University of Cambridge professor Morna Hooker notes that one know “quite a lot about Jesus” and then goes on to provide an overview of facts about Jesus and early Christianity.¹⁸⁷ Such lists of historical bedrock is a common consideration made by scholars when seeking to present facts that are known to be the most probable.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 268.

¹⁸³ Géza Vermès, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 3ff., 19-20 (quote from 3). Similar comments two decades later Géza Vermès, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 2ff., 18.

¹⁸⁴ Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 32-35 (quote from 32).

¹⁸⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 264.

¹⁸⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Learning the Human Jesus: Historical Criticism and Literary Criticism,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 159. Cf. John Dominic Crossan, “Response to Luke Timothy Johnson,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 185–86. Johnson also provides helpful, but nuanced, lists elsewhere. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Go* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 117–22.

¹⁸⁷ Morna D. Hooker, “Foreward: Forty Years On,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), xv.

¹⁸⁸ Keener notes the difference between minimalist and maximalist approaches and how they each have their proper place. Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), xxxiv–xxxv, 163–64. Similarly Michael R Licona, “Is the Sky Falling in the World of Historical Jesus Research?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 26, no. 3 (2016): 358. Other scholars have also offered lists to simply provide a description of the current scholarly landscape. See, for example, James H. Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” in *Images of Jesus Today*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 5–15. It is important to note he then goes on to note various challenges

These lists were not intended to be exhaustive, nor did these scholars necessarily focus on events occurring immediately after Jesus' crucifixion.¹⁸⁹ They understandably emphasized important facts they deemed relevant to their respective works and purposes. Nevertheless, they presented data that is so strongly evidenced and agreed upon that they believed their list of facts must be taken into account when describing the past. To do otherwise risks moving from the world of history to the world of fiction. This does not mean that these facts cannot be challenged or overturned, but by starting with the most highly evidenced facts that are agreed upon by scholars from widely differing worldviews, we can begin to safeguard our inquiry from the temptation to inappropriately impose our own image or ideology into the historical reconstruction.

On the Topic of the Resurrection of Jesus

This approach is especially important in areas that may be more divisive, controversial, or affect deeply held beliefs. The question of whether Jesus died and was then later seen alive is undoubtedly one of these topics and thus considering any agreed upon data is even more important. It is unsurprising, then, that the presentation of bedrock facts has become an increasingly used approach on this topic in the last few decades. For example, in 1975 George Eldon Ladd provided a list of facts, actually three lists, that focused on historical data relevant

to this consensus in the following pages (15-27). For another list see, Craig A Evans, "Life-of-Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology," *Theological Studies* 54, no. 1 (1993): 34. For the lists of the facts presented by these and other scholars as well as the ones mentioned below (on the resurrection), see Appendix: List of Lists.

¹⁸⁹ Sanders, for example, notes that his list could be longer. E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, Reprint edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 10.

for inquiries into Jesus' resurrection.¹⁹⁰ Each list is slightly modified from the others, but when combined there are a total of thirteen facts. These include the following:

1. Jesus' death.
2. Jesus' burial.
3. The empty tomb.
4. The empty tomb alone did not prove the resurrection.
5. The grave clothes were undisturbed.
6. Disciples' discouragement and disillusionment.
7. The disciples had experiences which they believed to be of Jesus risen from the dead.
8. These experiences initiated the resurrection faith.
9. Contemporary Judaism had no concept of a dying and rising Messiah.
10. Transformation of the disciples to be witnesses to Jesus' resurrection.
11. The disciples proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem.
12. The rise of the Christian church.
13. The conversion of Saul.

Ladd believes historians need to be able to take into account these “known historical facts” when providing a historical explanation for their occurrence.¹⁹¹ For him, naturalistic theories have failed to adequately account for these historical facts.¹⁹²

More recently, in 2010 Licona similarly presented his own shorter list of facts concerning this question and identifies events surrounding both Jesus' life and fate.¹⁹³ Licona's list of “historical bedrock” includes the following:

1. Jesus was understood to be a miracle-worker and exorcist.
2. Jesus understood himself as God's eschatological agent.
3. **Jesus's predictions of death and vindication.
4. Jesus' death by crucifixion.

¹⁹⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 13, 93, 132–33.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 13, 132.

¹⁹² Ibid., 133–41.

¹⁹³ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 277–464. Another notable scholar who has presented a smaller list of (three) facts is William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), 45–134; William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 351–418. However, Craig tends to present four facts in his debates Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 26–29; Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli, eds., *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 32–35.

5. Appearances to the disciples.
6. Conversion of the church persecutor Paul.
7. *Conversion of James the skeptical brother of Jesus.
8. *The empty tomb.

We have added an asterisk by some of Licona's points. One asterisk is by the conversion of James since Licona is "reluctant" to include it but does so as a "*second-order fact*."¹⁹⁴ For Licona, the conversion of James is well-evidenced and agreed upon by a majority of scholars, but the number of scholars "who actually comment on the matter is small."¹⁹⁵ We have similarly included an asterisk by his use of the empty tomb.¹⁹⁶ Licona does not include the empty tomb in his main list because it does not have *enough of a majority* for him to comfortably consider it part of historical bedrock.¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, he also considers the empty tomb to be a second-order fact.

When Licona considers whether Jesus predicted his death and vindication should be part of this bedrock he ultimately concludes that it should *not* be included and this is why that fact has two asterisks.¹⁹⁸ The reason for this is because although there are several good reasons for accepting it as a historical fact, the "majority of scholars do not regard the predictions as historical."¹⁹⁹ Interestingly, Licona does note that there is another scholar who argues to the

¹⁹⁴ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 461 (emphasis added). Licona has since noted that he may consider adding James' conversion to his historical case in the future along with the empty tomb, Jesus' predictions of the Passion and resurrection, and a few other facts in Michael R Licona, "In Reply to Habermas, McGrew, and McCullagh," *Southeastern Theological Review* 3, no. 1 (2012): 56, 60.

¹⁹⁵ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 461. Unfortunately, Licona does not clarify what constitutes a "small" or large number of scholars such that a majority position can be considered secure.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 463, 469.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 463.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 300–301.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 301.

contrary and that Jesus' prediction is, in fact, considered historical by a majority of scholars.²⁰⁰

We have included Jesus' prediction in our list above, despite the fact Licona does not technically include it himself, in order to show how he addresses this issue and why; because he includes it in his own discussion of historical bedrock as a serious contender; and since Licona acknowledges that there is disagreement regarding his assessment with respect to the consensus view. While these points may seem overly restrictive or even contrary to Licona's own definition of historical bedrock (i.e. accepted by a majority of scholars), his goal is ultimately to use data that are "virtually indisputable" and thus prefers facts that have a near "unanimous" acceptance over those that may have a simple majority.²⁰¹ His emphasis, then, is that he is giving greater priority to the historical bedrock fact which have greater agreement among scholars when compared to "second-order" facts.²⁰²

The Minimal Facts Approach

The most significant work on the historical bedrock as it relates to Jesus' resurrection, however, has come from Gary Habermas. Licona states that his own work stands on the "shoulders of Habermas, who has to my knowledge engaged in the most comprehensive

²⁰⁰ Here he cites Mark M. W. Waterman, *The Empty Tomb Tradition of Mark: Text, History, and Theological Struggles* (Los Angeles: Agathos Press, 2006), 196.

²⁰¹ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 56, 278. Licona's increasingly cautious approach becomes evident as one considers Licona's definition of historical bedrock throughout his work. Initially, it is just facts that are highly evidenced and have a mere majority acceptance (56), but a few pages later writes "strong" agreement (66) and later "nearly unanimous" (278). Thus, although Licona could include the conversion of James as a first-order fact or include the empty tomb, it appears that he is seeking to grant the benefit of the doubt by making the various exceptions that he does. One may see, for example, where Licona elsewhere includes the conversion of James as bedrock and incorporates the empty tomb into the discussion in Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 67–74.

²⁰² For further clarification see Licona's response to McGrew on this point in Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 60–61.

investigation of the facts pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus.”²⁰³ Indeed, his approach has made such an impact that it has recently been described as having attained a “near-exclusive use” by those arguing for the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection.²⁰⁴

Prior to Ladd’s *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (1975), Habermas had already started to develop what is now called the “Minimal Facts Approach” (MFA).²⁰⁵ For Habermas, the “chief thrust of the minimal facts approach is to argue whenever possible on more limited grounds, both to challenge a larger range of thinkers and to show that our basis is exceptionally firm.”²⁰⁶ The method itself is actually quite simple. When discussing the topic of Jesus’ resurrection, a fact is a “Minimal Fact” (MF) when it meets the following two criteria: (1) it has to be established by multiple lines of data/evidence and (2) it must be agreed upon by a strong

²⁰³ Licona, 302; Licona, “In Reply to Habermas, McGrew, and McCullagh,” 55. Another recent work that has built on Habermas’ work in David Mishkin, *Jewish Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 201–211. Cf. 9. For his list of facts see Appendix 1: List of Lists. Others who have also used Habermas as a foundation are Doug D. Scott, *Is Jesus of Nazareth the Predicted Messiah? A Historical-Evidential Approach to Specific Old Testament Messianic Prophecies and Their New Testament Fulfillments* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018); Tristan Casabianca, “The Shroud of Turin: A Historiographical Approach,” *Heythrop Journal* 54, no. 3 (May 2013): 414–23. For examples outside of Christianity that have specifically stated they adopted Habermas’ approach see Peter A. Lillback and Jerry Newcombe, *George Washington’s Sacred Fire* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Providence Forum Press, 2006), 30; Mark A. Beliles and Jerry Newcombe, *Doubting Thomas: The Religious Life and Legacy of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2014), 11. Most recently Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity: The Unalterable Facts of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

²⁰⁴ Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2017), 220–21. On the other end of the spectrum, even more radical scholars have recognized Habermas’ impact and have likewise sought to respond. For example, Richard Carrier writes, “Gary Habermas lists twelve facts that are widely accepted by contemporary scholars. Yet my theory is consistent with all but one of them: the discovery of an empty tomb.” Richard C. Carrier, “The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb,” in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 197.

²⁰⁵ See W. David Beck and Benjamin C. F. Shaw, “Gary R. Habermas: A Minimal Facts Ministry for Disciples and Doubters,” in *A History of Apologetics: Biographical and Methodological Introductions*, ed. Benjamin Kelly Forrest, Josh D. Chatraw, and Alister E. McGrath (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020). In a personal correspondence on March 27, 2019 Habermas confirmed with me that he had started to develop his approach as early as 1972. For Habermas’ first published reference use of key historical facts (which includes references to Ladd’s work) see Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1976), 314–22.

²⁰⁶ Gary R. Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 100.

majority of competent scholars from wide-ranging of backgrounds.²⁰⁷ The MFs are then used to illustrate the strength of the facts surrounding Jesus' resurrection by demonstrating the robust evidential ground on which these facts rest; their wide agreement among scholars with differing theological backgrounds; the continued failure of naturalistic theories to account for these facts; and that the historical explanation that Jesus was dead and then later seen alive has been able to adequately account for them.

Philosophically, this method raises a few definitional questions. First, one may consider what is meant by "multiple lines of data/evidence"? We can start by what this phrase does *not* mean. The facts established by the MFA are *not* considered true because of a presumed inspiration or inerrancy of the NT. More striking, they are *not* presupposed to be true because of a general reliability of the relevant documents. *Nor* are any of the facts given the benefit of the doubt. Rather, they are assumed to be unreliable *a priori*.²⁰⁸ What this phrase does refer to, then, is the plurality of arguments that critical scholars have put forward when seeking to demonstrate the historicity of these facts. We will discuss what some of these arguments look like in more depth below with respect to historical criteria.

A second definitional question may ask what is meant by "competent scholars"? Here Habermas is referring to scholars who have an advanced degree in a relevant field that have published on the subject. However, in a recent publication he has noted that he has even included more radical skeptical scholars despite the fact that they "did not have specialized scholarly

²⁰⁷ Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 15–16; Gary R. Habermas, "The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus: The Role of Methodology as a Crucial Component in Establishing Historicity," *Southeastern Theological Review* 3, no. 1 (2012): 16.

²⁰⁸ "There is no requirement that the New Testament be accepted as inspired. In fact, this groundwork is not even based on the New Testament being a reliable text." Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 16.

credentials or peer-reviewed publications” with the result being that his “study is skewed in the skeptical direction far more than if [he] had stayed strictly with [his] requirement of citing only those with scholarly credentials.”²⁰⁹ In other words, if a Christian and skeptic have both published on Jesus’ resurrection and both equally have problematic academic qualifications (i.e. a degree outside the field, just a master’s degree, etc.), Habermas is more likely to include the skeptic.

Lastly, what is meant by “strong majority”? While technically 51 percent is a majority view, Habermas’ method seeks a “strong” majority and what this means for him is that the “most important” facts presented have approximately a “ninety something percentile head-count.”²¹⁰ Some facts, despite having a good majority acceptance, are either identified for not having as strong majority acceptance (i.e. empty tomb) or are simply be excluded altogether.²¹¹ Thus, the

²⁰⁹ Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 18. This is important since Habermas notes he has been accused of ignoring skeptical scholars (fn. 9). Sometimes even those who adopt the MFA in their own research overlook this aspect. For example, David Mishkin believed that “Many of those discussed by Habermas were committed Christians who already believed in the resurrection by faith. Others may have been less committed to all of the details but were nevertheless sympathetic.” Mishkin, *Jewish Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus*, 201. The comment by Habermas that Mishkin is referring to from Gary R. Habermas, “Resurrection Research From 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 2005): 135–36. However, it appears that Mishkin conflated the backgrounds of those Habermas surveyed results with Habermas’ findings (which were moderately “conservative”). A nonconservative scholar could very well hold to a “conservative” position on a topic. Indeed, Mishkin’s excellent and unique study on strictly Jewish scholarship highlights this point as he identifies various historical facts that Jewish scholars have agreed upon but nevertheless remain Jewish. Mishkin, *Jewish Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus*, 203–10. Additionally, these strictly Jewish scholars accept the facts in percentages similar to those Habermas has noted (i.e. about 75-85% believed the empty tomb). See also Licona’s distinction between the way the MFA takes into account a wide-variety of scholars in contrast to the Jesus Seminar. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 280 fn. 13. Cf. 64.

²¹⁰ Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 17. Licona takes a similar line Licona, “In Reply to Habermas, McGrew, and McCullagh,” 55–56, 60–61.

²¹¹ Habermas notes, “But I have never counted the empty tomb as a Minimal Fact; it is very obvious that it does not enjoy the near-unanimity of scholarship.” Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 25–26. Habermas notes this qualification in his earliest debates with Antony Flew. Gary R. Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1987), 19.

MFA seeks facts that are the least likely to be questioned and thus uses the “lowest common denominator” of facts.²¹²

There are at least three substantial benefits of such an approach that should be mentioned. First, the use of facts accepted by one’s dialogue partner demonstrates that one’s evidential ground is firm while also challenging their interlocutor to present what they believe best accounts for those facts.²¹³ When one side has limited themselves to the facts that their opponent will grant, it demonstrates that even on exceptionally limited grounds one’s case can still be made (let alone if additional facts are granted), especially when their opponent cannot do the same.

Second, by starting with facts conceded by the overwhelming majority of scholars, one can bypass the “often protracted preliminary discussions of which data are permissible.”²¹⁴ Frequently included in these discussions may be issues surrounding the reliability of the NT, whether there are contradictions in the Bible, theological questions/concerns, and so on.²¹⁵ These sorts of discussions can be avoided entirely because the MFA does not assume inspiration, inerrancy, or reliability. Thus one could grant, for example, an alleged contradiction for the sake

²¹² Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 17; Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 16; Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 44.

²¹³ For a dramatic example of this type of approach well before Habermas, see C. A. Row, ed., “The Historical Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead,” in *Living Papers, Concerning Christian Evidences, Doctrine and Morals*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati, OH: Cranston & Stowe, 1886), 1–48. Row states that he will “take it for granted, that what such men as Strauss, Renan, Baur, and the whole Tübingen school of critics admit, those with whom I am reasoning will not deny” (4). Among these concessions is Baur’s belief that only four works are authentically Pauline (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians) of which Row grants and focuses only on two. In using only 1 Corinthians and Galatians, Row is a forerunner to many today who emphasize the importance of the creedal material in 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. in conjunction with Paul’s relationship to the pillars of the church in Galatians 1-2

²¹⁴ Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 16–17.

²¹⁵ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 45–46.

of the argument since the MF themselves are both well-attested historically and agreed upon by scholars (which includes those who think the NT is errant and has contradictions).

Third, as noted above, a strong consensus assists in guarding against confirmation bias due to one's presuppositions since a heterogeneous group, with different and even conflicting biases, are in agreement regarding the data.²¹⁶ By appealing to such scholarly group analysis, it encourages the type of "community of conscience" we suggested in the previous chapter. These facts are (and have been) submitted to a diverse group of scholars and "subjected to critical questioning and correcting."²¹⁷ Thus, facts accepted by diverse groups are a good indication that there are strong reasons that those facts are historical (which explains why a majority of scholars have accepted them).²¹⁸

These three factors combined with the two criteria for a fact to be considered a MF create an environment in which one can know the past with high degrees of probability, if not the highest degrees of probability. It is important to note that Habermas is *not* simply arguing that these facts are true merely because a strong majority scholars believe them, but rather he has "always held that the first [criterion] is by far the most crucial, especially since this initial

²¹⁶ Habermas has also emphasized the value of scholarly diversity. Habermas, "The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus," 20–21. For Licona see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 55–56, 64–66. Cf. 280.

²¹⁷ We borrowed the phrase "community of conscience" from Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 202. A number of others have also noted the benefits of analysis, such as Amy-Jill Levine, "Christian Faith and the Study of the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 105–6; Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 52–56; C. Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History: Putting Postmodernism in Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2003), 15; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 261; Hershel Shanks, "Introduction: Defining the Problem," in *The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994), 4.

²¹⁸ Habermas notes that "the situation seems to me that there is an incessant search for a methodological starting point. Where are most scholars and *why*, precisely, are they there?" Habermas, "The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus," 17.

requirement is the one that actually establishes the historicity of the events.”²¹⁹ Thus, the MFA places the highest value on the multiple lines of arguments which are the very reasons scholars have provided as to how they came to believe an event occurred. While the second criterion is less important since scholarly opinion could always change or be mistaken, it is nevertheless still highly significant for the reasons noted above.

Habermas’ list

We may now list some of facts that Habermas presents as agreed upon by scholars with wide-ranging theological, political, and personal backgrounds. Like the other scholars whose lists varied depending upon emphasis and purpose, Habermas states that his list of facts have similarly varied from “publication to publication.”²²⁰ He highlights this principle in *Risen Jesus Future Hope* by first presenting a larger list of twelve “known historical facts.”²²¹ This list includes:

1. Jesus died by (Roman) crucifixion.
2. He was buried, probably in a private tomb.
3. Afterward Jesus’ death, the disciples were discouraged and lost hope.
4. *Although not as widely agreed upon*, the tomb was empty shortly after the burial.
5. The disciples had experiences that they thought were of the risen Jesus.
6. The disciples were transformed and willing to die for this belief.
7. The disciple’s proclamation of the resurrection began at the beginning of the church (i.e. it was very early).

²¹⁹ Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 16.

²²⁰ Ibid., 16. For a sample of these publications with varying lists see Gary R Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980); Habermas and Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, 19–20, 23–27; Terry L. Miethe and Gary R. Habermas, *Why Believe? God Exists! Rethinking the Case for God and Christianity* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 261–74; Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 100, 115–21; Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 8–31; Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 43–47; Habermas, “Resurrection Research From 1975 to the Present”; Gary R. Habermas, “Experiences of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection,” *Dialog* 45, no. 3 (2006): 289–92; Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 15–18; Gary R. Habermas, “Jesus Did Rise from the Dead,” in *Debating Christian Theism*, ed. J. P. Moreland, Chad Meister, and Khaldoun A. Sweis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 471–72.

²²¹ Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 9–10.

8. They proclaimed it in Jerusalem, where Jesus had just recently been crucified and buried.
9. Jesus' resurrection is central to the Gospel.
10. Sunday became the day for Christians to gather and worship together.
11. James, the brother of Jesus and a former skeptic, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.
12. Paul, the church persecutor, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was the risen Jesus.

Just a few pages later Habermas considers the possibility of a more radical skeptic questioning these facts and how he would respond. As noted above, he prefers to avoid side discussions and would rather start with the “lowest common denominator” of accepted facts when possible. Thus he can reduce his list, for the sake of the argument, to an even shorter list of six facts even though this list would be “arbitrarily reduced” to a “bare-bones level.”²²² These six “minimal facts” (as distinct from the “known facts”) would include:

1. Jesus died by (Roman) crucifixion.
2. The disciples had experiences that they thought were of the risen Jesus.
3. The disciples were transformed and willing to die for this belief.
4. The disciple's proclamation of the resurrection began at the beginning of the church (i.e. it was very early).
5. James, the brother of Jesus and a former skeptic, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.
6. Paul, the church persecutor, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was the risen Jesus.

For Habermas, the result of the MFA offers the potential for a case to be made for Jesus' resurrection using MFs that are acceptable by even the most skeptical research procedures. It seeks to not only use data that critical scholars accept and defend but does so while accepting a negative and skeptical outlook towards the relevant sources. The conclusion that Habermas, and others, make from these MFS is that naturalistic theories have continually demonstrated their

²²² Habermas, 26-27 (quote from 27). Cf. 48 fn. 149. This list has been reduced even further in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 48–77. There they use four facts plus one lesser accepted fact (empty tomb).

inability to adequately to account for them, while the explanation that Jesus was dead and then shortly later seen alive is a superior historical explanation.²²³

Limitations, Concerns, and Objections

After having examined the MFA and its benefits, it is proper to consider some of the limitations as well as some potential concerns and objections. We will be focusing on the philosophical and historical issues in this section and avoiding possible theological concerns.²²⁴ Additionally, many of the issues below are topics of debate within the much broader area of philosophy of history. As we will see, some of these concerns have more to do with history itself rather than the MFA.

Provides limited descriptions and is overly skeptical

The name of the method implies one of its limitations. The *Minimal Facts Approach* is, by definition, using a *minimal* amount of data. That might concern those who believe that other important and relevant historical information is being ignored. This objection becomes most notable when Licona demotes of Jesus' predictions or Habermas reduces his list to a "bare-bones" level.

It should be remembered, however, that these are *self-imposed* limitations. The MFA seeks to argue from a minimalist position. One could very well remove this limitation and argue for Jesus' predictions or use the longer lists to further increase one's confidence in the

²²³ Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 31–32. Similarly Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 465–610; Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 180–85; Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 418–20; Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, 132–41.

²²⁴ Such theological considerations might include, for example, certain Christian doctrinal beliefs (i.e. presuppositionalism). For those interested see Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); William C. Roach, "Historical or Presuppositional Apologetics: A Henrecian Response to Michael Licona's New Historiographical Approach," *Perichoresis* 17, no. 3 (July 1, 2019): 43–61.

resurrection in their historical reconstruction. While there is undoubtedly value in using all of the available data, there is also value in using a minimal data as well.²²⁵ The value in using minimal data may be especially important when one is beginning a historical inquiry. This is even more so on a potentially controversial topic. Thus, the context and purpose of the inquirer can dictate which route is best.

From a philosophical and pragmatic point of view, there are other benefits from arguing minimalistically. Making minimal claims means one has less to defend, which can be immensely important if one is constrained by length or time requirements.²²⁶ It also assists by avoiding periphery discussions that, although important, may not be directly related to the immediate historical question (e.g. Jesus' resurrection). Additionally, since it uses data that is agreed upon from a heterogeneous group of scholars, the data points are less themselves are less likely to be challenged (although see below). Thus, it is a fair objection that the MFA can be too restrictive, but the objection is more of a contextual than methodological. Just as in some contexts a screwdriver is better than a hammer, so too is a minimalist approach better in some contexts than a more comprehensive approach.²²⁷ The point for our purposes is that the MFA helps answer the question of how we know the past by providing a way to know the most secure facts about the past.

²²⁵ For a helpful discussion regarding McGrew's preference is for a much more robust method that allows for more data. Timothy J McGrew, "Inference, Method, and History," *Southeastern Theological Review* 3, no. 1 (2012): 35–39. For a response see Licona, "In Reply to Habermas, McGrew, and McCullagh," 60–62.

²²⁶ This is also part of the reason Habermas may use shorter lists at times. As the list of facts grows, the amount of agreement declines. Habermas, "The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus," 16.

²²⁷ The discussion between atomism and holism below is relevant to the discussion here since the MFA considers these minimal facts in a more atomistic manner, but the explanation of MFs can benefit from a holistic approach that considers larger narratives.

Burden of proof. The first criterion of MFA focuses on arguments presented from critical scholars and therefore does *not* assume the reliability of the sources. The topic of where the burden of proof lies and whether a text should be considered true until proven false or false until proven true can be an important factor with significant consequences in historical research.²²⁸ Some, like those of the Jesus Seminar, begin with the assumption that the Gospels are unhistorical until they can be demonstrated to be historical.²²⁹ On the other side of the spectrum, Stewart C. Goetz and Craig L. Blomberg, among others, have argued for the presumption of truth unless a text can be demonstrated to be false.²³⁰ It is understandable that since neither of these positions is particularly neutral with respect to the trustworthiness of the text, some scholars have adopted the position that the burden of proof rests on the one making the claim.²³¹ Thus, the question of whether or not we are to trust our texts *a priori* can have

²²⁸ For a good overview of this issue in historical Jesus studies see Dagmar Winter, “The Burden of Proof in Jesus Research,” in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmen and Stanley E. Porter, vol. 1, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 843–51. See also Robert L. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 73–74.

²²⁹ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York : Toronto: Scribner Book Company, 1993), 5. Coincidentally, it is on this same page that the Seminar notes that “eighty-two percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him.” See also Lane McGaughey, “The Search for the Historical Jesus: Why Start with the Sayings?,” ed. Bernard Brandon Scott, vol. 3 (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2008), 80.

²³⁰ They write, “Lying only works because people assume that the truth is normally told....With respect to history-writing the case is no different.” Stewart C. Goetz and Craig L. Blomberg, “The Burden of Proof,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 4, no. 11 (April 1981): 51–52. Similarly James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 18.

²³¹ Winter attributes this argument to Hooker’s well-known essay Morna D. Hooker, “On Using the Wrong Tool,” *Theology* 75, no. 629 (November 1, 1972): 580. He also notes a number of adherents to this view (Sanders, Meyer, Meier and Theissen) in Winter, “The Burden of Proof in Jesus Research,” 848. See also Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 94–99. It is also noteworthy that David Hackett Fischer regards either assumption as problematic (leaving one with the implication that positive evidence is needed for the one making the claim). David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 47–50. James Charlesworth states that “most” scholars in historical Jesus research start with the assumption that the claim is false until it can be proven true despite the fact that it is “not objective or unbiased; it interjects into scientific research a bias against authenticity.” Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus*, 18. Winter suggests that after the early 1970s that many scholars agreed that the burden of proof should be on the one making the claim. Winter, “The

significant consequences for historians when examining historical claims, not just those studying Jesus.²³²

Despite the ongoing debate regarding the burden of proof, the MFA nevertheless takes the more skeptical approach and does not regard the sources as generally reliable.²³³ The reason for this is two-fold. First, it is seeking to avoid the *most* agreed upon data. In order to do this it must accept a greater burden of proof.²³⁴ Those who take the opposite assumption and treat the sources as true until proven otherwise will likely agree with the MFs, but those who are *a priori* more skeptical would not. Thus, in order to have the widest agreement, a more skeptical

Burden of Proof in Jesus Research,” 849. Incidentally, this is the position taken Charlesworth (Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus*, 18).

²³² Historians outside the world of historical Jesus have offered their comments on this issue as well. For example, Donald Kagan, the Sterling Professor of Classics and History at Yale, prefers the method that he calls “higher naïveté” which appears to treat the texts as innocent until proven guilty. For Kagan, reports should be given the benefit of the doubt because it is “bad method to ignore the report of an ancient author that is not contradicted by another source, internally impossible, or self-contradictory.” Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 378. He makes this comment in the context of those who doubt the historicity of the Spartan Assembly in 475 BC. He makes further comments with respect to “higher naïveté” in his course “Introduction to Ancient Greek History” which is a part of the Open Yale Courses online. He gives examples of where “higher naïveté” proved more accurate than a constant skepticism (Lecture 2: the discovery of Troy and Mycenae; Lecture 7: the discovery of gas vapors at Delphi; Lecture 8; Kagan offers his [minority] belief that someday coins will be discovered that date to the period of Pheidon on or around Aeigina) as well as a more in-depth discussion of “higher naïveté” (Lecture 3). Also compare the works by historians who specialize outside the field of historical Jesus studies, but nevertheless write on the subject. Michael Grant agrees with Kagan’s sentiment in Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian’s Review of the Gospels* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 201. It is interesting that these two classicists take a more trustworthy approach while historical Jesus studies has taken a more skeptical approach. However, see also Donald Akenson whose approach is more like the Jesus Seminar in that he is less trusting of the sources. Donald Harman Akenson, *Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 297 fn. 3. Perhaps the comments of Kagan and Grant are similar since both of them work in ancient history while Akenson’s academic work has focused on Irish history since the 1800s.

²³³ Some have pointed out the particularly severe consequences of this bias. Princeton professor James Charlesworth bluntly states that this “assumption is not objective or unbiased; it interjects into scientific research a bias against authenticity.” Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus*, 18. Grant refers to it as “too extreme” and that it would not be applied to fields outside of historical Jesus studies. Grant, *Jesus*, 201. See also Alan G. Padgett, “Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus,” in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 290–99.

²³⁴ Graham Twelftree makes a similar move in order to “carry as many readers as possible.” Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 249–50.

approach is to be adopted. Second, it assists in avoiding the peripheral discussions with respect to where the burden of proof lays. Rather, one is compelled to examine the facts that are agreed upon even by the more skeptical approaches.²³⁵

Facts can be challenged or changed

A potential concern regarding the MFA is that some of the MFs could change.²³⁶ There are a few reasons for this concern. First, it is reasonable given the provisional nature of history and that new evidence may come to light which gives us reason to consider revising the current list of facts (either by adding or subtracting).²³⁷ Second, the overturning of views that were considered to be the consensus among scholars has occurred in historical research studies before.²³⁸ Third, due to human nature, there will undoubtedly be those who wish to challenge the status quo (even if they happen to agree with it) because sometimes it is simply pleasing to be a

²³⁵ We should add that the MFA is not in any way antithetical to the reliability approach. It may actually be considered a pre-reliability approach in that it seeks to establish facts that would be part of a cumulative approach of the reliability method.

²³⁶ Scot McKnight raises a variation of this concern, except he applies it more generally to historical Jesus studies with respect to the church. He notes that the church “must await each generation’s or scholar’s latest discoveries in order to know what to believe.” Scot McKnight, “The Misguided Quest for the Nature Miracles,” in *The Nature Miracles of Jesus: Problems, Perspectives, and Prospects*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 188. We should not that such an idea is not being suggested here nor does it appear to follow from the arguments in this work.

²³⁷ Theissen and Merz note the impossibility of emphasizing the provisional nature of historical conclusions. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 181. James D. G. Dunn reminds us that “more data may always emerge...any judgment will have to be provisional, always subject to the revision necessitated by new evidence or by new ways of evaluating old evidence.” James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 103.

²³⁸ Some examples from NT research include the change in scholarly assessment regarding the primacy of John to Mark or the impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls for NT studies. Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986.*, New Ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 112–24, 329–330 (respectively). More recently, the notion of the Gospels were *sui generis* has changed. There now appears to be general agreement that the Gospels are now related to Greco-Roman *bioi*. This changed occurred in large part, but not solely, due to the work of Richard Burridge. Interestingly, Burridge is one of those very people who were convinced of his book. Prior to his work, he, like so many others, did not think the Gospels were *bioi* and set out to against that thesis. Then when confronted with the evidence, he, like so many others now, changed his view. Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 101, 252–53, 283.

nonconformist or to experiment with a new hypothesis.²³⁹ Similarly, given the impact and significance of Jesus and the resurrection, one may reasonably expect those who wish to disprove the resurrection would seek to disprove the facts on which it is argued in an effort to undercut its effects. Such a skeptic may wish to challenge some of the MFs such that the list becomes so dwindled that it is then unable to sustain the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead.²⁴⁰ Of course this sword cuts both ways, arguments could be provided that convince a majority of scholars such that the number of MF may be enlarged.

Ultimately, the concern here is one that highlights a limitation of our epistemic access to truth, rather than a methodological limitation. The potential for new information, new perspectives, and so on are possible in many facets of life and it should not be surprising that the MFs have the same potential for change. Of course, it should be exceptionally difficult for them to change, as Kuhn similarly noted with strong scientific paradigms, due to the multiple supporting lines for each established fact.²⁴¹ Additionally, this is a limitation that we should want

²³⁹ As Crossan notes, “I think it’s the job of a scholar to take on the majority every now and then....there is no consensus unless some people every now and then stick their necks way out against the majority and see what happens.” Copan, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?*, 46. Similarly Neill and Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986.*, 124. Licona notes a more negatively that there are “those who make their abode on the fringe.” Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 62. For a list of those who have challenged consensus scholarship see Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” 15–27.

²⁴⁰ This is more typical of popular level discussions (for example, a brief perusal through the comments section of an online article on the MFA will demonstrate the tendency of many to radically reject the MFs *a priori*). However, we ought not think that scholars are beyond the capacity for such emotions, especially on such a controversial topic with such significant implications. Intellectuals are quite effective at presenting impoverished arguments in order to defend personal preferences or desires and none of us are above this temptation. On this topic more broadly see Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). More specifically, Trueman points this out when he writes that the “denial by Christopher Hill that there were ever famines in Russia should be a salutary warning that all historians, however talented, need to be aware of how their own ideological commitments, left unchecked, can lead to ridiculous and, in some circumstances, downright sinister places.” Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 107. Historian Sir Richard Evans of Cambridge makes similar observations regarding the Paul de Man controversy. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 202–6.

²⁴¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 62, 64, 151–53. Cf. Evans, *In Defense of History*, 36. Similarly Bernard Barber, “Resistance by Scientists to Scientific Discovery,” *Science* 134, no. 3479 (1961): 596–602.

since the freedom to ask questions about them essential to open inquiry. Such questioning can lead to further confidence in the facts, a revising of our understanding of them (i.e. adding or subtracting facts). While some may be concerned that these facts lack Cartesian certainty and thus *might* change, such a concern is unwarranted because the reality is that our knowledge of the past is partial, probabilistic, and provisional.

Two consensus concerns

In addition to concerns regarding the facts, there are concerns regarding the use of a consensus. There are two main issues we will discuss below, but before exploring them we want to stress that consensus agreement does not equal truth.²⁴² It should be clear that the MFA is not suggesting that MFs are true primarily because of the agreement, but rather primarily because of argument.

Determining a consensus. Perhaps the most challenging aspect when discussing a consensus view is determining what actually *is* the consensus view.²⁴³ Licona has noted examples from various experts who have presented contradictory consensus conclusions.²⁴⁴ Indeed, even in his own work there is are contradictory claims regarding the scholarly consensus of Jesus' predictions of his death and vindication.²⁴⁵

²⁴² Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 64, 279; Padgett, "Advice for Religious Historians," 297 ("At best, a consensus might provide a beginning for our own careful examination of the issues.").

²⁴³ Joel Willits helpfully asks how "many scholars are required for a consensus to form?" Joel Willits, "Presuppositions and Procedures in the Study of the 'Historical Jesus': Or, Why I Decided Not to Be a 'Historical Jesus' Scholar," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 1 (January 2005): 68. Willits is also concerned about other aspects of this type of method, such as its epistemic foundationalism (69-70, 78, 86) or the limitations of using the lowest common denominator (101-102).

²⁴⁴ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 278-79. Referring to different consensus regarding the authorship of Colossians.

²⁴⁵ Licona concludes that the majority of scholars do not believe Jesus' predictions of his death and resurrection as historical. Licona, 300-301. He then notes a contradictory conclusion with respect to the majority of scholarship found in Waterman, *The Empty Tomb Tradition of Mark*, 196.

Paul Rhodes Eddy warns that “the claim of ‘scholarly consensus’ within New Testament studies today has at times become little more than an unsubstantiated rhetorical ploy, rather than simply reporting of a documented state of affairs....given this tendency...scholars should take extra precautions when making claims of ‘consensus’.”²⁴⁶ He further, and rightly, criticizes scholars who do not provide documentation for their claims to consensus.²⁴⁷ If a scholar is claiming some fact is accepted by a majority of scholars we should expect (perhaps demand) to have some sort of substantiation for such a claim.²⁴⁸

The comments by Licona and Eddy are helpful and offer a good reminder for scholars to be careful when making claims to consensus. We must avoid the temptation of rhetoric to strengthen our arguments. Similarly, we must avoid the ease of using our perception of what we may “feel” the scholarly landscape to be when making such claims. Moreover, these are also reminders to readers to be on alert for such claims and to look for these claims to be backed up by documentation.

²⁴⁶ Paul Rhodes Eddy, “Response,” in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273.

²⁴⁷ In the context of his chapter, he raises this criticism specifically against William Lane Craig who very well could have provided the documentation but for some unknown reason did not. Eddy, 273–74. Cf. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 280.

²⁴⁸ How such documentation could manifest itself would vary depending upon the style of the author, the development of the argument, editorial restraints, and so on. Nevertheless, something, however minimal, should be presented. Interestingly, in the lists we noted above, there rarely seems to be documentation that substantiates the claims of each of those facts. There are, however, scholars who provide exceptional documentation. For historical Jesus research, Charlesworth notes over two dozen scholars from wide-ranging theological backgrounds and from several different countries before he writes that they and “far too many international authorities to mention—are all, and independently, recognizing that in its broad outline the Gospels’ account of Jesus is substantially reliable and true.” Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” 6–7. With respect to resurrection research, Habermas see Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 3–51. In the largest reference, Habermas cites a staggering list of fifty scholars who accept the list of six facts presented by Habermas (50 fn. 165. Cf. 26–27, 31). Similar documentation can be found in peer-reviewed academic journals such as Habermas, “Resurrection Research From 1975 to the Present.”

We may add to Licona and Eddy another concern. There is an increasing difficulty in determining a consensus due to the vast number of publications being produced today. It is understandable to expect the number of publications today. The introduction of the computer and internet has contributed to the plethora of publications today as well as an increased accessibility to publications. The challenge is so great that no less a scholar than Dale Allison has commented that “even the experts cannot keep up any more. The number of publications has *become as the sand of the sea*.”²⁴⁹ If there are a number of publications that we are unable to read due to the vast quantity of writings, it will make claims to scholarly consensus less accurate.

This issue has been recognized for some time in historical Jesus studies.²⁵⁰ Nevertheless, one need not read every single work in order to determine the scholarly lay of the land. While scholars cannot read every publication, they still read many of them and in so doing become familiar with the positions of various scholars.²⁵¹ This includes those whom they are unable to

²⁴⁹ Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 13 (emphasis added). He adds “Attending the displays of new books at the annual Society of Biblical Literature meetings produces in me mostly despair, because I know that amid the myriads of throw-away books, are thousands of valuable pages that I will never turn.”

²⁵⁰ In 1993, the noted Princeton professor James Charlesworth made a comment similar to Allison’s above. He wrote that the “task before us is now formidable, and in some ways impossible.” Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” 2. Charlesworth was echoing the concerns of Hugh Anderson who, in 1967, asked “Who of sufficient range of intellect and breadth of vision is to survey and measure an enterprise so massive, to bring some order into the chaos of the lives of Jesus?” Hugh Anderson, *Jesus* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 16. However, writing in 1906, Schweitzer wrote “There is room for an attempt to bring order into the chaos of the Lives of Jesus.” Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 12.

²⁵¹ Habermas, for example, states that throughout his years of research he had to modify how he was able to maintain his finger on the pulse of scholarship. He writes, “Initially I read and catalogued the majority of these publications, charting the representative authors, positions, topics, and so on, concentrating on both well-known and obscure writers alike, across the entire skeptical to liberal to conservative spectrum. As the number of sources grew, I moved more broadly into this research, trying to keep up with the current stated of resurrection research.” Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus,” 18. It should be added that although he stated that his bibliography at that time was around 3,400 sources, he is am making no claim to having done an exhaustive study of all these resurrection sources. He adds, “Not to be misunderstood here, as I have tried to explain elsewhere, I am making no claim to have done an exhaustive study of all these resurrection sources. My figures reflect a difference between representative sources that have been catalogued in all their significant, exhausting details, to those that were surveyed more briefly, to those that are simply listed in my ongoing bibliography” (18 fn.8).

read directly since interaction, references, and reviews of works provide additional avenues for scholars to become familiar with the positions held by scholars.²⁵² Moreover, at the very least, one could quite reasonably read works that provide samples or overviews from the main groups in scholarship, in ways similar to how polls are taken today, in order to obtain a sampling of scholarly views. Thus, while it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to keep up with every scholarly publication on a topic today, this does not prevent scholars from determining what the majority of scholars believe on a topic.

Does not eliminate subjective element. As indicated above, consensus views are, in limited ways, helpful. While they can potentially help to mitigate the issues of bias, they do not provide a *guarantee* that objective knowledge has been obtained.²⁵³ For example, it could be possible that a heterogenous group shares an unrecognized and false assumption on which they evaluate the data (and thus the group is not actually heterogenous with respect to a specific unidentified assumption).²⁵⁴ Thus, despite a plurality of worldviews coming together in agreement, there always remains the possibility of a (seemingly idiosyncratic) minority being correct.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Albert Schweitzer's notable *Quest for the Historical Jesus* provides a substantial overview of a significant number of scholars. Reading this work could help provide one with information regarding a number of scholars despite the fact they may not be able to read them.

²⁵³ We are in agreement with Vanhoozer's notion of fallible knowledge. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 302–3, 335, 458, 464.

²⁵⁴ Polanyi highlights some of these issues with respect to the discovery of the theory of relativity. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 11–14.

²⁵⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg notes that the sound judgment of a historian can outweigh a majority view. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Historical Jesus as a Challenge to Christology," *Dialog* 37, no. 1 (1998): 22–23.

Another consideration is that the MFs are the result of interpretations themselves. To help illustrate what we mean by this is by pointing out that interpretation occurs when “facts are converted into evidence.”²⁵⁶ While the MFs are frequently “converted” into evidence when they are used to argue for a historical explanation, the MFs themselves are also the result of various other facts that have been “converted” into evidence in order to establish them as the best historical explanation. MFs have multiple lines of evidence that are used in order to demonstrate that a MF is indeed a fact. The best explanation of these multiple lines of evidence is the MF itself. Thus, this process found in criterion one of the MFA is not without its own levels of subjective interpretation and may also explain why some of the facts, like the empty tomb, have lesser agreement.

It is important, given the aforementioned limitations as well as the argument in chapter two, to remind ourselves that subjective nature of historical research is not in itself an obstacle to knowing the past. Moreover, these concerns are not strong enough to warrant a rejection of the approach. As Licona points out, consensus approaches may “not *always* be a reliable filter of conclusions that have been overly influenced by the horizons of historians, no filters are.”²⁵⁷ A method need not be perfect in order to be effective.

Final comments

We have seen that while some of the concerns are legitimate, most are the concerns of history in general and thus not necessarily concerns of the MFA in particular. Aside from the concern that this method is overly limiting, many of the issues are ones that are topics that are

²⁵⁶ Evans, *In Defense of History*, 66. Dunn distinguishes event, data, and fact (i.e. interpretation of data) Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 1:102–5.

²⁵⁷ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 279 (emphasis added).

related to philosophy of history or historiography. In other words, they are questions that everyone interested in the past must face. While it is true that this method is restrictive, as we noted, however, this is an acknowledged limitation of the method and in certain contexts this restriction can be positive and in others a negative. The MFA is especially beneficial, then, by seeking to start the discussion on common ground and provide a groundwork from which one may begin their inquiry. Importantly, one can examine the common ground and explore the ways in which different historians have come to their conclusions about the past. The variety of arguments and lines of evidence (criterion one of the MFA) provide a description of how these thinkers have come to know the past.

A further point may be added here for those who still may hold a reservation regarding the method. Should we prefer a method that seeks the opposite of what the MFA seeks to establish? It would be thoroughly surprising to find a scholar would proudly proclaim that their historical method (1) does not have multiple lines of evidence nor (2) enjoys an overwhelmingly minimal acceptance by critical scholars!²⁵⁸ Ultimately, scholars may wish to amend or supplement the method, but the minimalist nature of the method is one designed to establish the strongest historical foundations possible. It thus provides us with one avenue of knowing the past.

²⁵⁸ Note we are not saying that one needs acceptance of a majority of scholars for their argument to be true. To be clear, we have not argued anywhere that something is true simply because the majority believe it. It can certainly be preferred since such agreement amongst a diverse group mitigates against confirmation bias, but minorities can certainly be correct and it may be their bias that gives them the greatest insight into the truth of the matter. For these reasons, the bigger emphasis is on the multiple lines of evidence that substantiate each fact.

Historical Criteria: Moving from Historical Claims to Historical Events

It is at this point one may ask, “It is all well and good that these historians agree to X, Y, and Z, but *how do they know* that these things happened? What is it that convinces them?”²⁵⁹

Underlying such questions is a concern regarding how and why historians move from *the claim* of the occurrence of a past event (found in a source) to the *actual occurrence* of such an event.²⁶⁰ In other words, how do historians adjudicate between *claims* to historicity and *actual* historicity?

These questions are by no means trivial and have serious implications to other fields. For example, if we cannot provide good reasons to discern historical truth from historical fictions, then most claims to alleged criminal activity will be discarded (unless they have been videotaped, but even this can be questioned).²⁶¹ Fortunately, it is virtually unanimously agreed that we can have good reasons for doing so despite the fact that fictions, fabrications, and distortions can, and do, occur.²⁶² While our ability to discern the truth of the past may be taken for granted by many, the question of how we know the past in light of these challenges still

²⁵⁹ In a recent debate, Carl Stecher, a retired literature professor of Salem State University, repeatedly asked a similar question, “How do we determine where history ends and legends begin?” Carl Stecher and Craig Blomberg, *Resurrection: Faith or Fact? A Scholars’ Debate Between a Skeptic and a Christian* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2019), 58, 61, 63. Tom Holmén notes that the criteria should help ground our ability to affirm a historical tradition (although he is specifically referring to the NT traditions). Tom Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Craig Evans (New York: London: Routledge, 2008), 45.

²⁶⁰ Although it cannot be pursued here, there is a critical distinction between the *fact* of an event having occurred and its *significance* (both past and present). This distinction has been tacitly acknowledged by those studying the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, but is rarely drawn out. This issue is highlighted, for example, throughout Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965). Some of the most explicit examples are found on 168-170 regarding the work of Gerhard Koch. The classic work on the distinction between a text’s meaning and its significance is found in E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

²⁶¹ Video evidence is susceptible to many of the similar limitations that photographs have (limited perspective or angle, etc.), although to a lesser extent.

²⁶² Alan Spitzer makes the point that it is assumed by virtually everyone, even those engaged in controversial debates, that there is some way in which we all can distinguish historical truth from historical fiction. Alan B. Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies About the Past: Reflections on Dewey, Dreyfus, de Man, and Reagan* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1–12, 117–21.

remains. The answer to this question can, on one level, be answered by the so-called criteria of authenticity.²⁶³ While some of criteria may be instinctively recognized, various scholars have explored them in greater detail.²⁶⁴

The Role of Criteria

Although historians may vary regarding as to where the burden of proof should be placed when confronted with a historical claim, various criteria have been proposed which, if met, add to the probability of a historical claim being a historical reality. Criteria that historians use include multiple independent attestation, embarrassing testimony, and contextual credibility among others (see list below).²⁶⁵ It will thus be essential to discuss what are they intended to demonstrate and what their limitations are since there appears to be some confusion in this

²⁶³ These historical criteria are only one way among others that historians can know the past (others include source criticism, archaeology, evaluation of inferences to the best explanation [explanatory power and scope], etc.). Tom Holmén has also pointed towards the general reliability of these texts such that it has taken some of the burden off of the criteria of authenticity. Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” 44, 46. James Charlesworth notes that, “in fact far too many international authorities to mention—are all, and independently, recognizing that in its broad outline the Gospels’ account of Jesus is substantially reliable and true.” Charlesworth, “Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity,” 7.

²⁶⁴ Tom Holmén notes that the “The criteria of authenticity are therefore best characterized as tools in support of logic.” Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” 45. John Meier writes that “Given the difficulty involved in articulating and applying these criteria, it is not surprising that some scholars brush aside the whole question of method and criteria.... Yet every scholar engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus is de facto operating with some method and criteria, however inchoate and unexamined.” John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: The Roots and the Problem of the Person, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 12. While for Dunn, Gotthold Lessing and Ernst Troeltsch are “usually given credit for stating and defining most clearly the principles on which critical historical study is postulated and the sobering consequences which follow.” Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 1:68.

²⁶⁵ Some historians do not like the word criteria due to the degree of certainty that is conveyed with it and prefer other terms (e.g. indices, proverbs, principles, or tools). See for example, Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, PA: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 134, 141; Benjamin C. F. Shaw, “What’s Good for the Goose Is Good for the Gander: Historiography and the Historical Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 15, no. 2–3 (December 11, 2017): 303. We will use a number of terms below (tool, proverb, etc.), including criteria, since we will be noting the relevant qualifications to the term.

regard.²⁶⁶ This will also put us into a position to more fully understand the criteria and why they can be utilized as historical tools in uncovering the past.

It may be helpful to list some of the criteria proposed by NT scholars. This is important since there is currently no official list of criteria that historians can appeal to or have agreed upon. While some have analyzed these proposed lists, we will only briefly mention some of them here as a preface to the following section.²⁶⁷ Some of the proposed criteria consist of the following:

1. *Early*: Generally earlier sources are preferred to later sources.
2. *Eyewitnesses*: Eyewitnesses are typically better than non-eyewitness accounts.
3. *Multiple Independent Attestation*: The more independent sources the greater the likelihood of the event's occurrence.
4. *Multiple Literary Forms*: Different literary forms (i.e. parables, narratives, etc.), indicate an earlier and more likely historical event.
5. *Embarrassing Testimony*: Attestation that can argue against the interests of the source are normally a positive indicator of an event's historicity.
6. *Enemy Attestation*: Generally, when one attests to an event that is favorable to their rival, then it is considered more likely to have occurred.
7. *Contextual Credibility*: If the event in question fits the overall context in which it occurred, this can add to the events probability (if even only slightly).
8. *Double Dissimilarity*: If an event is not similar to either Judaism or early Christianity than it can add to the probability of an event.

²⁶⁶ Shaw, "What's Good for the Goose Is Good for the Gander," 301–2.

²⁶⁷ One of the most extensive lists comes from Dennis Polkow, "Method and Criteria for Historical Jesus Research," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 336–56. See also Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). Allison considers Theissen and Winter's work as "the most extended and most judicious exploration of our criteria to date." Dale C. Allison, "How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity," in *Handbook for the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 7.

Typically Add Historical Probability to an Event's Occurrence

It is valuable to first note that these criteria are *typically only able to add probability* to the historicity of an event.²⁶⁸ Ehrman argues, for example, that reported events that have either multiple attestation and meet the criterion of dissimilarity are *positive* indicators of the historicity.²⁶⁹ Each of these criteria add to the probability of an events occurrence and the more criteria that are met, the more likely the event in question occurred.

A critical distinction should be made with respect to the inverse of this formulation. It is true that if some criteria that are met then we are *less confident* in the historicity of the event; however, *it does not follow* that their absence makes it is more likely the event in question is *unhistorical*. Confidence that an event occurred needs to be distinguished from events that are considered unhistorical.²⁷⁰ For example, the absence of the criterion of multiple attestation with regard to event X will not be able to make X become improbable (i.e. go below 50% probability). It can, however, make an event become less probable in the sense of moving one's *confidence* from, say, 90% to 80% probability or from 80% to 70% probability, but it will not (by itself) make the event *move to historical improbability* (i.e. move from 50% [agnostic] to 40% [improbable]).

²⁶⁸ Holmén points out that this was primarily due to a presumed skepticism towards the NT. Unless one could present arguments (i.e. criteria), the tradition “would be assumed to be inauthentic.” Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” 43, 51. The criteria, then, were primarily developed in a climate that placed the burden of proof on the NT to show that it is historical. Given that scholars, even skeptical ones, wanted to demonstrate that their depiction of Jesus was accurate, they would need to devise or utilize criteria to support their claims if they wanted to even begin to attempt to argue on the basis of evidence. We use the term “typically” for reasons noted below regarding the criterion of contextual credibility.

²⁶⁹ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 220-221. Ehrman makes a similar comment regarding works that are closer to the events in question (217).

²⁷⁰ Confidence in an events occurrence can also relate to the risk assessment of a belief. Although this topic cannot be pursued here, for one of the few (and brief) discussions on risk assessment see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 192.

To say it differently, if a reported event does not meet a certain criterion, then it does not necessarily follow that the alleged event is unlikely to have occurred. As Meyer noted, the “presence [of criteria] positively tells in favor of historicity, but their absence does not positively tell against historicity.”²⁷¹ The logic here is that if an alleged historical event is not supported by multiple attestation, then it *does not follow* that the event is therefore non-historical or did not happen simply because the event lacks the criterion of multiple attestation.²⁷² In such an instance we would be limited in our ability to know whether an event occurred if it lacks the additional corroboration and this limitation can subsequently affect our confidence in the historicity of the event, but it is not a *positive* argument that an event did not occur.²⁷³ Ultimately, the point is that the criteria are criteria of *authenticity*, not *inauthenticity*.²⁷⁴ This means that their presence will

²⁷¹ Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 131. He adds, “By denying that the absence of these indices positively tells against historicity, or justifies the methodological ranging of data in the non-historicity column, one breaks cleanly with the grounding of historicity judgments on mere assumptions.”

²⁷² Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 60–62. See also Darrell L. Bock, “Faith and the Historical Jesus: Does A Confessional Position and Respect for the Jesus Tradition Preclude Serious Historical Engagement?,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 8 fn. 9. Bock notes that the reason historian’s may be cautious, as opposed to skeptical, in such a situation is that the event may, *ceteris paribus*, merely lack additional confirmation. Such lack of confirmation may understandably be due to a number of causes such as the destruction or deterioration of documents (especially in ancient history). However, as pointed out in fn. 59 above, sometimes later corroboration for singularly attested events is discovered.

²⁷³ Such arguments are arguments from silence. Relevant exceptions could be construed on the basis of missing evidence where one would have expected to find it. If we are limited in our ability to know whether the event occurred, then historians generally take one of three options. (1) They can simply withhold judgment and remain agnostic. (2) They can view the claim skeptically by placing the burden of proof on the text (until its historicity can be adequately demonstrated). (3) They can trust the claim by placing the burden of proof upon the skeptic of the text (until it has adequately been demonstrated to be unhistorical). The latter two options are clearly influenced upon how one views the burden of proof question.

²⁷⁴ While the language of authenticity and inauthenticity is typically related to historical Jesus studies, broader language of historical or unhistorical could also be employed. For a discussion on the use of authenticity and inauthenticity see Anthony Le Donne, “The Rise of the Quest for an Authentic Jesus: An Introduction to the Crumbling Foundations of Jesus Research,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 6–17.

generally add to the historical probability of an event and their absence does not constitute positive evidence that the event did not occur.²⁷⁵

There is, however, an exception to the claim that the criteria can only be used to raise the probability of an event's occurrence or that their absence of a criterion does not count against an event's historicity. For Ehrman, alleged events that do not satisfy the criterion of *contextual credibility* give us reason to doubt their historicity.²⁷⁶ He argues that "unlike other criteria, contextual credibility serves a strictly negative function."²⁷⁷ The reasoning for this is that the events need to fit reasonably into the context in which they occurred. For example, if we found an account in which the disciples were driving motorcycles, we would know immediately that this event fails to meet the contextual credibility criterion and would be a clear mark against its historicity. This is an admittedly extreme example and is used to highlight how a failure of this criterion could count against the historicity of the event. There are, however, other examples in which something may seem out of place contextually but are nonetheless historical. The criterion

²⁷⁵ Some have argued that the reason criteria do not identify historical fiction is because the criteria are somehow being prevented from doing so by the one's using them. For example, Robert Miller writes, "I assume—although I would be happy to be corrected—that evangelical scholars do not allow those same criteria to lead to negative historical conclusions." Robert J. Miller, "When It's Futile to Argue about the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 89. Amy-Jill Levine makes a similar argument writing, "If the application of the criteria in every case yields a positive assessment, we have not proof of historicity but doubt about the viability of the criteria." Levine, "Christian Faith and the Study of the Historical Jesus," 98. Thus, the problem for Miller is that it is the person wielding the tool (evangelicals), while for Levine the problem is the tools themselves. Both appear mistaken for as we will see, the tools, if being used properly, are generally only able to yield positive results regardless who uses them. Moreover, the fact that they essentially only yield positive results is not a fault of the criteria, but a legitimate limitation. To say that a screwdriver is not a hammer does not make a screwdriver a less viable tool. Ultimately, if one wishes to establish a historical falsehood they must, according to Fischer, find "affirmative evidence of not X – which is often difficult, but never in my experience impossible." Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 47. See also 48, 62. Similarly Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 135–36.

²⁷⁶ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 222–23. See also Holmén, "Authenticity Criteria," 51–52. Holmén helpfully notes that this criteria can be stated positively (e.g. the criterion of plausibility or the criterion of Palestinian context).

²⁷⁷ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 223. Robert Webb also makes a similar point in Webb, "The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research," 63–67, 69–71.

of dissimilarity, for example, suggests that those things that Jesus said or did that is significantly dissimilar from the context of Judaism or Christianity is, in fact, *more likely* to be historical.²⁷⁸

Thus, as with the other criteria, one cannot simply apply the criteria in a dogmatic way.

Probability (and Subjectivity), Not Certainty

None of the criteria are able to verify events with absolute certainty nor should they be expected to do so. This must be noted due to the existential angst of those who may “want the criteria to work like a calculator” or may be struggling with “physics envy.”²⁷⁹ The criteria, no matter how strictly or universally applied, can only yield probabilistic (and provisional) assistance and never mathematical certainty.²⁸⁰ There are several factors to consider in this regard.

First, speculations and possibilities will always persist.²⁸¹ Various undercutting defeaters can be imagined *ad infinitum* that would be a potential defeater to a given criteria. For example, what if all the documents we have for a given event are counterfeits? This is always a possibility that, if true, would remove claims to multiple independent attestation. Yet, possibilities are not probabilities and such speculating is reminiscent of Descartes’ evil demon. One cannot refute its logical possibility, but it clearly does not follow that because something is possible it therefore

²⁷⁸ Webb uses Matt. 8:22/Lk. 9:60 as an example of the criterion of dissimilarity being met since Jesus’ words regarding the treatment of the dead (“let the dead bury their dead”) appear to be out of context with those of the early church who, so far as we know, had concern for burying the dead. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 65.

²⁷⁹ The first comment comes from Licona, “Is the Sky Falling in the World of Historical Jesus Research?” 358–59. The second is from Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, 55.

²⁸⁰ Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” 43, 45, 51, 53.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 46, 53.

becomes probable. Our knowledge of the past, like knowledge in so many other areas, remains in the world of probability and not certainty and this is perfectly fine.²⁸²

Second, the application of the criteria, like a proverb, is dependent upon the one applying them. This means that an important subjective element remains. Meyer helpfully pointed this out when he observed that the criteria

function in criticism not entirely unlike the way proverbs function in common sense. Faced with an issue that must quickly be settled one way or another, one might wonder which of two proverbs fits the situation: “He who hesitates is lost”? Or “Look before you leap”? If added insight is needed to know which piece of wisdom is relevant here and now, so in the criticism of historical data, when the indices offer mixed signals, added insight I required to know which factors tip the balance. The added insight is not a misbegotten intrusion of subjectivity it is that without which a true judgment is simply impossible.²⁸³

The criteria require wise discernment in their application and are not wooden calculations. Of course, along with the possibility of *wise* discernment also comes the possibility of *unwise* discernment.²⁸⁴ It is for this reason that there remains an important subjective element in the use and application of the criteria. As noted in chapter two, subjective elements need not be a deterrent from good inquiry. Just as a proverb is not invalidated simply because someone applies

²⁸² Some may nevertheless find the probable nature of much of our knowledge existentially problematic. Ben Simpson notes some historians “emphasized this high level of objectivity because of the demand for certainty in the modern Western culture.” Benjamin I. Simpson, *Recent Research on the Historical Jesus*, *Recent Research in Biblical Studies* 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 28. Cf. Dunn’s comments on the fact that most of our knowledge is probabilistic. James D. G. Dunn, “Response to Darrell L. Bock,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 299.

²⁸³ Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 141. Similarly, Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 279. Jonathan Bernier writes that the criteria “simply do not achieve the desired objectivity because objectivity is to be located not in our techniques but, rather, in ourselves.” Jonathan Bernier, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus after the Demise of Authenticity: Toward a Critical Realist Philosophy of History in Jesus Studies*, *Library of New Testament Studies* 540 (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 10. See also 159.

²⁸⁴ We can agree with Bernier here when he notes that we need to “make peace with our own subjectivity and realize that it is an asset rather than an obstacle.” Bernier, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus after the Demise of Authenticity*, 11. However, we would want to add, that we should also recognize that in addition to it being an asset, it can also be an obstacle. This is not just the case for “other” historians, but also ourselves.

the incorrect proverb to a given situation, neither are the criteria to be discarded because they have been misused.²⁸⁵

Another way one may understand the subjectivity of the inquirer with respect to the criteria is in the evidential weight one places on the differing criteria. Webb remarks that the “relative importance or weight for each of these primary criteria is somewhat subjective among scholars.”²⁸⁶ For example, some may favor multiple attestation (e.g. John Meier) as the weightiest criterion while others may prefer discontinuity (e.g. Norman Perrin). However, Webb warns that with a “heavy and rough hand, the historian can push the criteria in one direction or another, and they may be used to justify a preconceived viewpoint.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Allison is concerned that we cannot discern the difference between a misuse and proper use since each historian makes the criteria say what they want. He uses tools as an analogy and writes, “Tools do not dictate how they are used; the hands that hold them do that. You can use screwdrivers to remove screws or screws, and you can use screwdrivers to install screws.” Dale C. Allison, “It Don’t Come Easy: A History of Disillusionment,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 197. Allison’s distinction is that historians are using these tools to build or tear down anything they like. However, this seems to be an overly negative attitude towards the criteria and would also seem to apply to proverbs. Though people can wrongly apply a proverb by forcing it into a situation in which it ought not be used, we do not respond by suggesting that we do away with proverbs. So too with criteria. Thus, the point we are making is that a hammer is still a good tool even if someone (mistakenly) uses it on a screw (one could also question whether the hammer constitutes an actual “tool” in such a scenario since it is being used in a way outside of its original design). Such mistaken or incorrect uses of a tool or proverb should cause us to consider the one utilizing them, not question the tool/proverb itself.

²⁸⁶ Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 60. However, Holmén rightly notes “the criteria are not all of the same value in what comes to argumentative strength and cogency...the effectiveness and cogency of the different criteria vary from case to case.” Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” 52. See also Shaw, “What’s Good for the Goose Is Good for the Gander,” 303–4.

²⁸⁷ Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 72. Hooker’s comments are similar, but too pessimistic (and possibly relativistic). She writes that the “answers which the New Testament scholar gives are not the result of applying objective tests and using precision tools; they are very largely the result of his own presuppositions and prejudices.” Hooker, “On Using the Wrong Tool,” 581. Rather, as Allison more accurately states, “The criteria are not strong enough to resist our wills, which means that we tend to make them do what we want them to do....Tools do not dictate how they are used; the hands that hold them do that. You can use screwdrivers to remove screws, and you can use screwdrivers to install screws. And so it is with multiple attestation, dissimilarity, embarrassment, and coherence.” Allison, “It Don’t Come Easy: A History of Disillusionment,” 197.

For these reasons, it is not be surprising that some see the application of the criteria as “more art than science.”²⁸⁸ Viewing the criteria as something other than a scientific formula reminds us that the results are not assured with certainty and that the role of the inquirer retains an element of responsibility.²⁸⁹ Thus, the subjective inquirer applies the criteria in order to yield objective knowledge about the past that is (unsurprisingly) probable and provisional, but not certain.

Criteria Should be Used as Part of a Cumulative Argument

The criteria are not to be used in isolation, but rather should be used in conjunction with one another when possible. As Webb writes, the criteria “must be used together....viewed as functioning collectively to provide the historian with the best judgment concerning a piece of tradition....it cannot be stressed enough: weighing the evidence involves using all the criteria together, seeing the issue from various angles.”²⁹⁰ The past is far too dynamic to be restricted to one test for truth. Just as a geologist would not restrict their inquiry to only that which shovels can discover, neither should the historian examine the past using only one criterion. Thus, while one may have a preference for a given criterion, they should not use that criterion to the

²⁸⁸ Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 72.

²⁸⁹ Ben Meyer helpfully reminds us that criticisms of the criteria that identify the subjective nature of the criteria are implicitly advocating for the impossibility of a positivistic form of history. He writes, “Morna D. Hooker made a particularly incisive contribution....But the critique failed to come to a fully satisfactory conclusion....[because] it was undermined by a mistaken (implicitly positivist) recoil from ‘subjectivity.’” Ben F. Meyer, “Some Consequences of Birger Gerhardsson’s Account of the Origins of the Gospel Tradition,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansbrough, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 64 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 427. Bernier places Meyer’s point in the critical realist context. Bernier, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus after the Demise of Authenticity*, 10 fn. 36.

²⁹⁰ Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 72.

exclusion of other considerations.²⁹¹ Indeed, the more tools at their disposal, the more fruitful their findings are likely to be (so long as those tools are used properly). Tom Holmén argues that “The best way to observe these considerations is an ensemble use of the criteria: that is, allowing flexibly for the whole repertoire of applicable criteria.”²⁹² Thus, there is an interplay between the differing criteria as well as the context in which they are employed and by taking these into account, one attains a greater understanding of the past.

The importance of this can be seen in the purpose of some of the criteria themselves. For example, as Rafael Rodríguez and Mark Goodacre note, the criterion multiple attestation and the criterion of embarrassment create a *tension* with one another. Goodacre writes, “It is a strange state of affairs that scholars will simultaneously claim both that a given tradition was ‘embarrassing’ to the early church and that they repeated it on ‘multiple’ occasions. It is a counterintuitive combination.”²⁹³ While we will have more to say on the combination of these two criteria below, it is sufficient for our purposes here to point out the use of multiple criteria is important for developing a better understanding of the past, which includes identifying potential tensions in our evidence such as those noted by Rodríguez and Goodacre.

We thus want to argue that an important aspect of the criteria is that, in general, they should not be used in isolation. As Holmén points out, “the more criteria one can appeal to for the authenticity of a tradition or a motif, the better. However, decisions must not be based on

²⁹¹ For example, Webb complains that John Dominic Crossan has overemphasized the criterion of multiple attestation in his work. Webb, 62 fn. 117. We may also note that the historian should not just bind themselves to the use of criteria alone, but should incorporate other historical arguments.

²⁹² Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” 53.

²⁹³ Mark Goodacre, “Criticizing the Criterion of Multiple Attestation: The Historical Jesus and the Question of Sources,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 166. See also Rafael Rodríguez, “The Embarrassing Truth About Jesus: The Criterion of Embarrassment and the Failure of Historical Authenticity,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 147.

simple counting of the criteria but the variables [also involved].”²⁹⁴ Furthermore, and as we will see below, it is not just that the criteria should be used in conjunction and in conjunction with other criteria, but also on differing levels of analysis with other historical arguments.

Multiple Levels of Analysis

Historical analysis occurs at many different levels. Two levels of analysis relevant to our present considerations are what can be termed holism and atomism. Holism seeks to take into account a general overview of all available sources and factors.²⁹⁵ On the other end of the spectrum, atomism seeks to examine specific events (saying or action) within the broader historical narrative. Contrary to what some have suggested, the criteria should take both into account when analyzing the past.²⁹⁶

Ferdinand Hahn helpfully had pointed out years ago the interrelated nature of the whole and the parts of historical inquiry. He wrote that a “reconstruction of the pre-Easter activity of Jesus can be obtained only if a first draft for a comprehensive interpretation is sketched simultaneously with the discovery of detailed pieces of information. Individual observations and an overall view are interrelated at every stage.”²⁹⁷ The larger narrative is thus kept in mind when

²⁹⁴ Holmén, “Authenticity Criteria,” 53.

²⁹⁵ Chris Keith argues that such a “big-picture approach” is growing in historical Jesus studies and is one of the ways historians should seek to proceed. Chris Keith, “The Fall of the Quest for an Authentic Jesus: Concluding Remarks,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 201–2. Other scholars in the volume who advocate for such an approach are Jens Schröter, “The Criteria of Authenticity in Jesus Research and Historiographical Method,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 55–59, 65, 69–70; Rodríguez, “The Embarrassing Truth About Jesus: The Criterion of Embarrassment and the Failure of Historical Authenticity,” 148–51; Allison, “It Don’t Come Easy: A History of Disillusionment,” 193–95, 198.

²⁹⁶ Allison writes, “Fishing for the Jesus in the sea of tradition using criteria of authenticity wrongly privileges the part over the whole.” Allison, “How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity,” 21.

²⁹⁷ Ferdinand Hahn, “Methodological Reflections on the Historical Investigation of Jesus,” in *Historical Investigation and New Testament Faith: Two Essays*, ed. Edgar Krentz, trans. Robert Maddox (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 54. While in the following pages (55–57), Hahn notes the challenges of such a dialogue between the whole and the parts. Schröter’s summarizes Hahn’s views writing, “The general sketch on the one hand and the...criteria on the other would therefore stand in *complex interdependence* with each other and form a

examining an individual unit, but the individual units are precisely those what contribute to our understanding of the larger narrative.

One may think of Google Earth as a helpful analogy here. Just as one can zoom in on Google Earth in order to look at individual streets, one can also zoom out in order to examine the broader city, state, country, or continent. These different levels aide to our geographic understanding by allowing analysis on a variety of different levels (street, city, etc.). Similarly, our understanding of the past is examined on multiple levels of analysis. One can “zoom in” to an action, but in order to better understand the action one may also need to “zoom out” and consider the bigger picture. For example, when utilizing the criterion of embarrassment, one must consider the atomistic level of the event (e.g. Jesus’ death on a cross). However, one must also “zoom out” in order to consider the wider narrative that situates such an event in a specific context that would constitute the event as embarrassing. In other words, the “fact *becomes* embarrassing when we place them into larger historical narratives.”²⁹⁸

We should add here that on the different levels different historical arguments can be provided that go beyond just the criteria. For example, Allison helpfully refers to recurrent attestation when considering a more holistic approach. While multiple independent attestation refers to a particular event, recurrent attestation is “a theme or motif that is repeatedly attested throughout the tradition.”²⁹⁹ This is important for Allison because if the “tradents of the Jesus

methodological circle for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus.” Schröter, “The Criteria of Authenticity in Jesus Research and Historiographical Method,” 55 (emphasis added).”

²⁹⁸ Rodríguez, “The Embarrassing Truth About Jesus: The Criterion of Embarrassment and the Failure of Historical Authenticity,” 146 (emphasis in original). It is worth noting that, on the atomistic level, the criteria will generally identify that an event happened and not its significance. For example, whether or not an event is embarrassing cannot be known simply by the occurrence of an event alone. In some contexts one event can be embarrassing, while in other events the same event may be encouraging.

²⁹⁹ Allison, “How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity,” 25.

tradition got the big picture or the larger patterns wrong then they also got the details—that is, the sentences—wrong.”³⁰⁰ Conversely, if they get the particulars wrong, the big picture arguments provide a reasonably accurate general depiction or gist of the past. It is for this reason that Allison is able to argue that “Joseph was surely the name of Jesus’ father, even if none of the stories in which he appears is historical.”³⁰¹ Whether or not one agrees with Allison’s arguments, the point we are making is that the criteria can, and should, be used alongside other historical arguments.

Here we have argued along lines similar to that of Hahn. He pointed out that “observations taken singly fall far short of permitting judgment about a piece of tradition....Only when several criteria are used simultaneously, and when observations are used to supplement and correct one another, can reliable conclusions be obtained about the assessment of the Jesus tradition for use in the historical investigation of Jesus.”³⁰² More recently, Licona has advocated for a similar approach writing, “Whether one begins with holism or atomism, *using them together* has the potential to yield a greater degree of certainty pertaining to a greater number of specific logia and acts than using one approach to the exclusions of the other.”³⁰³ Thus, we want to avoid using the criteria in isolation from one another, in isolation from the larger picture, and in isolation from other arguments. Rather, we should seek as cumulative and integrated approach as possible if we are seeking to have a better understanding of the past.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 21.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 23.

³⁰² Hahn, “Methodological Reflections on the Historical Investigation of Jesus,” 54.

³⁰³ Licona, “Is the Sky Falling in the World of Historical Jesus Research?” 358 (emphasis added). Schröter, although more critical of the criteria, appears to be in agreement with Hahn’s approach. Schröter, “The Criteria of Authenticity in Jesus Research and Historiographical Method,” 55–59.

Summary

For decades various concerns have been raised with respect to the effectiveness and usefulness of the criteria in providing authentic or historical material about Jesus.³⁰⁴ These concerns have recently culminated into a book length treatment on the subject criticizing the criteria titled *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*.³⁰⁵ We have sought in the above discussion to take some of their criticisms into account in our presentation of how historical criteria can assist one in knowing the past. In summary, the criteria are tools that are used to help establish the greater probability of a purported historical event. The more criteria that are met, generally the greater the likelihood the event occurred. If a historical claim does not meet the criteria, then it does not typically make the event unlikely by itself. The criteria all add varying degrees of certainty with some criteria carrying greater weight than others and some criteria being more valuable in certain situations and less so in others. Wise judgment and discernment will be important when determining which criteria are more valuable than others in a given circumstance. Thus, the subjective role of the inquirer is important in the application of the criteria. Furthermore, we should avoid the mistake that we only need one criterion or that only one should be used. Instead we should seek to use multiple criteria. In addition to multiple criteria, we should utilize the criteria within the context that takes both the whole (holism) and the parts (atomism) into consideration. In doing so, one should not exclude other relevant historical considerations. In short, the criteria function as proverbs that are applied by the inquirer of the past in order to provide positive, probabilistic, and provisional conclusions that

³⁰⁴ Perhaps beginning most notably in the 1970s with Hooker, "On Using the Wrong Tool."

³⁰⁵ Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

are most effective when one takes into account other relevant criteria, historical arguments, and differing levels of analysis (e.g. holism).

Jesus, Criteria, and the Surprise of Historicity: Jesus' Crucifixion as Test Case

In response *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, Licona asks an important question to those who are more skeptical of the criteria. He writes,

If a contributor objects to my use of criteria with respect to Jesus' death by crucifixion, I would want to ask that contributor whether he or she thinks Jesus was crucified and died as a result. If the contributor answers affirmatively, I would want to ask how that contributor arrived at that conclusion apart from the criteria.³⁰⁶

In this section we want to provide a test case for how the criteria contribute to our knowledge of the past, specifically with respect to Jesus' death.

Criteria and the Crucifixion

In addition to the criteria, there are many critical *arguments* for Jesus' crucifixion (e.g. medical considerations, qualifications of the Roman soldiers, Strauss' famous critique, etc.). In an effort to highlight how the criteria operate when investigating the past, we are going to focus upon those directly related this event. In this case there are at least seven different criteria that provide the inquirer with positive reasons to believe Jesus died by crucifixion.³⁰⁷

First, Jesus death by crucifixion is *multiply attested* in a wide variety of sources. Jesus death is referenced in nineteen of the twenty-seven writings of the NT.³⁰⁸ It is also attested, both

³⁰⁶ Licona, "Is the Sky Falling in the World of Historical Jesus Research?" 365.

³⁰⁷ Although we think that there is limited value for the criterion of dissimilarity, we have excluded it from our consideration (Jews were not expecting a Messiah who would die) due to the recent debates surrounding the validity of this criterion. If we were to include this criterion, then there would be eight different criterion that are met. For one of the most detailed discussions of this criterion see Theissen and Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus*.

³⁰⁸ It is not found in 2 Thessalonians, Titus, Philemon, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude. It should be noted that although there are nineteen works in the NT, scholars have identified additional possible sources within those works (e.g. Q, creeds, hymns, etc.). The number of sources could also vary depending upon how one views the authorship of the Pauline epistles that are not considered a part of the "undisputed" Pauline works. The

with and without mentioning the cross, in early Christian noncanonical writings such as Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and others.³⁰⁹ Josephus and Tacitus are examples from non-Christian sources that also refer to Jesus death.³¹⁰ These sources combine to make Jesus' death by crucifixion one of the best attested historical facts we have about Jesus.³¹¹

Second, as might be expected in a wide variety of sources, Jesus' death is found in *multiple literary forms*. It is found, for example, in biographies (Gospels), creeds (1 Cor 15:3), and historical annals (Tacitus). While this criterion is sometimes considered under the category of multiple attestation, we find it helpful to distinguish it separately here.³¹²

Third, it is in sources that are *early*. Although Paul mentions Jesus' death and his writings predate the Gospels, there is an important creedal formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. Jesus' death is mentioned in v. 3. It is widely believed that the creed predates Paul's initial trip to Corinth. In fact, James Ware has recently summarized the scholarly assessment regarding the date of this creed. He writes, "There is almost universal scholarly consensus that 1 Cor 15.3–5 contains a carefully preserved tradition pre-dating Paul's apostolic activity and received by him within two to five years of the founding events."³¹³ Thus, we have reports of Jesus' death that date

undisputed Pauline works are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. If the other works attributed to Paul are actually Pauline, then we still have one source. If they are non-Pauline, then these would constitute additional sources and add to the weight to the criteria of multiple attestation.

³⁰⁹ For just four references from the early church: Clement, *Cor.*, 24; Ignatius, *Trall.* 9; Polycarp, *Phil.* 7; and Justin, *I Apol.*, 32. Apocryphal writings, such as the *Gospel of Peter*, similarly include Jesus death.

³¹⁰ Jos. *Ant.*, 18.3. Although there is debate about the authenticity of Josephus' text as a whole, it is likely that the portion referencing Jesus' death was in the original. Tacitus' reference in *Ann.* 15.44 mentions the "extreme penalty" as occurring under Pilate. Other references could include the Talmud which makes reference to Jesus being "hanged" in *b. Sanh.* 43a (cf. Acts 10:39).

³¹¹ This is a central point in Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), esp. 291.

³¹² Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1: The Roots and the Problem of the Person:174–75.

³¹³ James Ware, "The Resurrection of Jesus in the Pre-Pauline Formula of 1 Cor 15.3–5," *New Testament Studies* 60, no. 04 (2014): 475. Among those he cites are Conzelmann, Schlier, Kloppenborg, Lüdemann, and Gerhardsson. Ehrman similarly writes that "it is believed far and wide among New Testament specialists that Paul is

incredibly early in the ancient which subsequently adds considerable probability to this event being historical.³¹⁴

Fourth, there are several elements that indicate the *embarrassing/offensive* nature of Jesus' death by crucifixion from the wider culture.³¹⁵ Jewish sensibilities considered those hung on a cross as cursed by God (Deut 21:23). The Roman world would have understood such a death to belong to a slave or insurrectionist.³¹⁶ Cicero notably stated, the very word "should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears."³¹⁷ Cicero's comments appear to explain why there are not more descriptions in the ancient world of such an event. In fact, the Gospels represent "the single most comprehensively documented extant record of an execution by this method."³¹⁸ Indeed, as Paul Barnett writes, "the dominant place of the death of Jesus, a death by the unmentionably vile mode of crucifixion, makes the *bios* or 'life' of Jesus distinct from any other *bios* of that era."³¹⁹ Thus, while

indicating that this is a tradition already widespread in the Christian church, handed over to him by Christian teachers, possibly even the earlier apostles themselves." Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 2014, 138.

³¹⁴ It might be objected that the creed does not refer to the cross and thus we cannot know if the mode of execution goes back this early. However, there is good reason to connect the mode with the creed. For example, Paul argues that Jesus was crucified and it is unlikely that he would quote this creed if it implied another sort of death (cf. 1 Cor 1:23).

³¹⁵ For an update to Hengel's classic treatment, see John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, 2nd ed., vol. 327, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

³¹⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision—Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 178.

³¹⁷ Cicero, *Pro Rabirio*, 16. Hengel helpfully writes that, "for the men of the ancient world, Greeks, Romans, barbarians and Jews, the cross was not just a matter of indifference, just any kind of death. It was an utterly offensive affair, 'obscene' in the original sense of the word." Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), 22. For a discussion of this text see Hengel, 41–45.

³¹⁸ Felicity Harley, "Crucifixion in Roman Antiquity: The State of the Field," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 27, no. 2 (June 26, 2019): 308.

³¹⁹ Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 165. See also 159–161.

Christians believing in Jesus' resurrected may not have felt embarrassed or offended by Jesus' crucifixion, those to whom they were evangelizing certainly would (1 Cor 1:23).³²⁰

Fifth, Jesus' crucifixion meets the criterion of *contextual credibility*. As indicated above, crucifixions did occur in the time and area that Jesus lived. Thus, Ehrman offers the simple conclusion that the "crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate is, of course, contextually credible."³²¹

Sixth, although this criterion is met with less confidence than those above, we appear to have reports that originated with *eyewitnesses*. The reason it is met with less confidence than those above is because of the arguments used to establish the eyewitnesses are not as clear-cut as one may desire. Only two points will be briefly made here with respect to this criterion. (A) The statement regarding Jesus' death from the early creed in 1 Cor 15:3 could have been created or affirmed by eyewitnesses.³²² Paul argues that the apostles were preaching the same message as him (v. 11; Cf. Gal 1:18; 2:1-10) and given that the cross was so central in Paul's thought it is unlikely that he would have gotten that wrong, especially after two trips to Jerusalem and meeting with the pillars of the church (Galatians. 1-2). (B) Richard Bauckham has placed a great deal of emphasis on the names of the women in the Gospels, especially towards the end of Jesus' life. His argument is that their names were recorded because they were well known witnesses

³²⁰ Allison also points out that, "The joy brought by belief in the resurrection did not obliterate the memory that Jesus had been publicly humiliated and tortured to death." Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 364. This explains, *contra* Goodacre, why we could have multiple attestation and embarrassing testimony. Although, Ehrman places the crucifixion as meeting the criterion of dissimilarity, embarrassment and dissimilarity frequently overlap in that they both identify aspects that are contrary to the biases of the author. Ehrman's own comment highlights this overlap because he argues that the crucifixion of Jesus created "enormous headaches for the Christian mission." Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 292.

³²¹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 291.

³²² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 307–8; Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 99. Even Ehrman considers the possibility that the apostles gave him this creed. Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (NY: HarperOne, 2014), 138.

and each Gospel listed the women that were known to their respective authors.³²³ Although more work needs to be done to more fully establish these points, these arguments present why one would be reasonable in considering this criterion as relevant here.

Seventh, a few of the sources indicate that the opponents of early Christianity were aware of Jesus' death and thus meets the criterion of *enemy attestation*. Like the criterion above, it also has some challenges that cause us to be less confident in its fully satisfying this criterion.

Although there are some problems with it (i.e. dating, sources, etc.), we noted above that the Babylonian Talmud refers to Jesus as being hung. Additionally, it is reasonable for scholars like Ehrman to suggest that Paul knew of Jesus' crucifixion prior to his own conversion both of which occurred in the early 30s.³²⁴ One would expect that the very enemies of Jesus would be proclaiming their perceived victory (Cf. Matt 27:11-15). In any event, this criterion is another one that is worth considering even if it cannot be held with as much confidence as other criterion.

We have seen how the claim that Jesus was crucified can be examined in light of various historical criteria and that by meeting these seven criteria, the reality of the event increases in probability.³²⁵ Other arguments should be used to supplement these criteria, but the criteria should also contribute to our ability to obtain knowledge about the past. This test case very briefly presents how the criteria are used in assessing claims of the past.

In completing our test case, we want to add a final comment. One might expect that these and other arguments for Jesus' death by crucifixion have convinced scholars from wide-ranging

³²³ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 51–54.

³²⁴ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 156–58, 164, 173.

³²⁵ We could have applied this test to an event outside historical Jesus research. Recall the event we discussed in chapter two regarding the controversy surrounding Huldrych Zwingli. The letter discovered that contained Zwingli's confession met several criteria. At the very least it was eyewitness testimony, embarrassing, and corroborated the multiple reports of the Catholic church (reports that were difficult to discern due to the controversy).

theological backgrounds and indeed they have. In *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Gary Habermas lists over fifty scholars who accept this fact (among others).³²⁶ We need not list them here, but it is important to nevertheless point out the fact that scholars have been convinced by the reasons mentioned above (among others) and the acceptance of this fact by a diverse group of scholars can likewise provide us with greater confidence regarding the event. Thus, the MFA itself utilizes the role of the criteria and other historical arguments as well as substantial agreement among scholars.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout this chapter we have sought to establish how we can know events in the past occurred. We presented two interrelated concepts that both deal with our epistemological access to the past. The first was to consider the MFA as a way to begin with the bedrock historical details. Such a method is admittedly minimal, but the events established by such an approach should be the most secure. We also examined one way that historians can move from mere claims of the past, to warranted knowledge that the event actually occurred. Historical criteria can be used to provide the inquirer with various intuitive tools that help them better discern past facts from past fictions.

³²⁶ Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 50–51 fn. 165.

CHAPTER FOUR: HISTORICAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND DIVINE ACTION

“In history as well as in science, God is dead.”³²⁷

- Tor Egil Følrand

“The academy—which now includes ourselves—has the right to reframe approaches in the light of new perspectives.”³²⁸

- Craig Keener

We will be discussing a question that has been undergoing a re-evaluation among scholars in recent years, namely whether a historian *qua* historian can conclude that a miracle has occurred.³²⁹ Interestingly, where one falls on this question does not appear to be guided directly by the question of whether God exists.³³⁰ There are skeptics who believe historians should, in principle, be able to investigate miracle claims, such as Jesus’ resurrection, as well as skeptics who do not.³³¹ Similarly, there are theists who think these claims can be investigated historically,

³²⁷ Tor Egil Følrand, “3. Historiography Without God: A Reply to Gregory,” *History and Theory* 47, no. 4 (2008): 532.

³²⁸ Contributors, “Dialogue: A Way Forward,” in *The Nature Miracles of Jesus: Problems, Perspectives, and Prospects*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 196 (Craig Keener).

³²⁹ For example, Graham Twelftree’s recent book presents several different scholars who examine the historian’s responsibility to miracle claims, specifically Jesus’ nature miracles. The book, Twelftree argues, “seeks to discuss the problem with the view to seeing whether there is the possibility of greater consensus.” Graham H. Twelftree, “Preface,” in *The Nature Miracles of Jesus: Problems, Perspectives, and Prospects*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), xi. For a recent article concluding in the negative, see Robert L. Webb, “The Rules of the Game: History and Historical Method in the Context of Faith: The Via Media of Methodological Naturalism,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 59–84. For an affirmative response, and critique of Webb, see Michael R. Licona, “Historians and Miracle Claims,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12 (2014): 106–29.

³³⁰ Philosopher Raymond Martin was surprised to find that it is *not* a partisan issue between “conservative and liberal historical Jesus scholars.” Raymond Martin, *The Elusive Messiah: A Philosophical Overview of the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 50. Similarly Robert A. Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 88.

³³¹ For example, Gerd Lüdemann is a skeptic who maintains the question of Jesus’ resurrection must be asked historically. Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 11–21. While, perhaps most famously, David Hume did not believe one could conclude a miracle occurred historically, David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993). For a more recent treatment that answers negatively see James G.

as well as theists who do not.³³² This does not mean that there are not theological or atheological factors that may contribute to how one answers this question. It is simply to point out that this issue does not seem to place theists and atheists at odds with one another with respect to the historian's ability to assess miracle claims.

We will present an argument that outlines why historical epistemology allows for a historian to, in principle, conclude whether a miracle has occurred or not. To do this we will briefly address the concept of a miracle in general. Then we will examine how our epistemic access to the past allows for the possibility of identifying divine acts. Lastly, we will briefly address some common objections to our conclusion. The goal, then, is not to argue for any specific miracle, but rather to demonstrate that historians have the epistemological tools to investigate alleged divine acts and comment upon their historicity.³³³

Crossley, "The Nature Miracles as Pure Myth," in *The Nature Miracles of Jesus: Problems, Perspectives, and Prospects*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 86–106.

³³² Two Anglican bishops provide helpful examples here. N. T. Wright seeks a historical case for Jesus' resurrection in N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003). Conversely, Peter Carnley wrote that those who speak about the resurrection (and even the "certainty" of the disciples belief) are not doing so *qua* historians. Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 89. More recently, Peter Carnley, *Resurrection in Retrospect: A Critical Examination of the Theology of N. T. Wright* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019); Peter Carnley, *The Reconstruction of Resurrection Belief* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019). Although Carnley's discussion focuses upon the resurrection in particular, his comments seem indicate that miracles in general are also a problem for the historian. For a theist who makes a more direct comment on the historian's ability to comment upon miracles in general John Meier writes, "A historian may examine claims about miracles, reject those for which there are obvious natural explanations, and record instances where the historian can find no natural explanation. Beyond that, a purely historical Judgment cannot go." John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2: Mentor, Message, and Miracles (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 11.

³³³ It should be noted that we are not attempting to provide an exhaustive account of all the ways a historian might be able to account for divine action, but rather addressing the issue from the general context of historical inquiry while also addressing common objections. Some scholars have, for example, sought to demonstrate God's existence as part of their overall argument for a miracle. See Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew, "The Argument From Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 593–662.

Defining a Miracle

Scholars have had a surprising difficulty in defining a miracle.³³⁴ It is important for us to examine and define the concept because we need clarity regarding the sort of events we are referring to in this chapter. Additionally, one's definition could affect whether they believe a historian can investigate miracle claims if one's definition is too restrictive.³³⁵ It will thus be helpful to briefly consider the concept of a miracle so that we can better understand why a historian would be within their epistemological rights to evaluate them.

David Hume's well-known definition of miracles as "violation[s] of the laws of nature" is a helpful place to begin.³³⁶ The late Antony Flew, a supporter of Hume, noted that this definition highlights some challenges to believing in miracles *a posteriori*. He writes that

The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that a particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden....On the contrary, the new discovery is simply a reason for his conceding that he had previously been wrong in thinking that the proposition, thus

³³⁴ Licona, for example, lists around *two dozen* different definitions that have been offered in an attempt to define a miraculous event. Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 134–35 fn. 3. See also Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 27–52.

³³⁵ Bart Ehrman provides a definition for miracle that *a priori* eliminates them from historical investigation. For him, miracles are events that "defy all probability, miracles create an inescapable dilemma for historians. Since historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and the chances of a miracle happening, by definition, are infinitesimally remote, historians can never demonstrate that a miracle *probably* happened." Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 228–229 (emphasis in original). Licona rightly objects to those who define *history* in such a way that it *a priori* excludes inquiries into miracle claims. Licona, "Historians and Miracle Claims," 108–14, 129. As noted earlier, inquiries should be made by questions that are open-ended and flexible and without imposing foreign or artificial conceptual schemes upon the object of inquiry/

³³⁶ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 76. For a recent discussion on the reception, resurrection, and recent assessment of Hume's influence see Timothy J. McGrew, "Of Miracles," in *The Nature of Miracles of Jesus: Problems, Perspectives, and Prospects*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 161–70.

confuted, did indeed express a true law; it is also a reason for his resolving to search again for the law which really does obtain.³³⁷

In short, any observed violation of a law of nature will simply cause a revision of the laws of nature rather than the acceptance of a miracle. Additionally, appeals to supernatural intervention due to a violation of the natural law *alone* would also seem to *require* (faulty) God-of-the-Gaps reasoning since God is used to explain a gap in our knowledge.³³⁸

Flew makes a fair point. One should not believe that a miracle has occurred merely because of an apparent violation of a natural law, or the normal course of nature, *alone*.³³⁹ Perhaps a new discovery was rightly observed and our understanding of the world needs to be modified (i.e. a Kuhnian paradigm shift). While an anomalous event could possibly be evidence of a divine agent, it could also be evidence of new discovery.³⁴⁰ Without *positive reasons* to

³³⁷ Antony Flew, "Miracles," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 349.

³³⁸ Philosopher Larry Shapiro appears to require the believer in miracles to accept God-of-the-Gaps reasoning by his definition of miracle. For him, miracles are events that are so incredibly improbable that we simply infer God must have been the cause. Lawrence Shapiro, *The Miracle Myth: Why Belief in the Resurrection and the Supernatural Is Unjustified* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 19–20, 21, 58–61, 78–81. Bart Ehrman gets close to this position as well. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226–27. As we will see below, he also incorporates notions of "faith" into his assessment of miracle claims.

³³⁹ Bart Ehrman notes "scientists today are less confident" of the phrase "natural law" and prefer to think in terms of the "normal workings of nature." Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226. The issue of propriety of the term "natural laws" and subsequent "violations" with respect to miracle claims is beyond the scope of our present discussion and has been discussed elsewhere. See David Basinger, "Miracles as Violations: Some Clarifications," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (March 1, 1984): 1–7; Richard L. Purtill, "Defining 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), 61–85; Steve Clarke, "Hume's Definition of Miracles Revised," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1999): 49–57; Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 67–78; Morgan Luck, "Defining Miracles: Violations of the Laws of Nature," *Philosophy Compass* 6, no. 2 (February 1, 2011): 133–41; Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 37–45.

³⁴⁰ Joshua Butler notes the relevant analogies between scientific anomalies and miracles such that the *observer* of the scientific anomaly is comparable to the observer of a miracle. Joshua Kulmac Butler, "A Kuhnian Critique of Hume on Miracles," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 86, no. 1 (August 1, 2019): 39–59.

believe a divine agent was involved, one would be perfectly reasonable to believe a new discovery has been observed.

However, rather than identifying a problem for the believer, Flew's observation actually identifies inappropriate limitations to Hume's concept of a miracle. His definition, as it stands, is too narrow since it seems to limit miracles to anomalous events, something many would reject as accurately reflecting their understanding of a miracle.³⁴¹ It appears to conflate scientific discoveries and divine action since it offers no way to distinguish between the two. If a miracle is simply a violation of a natural law, then there is no room for science to make new discoveries since any new discovery would be considered a miracle.³⁴² This also places the believer of a miracle in a rationally disadvantaged position because they are required *a priori* to accept God-of-the-Gaps reasoning to explain apparent violations. Thus, we see some internal problems with this definition that should lead us to think it needs to be expanded in order to properly capture what is meant by the term miracle.

A second reason to expand this definition is that Hume neglects to consider purported miracles that do *not* violate natural laws. Oxford philosopher Steve Clarke has pointed out that Hume's definition it is "too narrow to capture all instances of miracles; too narrow because it

³⁴¹ Even those in the ancient world recognized that a miracle was *more* than just an experience contrary to the normal workings of nature. Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 5, 7–8. Gerhard Lohfink points out that in the OT and NT "the concept of miracle was still wide open. It was not "natural laws" in the modern sense and most certainly not about breaking them. For the Bible a miracle is something unusual...by which God plucks people out of their indifference and causes them to look at him." Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 140. See discussion below regarding context.

³⁴² Interestingly, Flew critiques Hume's dogmatic refusal to accept events simply because they are reported as miraculous as detrimental to the sciences. Flew, "Miracles," 351. Flew was referring to what he believes were psychosomatic healings which Hume had dismissed *a priori*. Butler also identifies how testimony related to the observation of anomalies to current paradigms can lead to further discoveries and that without such anomalies (i.e. violations of natural law) "further paradigms and discoveries likely would not, and in some cases could not, be made." Butler, "A Kuhnian Critique of Hume on Miracles," 49. See also Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 149–51, 168, 173–74.

fails to include acts of supernatural intervention in the world which are non-law-violating. Intuitively it seems possible that a supernatural being could intervene in the natural world without violating any laws of nature.”³⁴³ New Testament scholar Craig Keener similarly argues that “many biblical accounts of miracles portray God working through nature, merely in extraordinary ways. For example, the formulation of ‘miracle’ against which Hume directs his case fails to cover many of Jesus's works treated as ‘signs’ or ‘miracles’ in the Gospels.”³⁴⁴ Thus, for Clarke and Keener, God could perform incredible acts through, for example, a “powerful wind” as described in Exodus 14:21 or Numbers 11:31.³⁴⁵ Similarly, “providence” or answers to certain prayers (i.e. healing via natural means) could be described as miraculous without necessarily violating the laws of nature. The point here is that miracles might not be limited to only violations of natural law but need to include the possibility of God acting through nature itself in ways analogous to human agents.³⁴⁶

One must therefore be careful to avoid definitions that inappropriately limit the possibility of divine action by an inadequate definition. The late German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg stated that the “judgment about whether an event, however unfamiliar, has happened or not is in *the final analysis a matter for the historian and cannot be prejudged by the knowledge of natural*

³⁴³ Clarke, “Hume’s Definition of Miracles Revised,” 51.

³⁴⁴ Keener, *Miracles*, 2011, 1:133. Adding, “Likewise, most Muslims claim that the Qur’an is a miracle but not that it violates a law of nature.” Larmer similarly discusses the fact that miracles need not necessarily be violations of the laws of nature. Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 11–13, 36–45.

³⁴⁵ Clarke, “Hume’s Definition of Miracles Revised,” 53; Keener, *Miracles*, 2011, 181. See also 180–185. Similarly Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 28.

³⁴⁶ As will be discussed below, God working through nature could be understood as analogous to other agents (i.e. humans) who act through nature.

science.”³⁴⁷ Others have similarly observed that we cannot allow fallible, if not fallacious, conceptions of natural law to dictate what can or cannot happen.³⁴⁸ This creates problems not just for new scientific discoveries, but also for recognizing divine actions.

The Super/Natural Distinction

Not only might one’s definition affect their conceptualization of a miracle, but so could one’s understanding of the relationship between the natural world and the supernatural world. For example, one’s beliefs about God’s relationship to the world can significantly impact how one views God’s ability to then interact with the world. Clarke points out the following, “To attach a meaning to the ‘supernatural’, we also need to attach a meaning to the term ‘natural’. This is because the supernatural stands in a particular relation to the natural.”³⁴⁹ For him, “the demarcation between the natural and the supernatural on the basis of the notion of a violation of a law of nature is somewhat problematic.”³⁵⁰ We will thus briefly contrast two different paradigms that attempt to describe the relationship between supernatural and natural. Although the paradigms below are admittedly broad generalizations, they nevertheless provide a helpful

³⁴⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 98 (emphasis added).

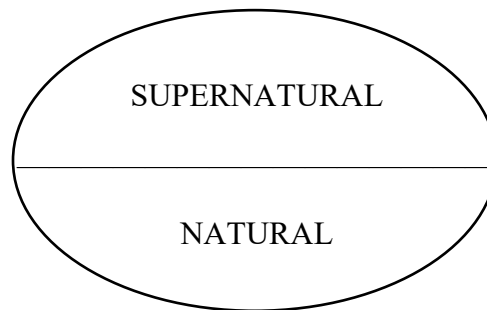
³⁴⁸ “The casual dismissal of the claim that Jesus may indeed have risen from the dead is not a helpful prejudice, for it is founded upon a fallacious conception of natural science [as prescriptive and not descriptive].” Alan G. Padgett, “Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus,” in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 295–96. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 92.

³⁴⁹ Steve Clarke, “The Supernatural and the Miraculous,” *Sophia* 46, no. 3 (October 30, 2007): 278. Millard Erickson notes, “The position taken on one doctrine greatly affects our conclusions about other doctrines as well.” Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 14.

³⁵⁰ Clarke, “The Supernatural and the Miraculous,” 280.

heuristic for highlighting how each framework can potentially impact our understanding and knowledge of miracles.

Paradigm One places a hardline between the supernatural and natural worlds. It views the supernatural and natural realms as wholly distinct and separate. Paradigm One has become more prevalent since the Enlightenment and can often be associated with a Newtonian mechanistic understanding of the natural world around.³⁵¹

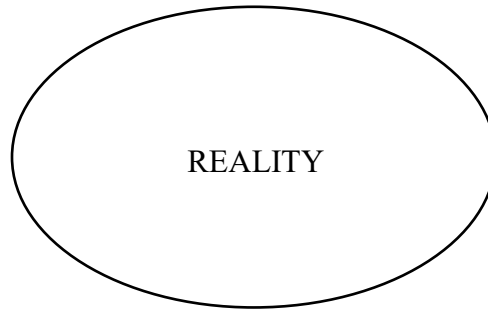


Paradigm One

Paradigm Two is one where the dividing line is erased. In this paradigm there is no strict distinction between the super/natural. This does not necessarily imply a form of monism or pantheism, but rather is to express the point that both the supernatural and natural are part of reality.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Wright, for example, notes this paradigm is primarily due to Enlightenment assumptions. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:97. Ehrman similarly recognizes the influence of the Enlightenment with respect to our understanding of natural laws. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226. One may think of Immanuel Kant's noumenal/phenomenal split.

³⁵² Michael Cantrell observes that the "believer perceives the sacred as quite a natural reality." Michael A. Cantrell, "Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2 (June 2016): 378.



Paradigm Two

Undoubtedly other paradigms could be presented, but these two provide a helpful contrast with respect to the ontology and epistemology of miracles.³⁵³ Paradigm One, for example, is foreign to many who have claimed miracles in the distant past. Bart Ehrman reminds us that for those in the ancient world, a miracle “did not involve an intrusion from outside of the natural world into the established nexus of cause and effect....For ancient people there *was* no...natural world set apart from a supernatural realm.”³⁵⁴ Not only would they reject Paradigm One, but according to Ehrman they would seem to be at quite comfortable with Paradigm Two.

³⁵³ It is worth noting that Robert Webb provides three paradigms in which historians operate. Interestingly, the one closest to representing Paradigm Two is what Webb calls “Ontological Naturalistic History.” The main, perhaps essential, difference is that instead of the word “Reality” (as in our Paradigm Two), he has “Natural World.” His other two paradigms include similar distinctions between the supernatural and the natural worlds, but differ with respect to where history is concerned. In the “Critical Theistic History” model history consists in both the supernatural and natural worlds. In the “Methodological Naturalistic History” model history is only concerned with the natural world. Robert L. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 43. Another example would be to add the nuance that the line dividing the supernatural world and natural world may be conceived of in a more porous manner (thus enabling more interaction). Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 39 fn. 1. While still another avenue is presented by Clarke who believes the category of the supernatural is a subcategory of the non-natural. Clarke, “The Supernatural and the Miraculous,” 278.

³⁵⁴ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226 (emphasis in original).

Of course this is not just an ancient viewpoint. N. T. Wright is forthright in his dismissal of Paradigm One when he writes, “I reject the nature/supernature distinction....It seems to me...that ontologies based on a nature/supernature distinction simply will not do...[It is an] untenable ontological dualism.”³⁵⁵ For Wright, part of the problem seems to be, at least in part, is how do we distinguish between the two worlds.³⁵⁶ Paradigm One makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the supernatural to interact with the natural because if it does then it, *by definition*, becomes part of the natural (similar to Flew’s point above) or because it cannot cross the dividing line at all.

Contrarily, Paradigm Two eliminates one from asking whether something is natural or supernatural due to the challenges one faces when distinguishing between the two. Indeed as Clarke points out, “In the absence of agreement regarding the definition of the natural, the charge that the boundary between the natural and the supernatural is ill-defined is hard to argue against.”³⁵⁷ Paradigm One is difficult to establish if we do not know where the lines of demarcation are actually located (and why). Furthermore, one could also argue that Ockham’s razor should be employed here to simplify our understanding and remove any potential inappropriate *a priori* conceptual frameworks from being imposed. Thus, the difficulty, or

³⁵⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:97. See also 10. For Wright, other false dichotomies that should be abandoned are theology/history and subjectivity/objectivity (24-25, 34, 93, 95). Thomas F. Torrance also argues strongly against dualisms of ontology (Newton), epistemology (Kant), etc. For a summary see John D. Morrison, *Knowledge of the Self Revealing God in the Thought of Thomas Forsyth Torrance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 48–60.

³⁵⁶ Wright notes a concern that such dualisms may be used in such a way that collapses one side into the other. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:25. Clarke has noted the challenges of actually defining the dividing line between these two. Steve Clarke, “Naturalism, Science and the Supernatural,” *Sophia* 48, no. 2 (May 2009): 130, 138–39. For a scientific discussion on this issue see Maarten Boudry, Stefaan Blancke, and Johan Braeckman, “How Not to Attack Intelligent Design Creationism: Philosophical Misconceptions About Methodological Naturalism,” *Foundations of Science* 15, no. 3 (June 9, 2010): 231–33.

³⁵⁷ Clarke, “Naturalism, Science and the Supernatural,” 130.

possibly the impropriety, of distinguishing between these two realms might be dismissed due to the unnecessary problems, distortions, and complications it creates.

For example, let us think about the implications of Wright's argument regarding "heaven" (i.e. "life after life after death").³⁵⁸ Consider for the moment that Wright is right and that followers of Jesus are resurrected bodily into an incorruptible new world. While it would seem appropriate for one who holds to Paradigm Two to consider "heaven" simply a part of reality, how is one to understand this reality on Paradigm One? It seems that an implication of Flew's point would be that "heaven" is part of the natural world since life in "heaven" would simply require us to revise our understanding of natural laws. While it may be true that a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet, it would certainly seem odd for someone who holds to Paradigm One to suggest that "Heaven" is part of the natural world.

Perhaps, on the other hand, those who hold to Paradigm One might say that "heaven" *is* a part of the supernatural world and *not* the natural world. In this case, one would be left questioning what it means for resurrected humans to be a part of the supernatural world and no longer part of the natural world. It would seem odd to consider humans, even resurrected humans in "heaven," to not be part of the natural world. One would be left wondering what is it that makes these humans part of the supernatural world? Is it just that they have eternal life? Are there some set of traits or laws that making something supernatural? What is it that actually makes something supernatural? How do we know what these traits are? And so on. However one answers these questions, the answers illustrate the concern of Wright and others regarding how one precisely distinguishes the supernatural and the natural worlds.

³⁵⁸ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 148–52.

Another example may be found in Gary Habermas' research on *evidential* Near-Death Experiences (NDEs).³⁵⁹ Evidential NDEs refer to a specific type of NDE whereby a person has been "dead" (or almost dead), later revives, and then are able to report empirically verifiable data from experiences they had while "dead" which are subsequently corroborated.³⁶⁰ Are these evidential cases demonstrative of the natural or supernatural? How is one to classify the reality they experience if these reports are accurate? Again, it seems odd to suggest that such experiences are what we *typically* mean when we speak of the natural world.³⁶¹ Moreover, the distinction between the supernatural and natural worlds becomes more and more blurred.

Although we cannot pursue these issues further here, our goal was simply to explore the different implications of these two different paradigms. We have highlighted how these paradigms can possibly affect one's understanding of miracles and their relationship to the

³⁵⁹ Recently, Habermas has provided five different categories of corroborated NDEs. Gary R. Habermas, "Evidential Near-Death Experiences," in *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*, ed. Jonathan J. Loose, Angus J. L. Menuge, and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 227–46.

³⁶⁰ In Habermas' earlier work he provided a categorized list of evidential NDEs according to one's consciousness as it continued beyond various definitions of death. Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1992), 74–78. For an entire book dedicated to these types of verified and corroborated cases see Titus Rivas, Anny Dirven, and Rudolf H. Smit, *The Self Does Not Die: Verified Paranormal Phenomena from Near-Death Experiences*, ed. Robert G. Mays and Janice Miner Holden, trans. Wanda J. Boeke (Durham, NC: International Association for Near-Death Studies [IANDS], 2016). One example of an evidential NDE from the book describes a patient who was undergoing surgery (and properly connected to the medical monitoring equipment). The patient's heart activity ceased about twenty minutes. The patient was being prepped for an autopsy when suddenly the monitoring equipment began to detect heart activity and other vitals. The patient recovered and later reported various details from this world that should have been unknown to him. His reports were later confirmed (71–78, case 3.11).

³⁶¹ Another contribution of Habermas might also be used as an example, namely the Shroud of Turin. If this is the burial cloth of Jesus and represents a piece of remaining empirical evidence of the resurrection and the differing paradigms are going to understand the shroud differently. Kenneth E. Stevenson and Gary R. Habermas, *Verdict on the Shroud: Evidence for the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1981). See also Tristan Casabianca, "The Shroud of Turin: A Historiographical Approach," *Heythrop Journal* 54, no. 3 (May 2013): 414–23.

world.³⁶² We have suggested that Paradigm Two appears to be the more open of the two paradigms since it does not restrict the inquirer in an *a priori* manner as Paradigm One does.

One may object and say that one is imposing a foreign framework by suggesting that we start with Paradigm Two, but this objection misses the point on several fronts. First, one cannot add such distinctions into reality (i.e. supernatural and natural) *a priori*. By *adding* the distinction, one assumes the burden of proof and thus requires arguments to be made in support of such distinctions. Second, if one begins with Paradigm Two, nothing prevents Paradigm One from being argued for *a posteriori*, but if one begins with Paradigm one, then artificial limitations are imposed and our knowledge becomes necessarily limited to those constraints. Third, there are no clear definitions that describe this distinction or how we know where these distinctions are located and why. Fourth, as we have noted, Paradigm One appears unfalsifiable. As noted in the example above, anything that acts in the natural world is by definition natural and not supernatural. The natural appears to engulf the supernatural. Fifth, Paradigm Two is falsifiable in the sense that if there is no “supernatural” then all reality would simply be the natural world and thus look like Paradigm Two anyway. For these reasons, we concur with Clarke that, “What is crucial to enable sense to be made of the concept ‘supernatural’ is that we have a coherent way of talking about the natural that leaves *conceptual space open for the possibility of the supernatural*.”³⁶³

³⁶² Another reason we have not sought to engage these issues more fully here is that to do so would border the type of metaphysical discussions David Hackett Fischer warns about (see below). The reason we have pointed out these Paradigms is that they frequently, particularly Paradigm One, do get imposed into historical investigation. It was thus important to evaluate these two interpretive models to see how they might affect one’s interpretation. We will be suggesting below that, as part of the normal workings of history, historians should not allow the differing paradigms to wholly interpret data, such as a miracle claim, but that the data should be able to inform the observer how to formulate their paradigm via a dialogical relationship between the two. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:35.

³⁶³ Clarke, “The Supernatural and the Miraculous,” 280-281 (emphasis added).

We will end this section with our own tentative definition. The definition will seek to limit inappropriate *a priori* considerations while trying to remain open to the possibilities of the different paradigms above. A miracle, then, may be defined as *a dynamic event in space/time whereby a divine agent has acted in such a way as to communicate or reveal something intelligible*.³⁶⁴

Historical Epistemology and the Miraculous

We now turn to historical epistemology with respect to miracle claims. There are generally two ways scholars have suggested we could proceed. The first is that a historian could say that event X has occurred, *without* arguing for its cause(s).³⁶⁵ The second is that one can conclude that X has occurred *and* argue for a specific cause(s). Although the first approach is more modest, Flew rightly points out the “essential aim of the historian is to get as near as he can to a full knowledge of what actually happened.”³⁶⁶ Among other things, historians seek to describe past events and, when possible, their cause(s).³⁶⁷ Thus, we will be arguing that a historian *qua* historian can investigate the event *and* the cause of purported miracles in ways

³⁶⁴ Although this definition does not address whether the divine agent is benevolent or malicious. Generally benevolent beings are considered to have performed miracles, but our definition makes no such distinction since such a discussion would require further philosophical and theological refining which is beyond the scope of this present work. Additionally, if someone is arguing for a miracle that occur outside of time and space (i.e. spiritual resurrection), then this would be different. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 162 fn. 100.

³⁶⁵ Licona notes that this is a more modest approach and one that is compatible with methodological naturalism. Licona, “Historians and Miracle Claims,” 122–25. Dale Allison appears to make comments sympathetic to such an approach. Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 298.

³⁶⁶ Flew, “Miracles,” 352. Similarly Evan Fales, *Divine Intervention: Metaphysical and Epistemological Puzzles* (NY: Routledge, 2010), 2.

³⁶⁷ Fischer writes, “A historian is someone (anyone) who asks an open-ended question about past events and answers it with selected facts which are arranged in the form of an explanatory paradigm.” David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), xv. See also James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 101; Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 24.

analogous to other historical claims. We must recall how historians approach and investigate the past before considering whether the historian can comment upon miracle claims. This will be done by incorporating relevant elements from our earlier chapter on the philosophy of history and then applying them to our current question.

Investigating the Past

The first section of David Hackett Fischer's *Historians Fallacies* is dedicated to highlighting fallacies of question framing.³⁶⁸ One of the fallacies historians ought to avoid is asking metaphysical questions that seek to answer a “nonempirical problem by empirical means.”³⁶⁹ Fischer argues that historians should abandon metaphysical questions raised by determinism and voluntarism, materialism and idealism, and “all manner of other monism and dualisms. *The progress of an empirical science of history squarely depends upon a sense of the possible.*”³⁷⁰ This does not mean historians operate from a neutral position on these topics.³⁷¹ The point is, however, that although one may have their own metaphysical preferences, these should not be inappropriately *imposed* into the historical data because to do so would mistakenly limit what is possible based upon a metaphysical commitments. Fischer suggests that to avoid this and other fallacies, historians should ask questions that are open, flexible, and that can be revised throughout the process of research.³⁷²

³⁶⁸ Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 3–39. See chapter two.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 13. Examples of the types of metaphysical questions Fischer has in mind are those such as “What is the nature of things?” or “What is the inner secret of reality?”

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 13, emphasis added.

³⁷¹ Fischer calls this the “Baconian Fallacy.” Fischer, 5–6. For a list of typical metaphysical beliefs held by historians see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 156.

³⁷² As well as operational (empirical), analytical, explicit and precise, and testable. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 38–39, 160–61.

History must not only be open regarding the questions it asks, but also its conclusions. Historians cannot restrict, *a priori*, the answers to open historical questions.³⁷³ The nature of history is such that many things are *possible*, but evidence directs us to what is most *probable*. Since so many things are possible, the historian must remain open to them when beginning their inquiry and allow the data to guide their inquiry toward what is probable.³⁷⁴ Historical conclusions need to be made *on the basis of the available evidence* and held provisionally such that if new evidence should arise, one can revise their initial conclusions.

It also vital to recall that all historians approach evidence from some perspective or worldview. The historian must keep a constant dialogue between the evidence and their interpretive model. Significantly, evidence is not wholly interpreted and can potentially change one's perspective. Thus, if evidence is obscured from one vantage point, another one can be adopted. Indeed, a plurality of worldviews, or a community of conscience, can enable historians to see events from a variety of angles and better determine which ones are better and why.

In order to examine these different angles, historians must be willing to bracket their own worldviews and consider different vantage points. Wright helpfully notes that in some situations one should, based upon publicly available evidence, re-examine their worldview and consider other alternatives. He writes,

If events are public, they can be discussed; evidence can be amassed; and some worldviews become progressively harder and harder to retain, needing more and more conspiracy theories in order to stay in place, until they (sometimes) collapse under their own weight....worldviews, though normally hidden from sight like the foundations of a

³⁷³ As will be seen below, closed-minds of this sort are damaging to scholarship. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:92–93.

³⁷⁴ For one who argues strongly for following-after the data see Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 5. See also chapter two. For a helpful discussion on the often misunderstood concept of historical possibility see Robert J. Miller, “Back to the Basics: A Primer on Historical Method,” in *Finding the Historical Jesus*, ed. Bernard Brandon Scott, vol. 3, Jesus Seminar Guides (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2008), 10–12.

house, can themselves in principle be dug out and inspected....Dialogue is possible. People can change their beliefs; they can even change their worldviews.³⁷⁵

Differing worldviews, horizons, or explanations can be challenged or supported by the evidence.³⁷⁶ Unless one maintains a rigid dogmatism, they are not impenetrable fortresses to which all data must conform in order to be accepted.³⁷⁷ This is particularly important to keep in mind when considering alleged divine acts since they can potentially have significant worldview ramifications.³⁷⁸

The basic principles for historians, when investigating the past begin with open questions that can be answered based on evidence. Although we all approach the evidence from a certain perspective, this does not inhibit our ability to know the past. We can bracket our worldviews, consider alternatives, and judge whether any revisions or changes are needed. As we approach the data, we allow it to inform us of its own structure. We then begin to reconstruct this model and test it against the data whereby we our conceptual frameworks are in dialogue with the evidence.

³⁷⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:117. See also 92, 95, 97–99; Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 24–25; Padgett, “Advice for Religious Historians,” 291, 301.

³⁷⁶ This is precisely Flew’s point above with respect to the scientist who comes across evidence that violates the natural law of a current scientific interpretation. The evidence forces the scientist to search for a new interpretive model.

³⁷⁷ Larmer is correct when writing, “Historians can scarcely escape the influence of interpretive horizons based on assumptions they bring to their work, but to the degree that such assumptions cannot be challenged or overthrown by actual evidence, they cease to function as genuine historians and become merely dogmatists.” Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 181.

³⁷⁸ The centrality of the resurrection is a good example here of a miracle that can have significant impact in several areas (1 Cor. 15:12-19). See also Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 89–121; Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 187–88.

Methodological Naturalism

While there are several types of inappropriate *a priori* (e.g. worldviews, conceptual frameworks, etc.) that could negatively affect one's investigation of the past, methodological naturalism (MN) is frequently used to negate the historian's ability to discuss miracles.³⁷⁹ MN, as opposed to ontological naturalism, requires that historians examine the world *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if there were no God).³⁸⁰ While different reasons have been advanced for adopting MN (e.g. as a definitional limitation), such a methodology *imposed a priori* restricts historical conclusions by not allowing one to examine the past with a full range of explanations.³⁸¹ It should be noted that we are not presently concerned here with those who hold to MN in an *a posteriori* and provisional manner (PMN) which is distinct from the MN we will be discussing here.³⁸² As we saw in the first chapter, by refusing to allow the evidence of the past to be

³⁷⁹ For examples of other inappropriate impositions outside of the issue of methodological naturalism, see Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 168, 188. See also Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 87–107; Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 114.

³⁸⁰ Roland Deines provides a helpful discussion on the origins of this phrase (which is attributed to Hugo Grotius). Roland Deines, *Acts of God in History: Studies Towards Recovering a Theological Historiography*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 317 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 2–3. See also Gregory Dawes, “In Defense of Naturalism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 70, no. 1 (2011): 6.

³⁸¹ Webb, for example, sees MN as nothing more than merely a definitional limitation. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 41–43, 47–48. Mark Allen Powell is exceedingly complimentary of Webb's approach. He writes that Webb's “proposal for a methodological-naturalism that places a definitional limitation on what historian can appropriately say about causation strikes me as absolutely correct and, in fact, so obvious as to be virtually beyond dispute. It strikes me as something that should be able to go without saying...I don't know that it has ever been said as well as it is here. I deem Webb's essay a masterpiece of elocution and common sense.” Mark Allan Powell, “Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies: Final Reflections,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 135. As this chapter indicates, however, we believe there is reason to doubt and that significant revisions are needed.

³⁸² Those who hold to PMN are open to revising their view in light of new evidence. An example of this would be Dawes, “In Defense of Naturalism.” Similarly, but with more questionable justification. Maarten Boudry, Stefaan Blancke, and Johan Braeckman, “Grist to the Mill of Anti-Evolutionism: The Failed Strategy of Ruling the Supernatural Out of Science by Philosophical Fiat,” *Science & Education* 21, no. 8 (February 22, 2012): 1152. As I have understood these scholars, they are open (or at least the claim to be open) to examine claims of alleged

examined freely, history is undermined because an open and free questioning of the past, which is *crucial* to historical study, is impossible since the answers are constrained before the inquiry even begins.³⁸³ In such situations, the conclusions are built into the method and no amount of evidence can possibly have an effect on such a method that is dogmatically closed.³⁸⁴

Given these issues, it is understandable that discontent with MN has been growing in recent years. In a recent series of articles featured in *History Compass*, scholars engaged in these very issues and questioned the current paradigm of MN.³⁸⁵ Roland Deines has argued that dogmatic MN “*coerces* those who desire to talk intelligibly and rationally about God acting in history, and in their own lives, to *convert* first to a worldview where the very thing they seek to communicate is already assigned to the non-real.”³⁸⁶ Michael Cantrell has also contested against such dogmatism. For him it not only “prejudices the integrity of a scholar’s work,” but can actually lead scholars to *do worse* in their research.³⁸⁷ Church historian Brad Gregory highlights

supernatural intervention. The fact that they have not found any sufficiently strong enough to be granted is a separate topic and beyond the scope of this work.

³⁸³ Francis Beckwith, *David Hume’s Argument Against Miracles: A Critical Analysis* (University Press of America, 1989), 101.

³⁸⁴ G. E. Ladd points out that “Far from being open-minded and ‘objective’, it is closed-minded to one of the most viable explanations....the very presuppositions of the scientific method make it blind to one very live option....The man of faith is therefore more open-minded than the so-called scientific historian.” George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 13. See also 25-27.

³⁸⁵ Luke Clossey et al., “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I: A Challenge,” *History Compass* 14, no. 12 (December 1, 2016): 594–602; Luke Clossey et al., “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II: Proposals and Solutions,” *History Compass* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 1–9; Roland Clark et al., “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III: Responses and Elaborations,” *History Compass* 15, no. 12 (December 1, 2017): 1–10. In 2006, *History and Theory* (45.12) also released a theme issue on this topic.

³⁸⁶ Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 26 (emphasis in original). He adds, “[To stay silent about truth] is against the ethos of the university and the practice of good scholarship.” Similarly Evan Fales refers to an “anti-intellectual” attitude.” Fales, *Divine Intervention*, 3.

³⁸⁷ Adding, “It is not going too far to say that, by using methodological atheism, a scholar may actually fabricate the data of experience—an action that, in any other circumstance would raise serious concerns about the shirking of proper scholarly conduct.” Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?,” 384. See also 379-386. Similarly Licona, “Historians and Miracle Claims,” 112–13.

the circularity of methodological naturalism in that it unsurprisingly yields only naturalistic conclusions.³⁸⁸ Although Maarten Boudry, Stefaan Blancke, and Johan Braeckman do not appear to have found any supernatural explanations satisfying, they nevertheless conclude that “the most widespread view, which conceives of MN as an intrinsic or self-imposed limitation of science, is *philosophically indefensible*.”³⁸⁹

Even more striking is when Robert Webb, a proponent of MN, acknowledge its limitations. He concludes that MN is “less satisfying, for its conclusions may be more tentative and explanations are incomplete in certain cases.”³⁹⁰ Rather than settle for an admittedly limited

³⁸⁸ Gregory adds that this “goes on unrecognized to the extent that such metaphysical beliefs [e.g. naturalism] are widely but wrongly considered to be undeniable truths.” Brad S. Gregory, “The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (2006): 146; Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 48. More skeptical thinkers have also recognized this point. Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman, “Grist to the Mill of Anti-Evolutionism,” 1155.

³⁸⁹ Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman, “How Not to Attack Intelligent Design Creationism,” 228 (emphasis added). In their article they also evaluate five common arguments in favor of MN (definitional, lawful regularity, science stopping, procedural necessity, and testability) and despite being sympathetic to them they ultimately find each of them problematic. Tiddy Smith similarly argues against two forms of MN (intrinsic and pragmatic) in Tiddy Smith, “Methodological Naturalism and Its Misconceptions,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, February 2, 2017, 323–30. Fales responds to four arguments in favor of MN (locality, supernatural/natural distinction, reliability of the laws of nature, and miracles as a science stopper). Fales, *Divine Intervention*, 4–6. Gregory Dawes makes a similar point and contends ultimately against dogmatic positions and advocates for a provisional approach which is open to change in light of new evidence. Dawes, “In Defense of Naturalism,” 23.

³⁹⁰ Webb, “The Rules of the Game,” 83. See also Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 48. See also 42. Powell similarly acknowledges this shortcoming despite favoring MN. Powell, “Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies,” 135. Robert Miller discusses the costs involved in such a method as Webb’s in Robert J. Miller, “When It’s Futile to Argue about the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 93–95; Robert J. Miller, “The Domain and Function of Epistemological Humility in Historical Jesus Studies,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12, no. 1/2 (January 2014): 130–42. In addition to the issues noted throughout this chapter, another concern is also present regarding Webb’s discussion of methodological naturalism. Webb’s criticisms of critical theistic history are unsuccessful and contrary to normal historical practice. For example, he cites that one of the problems of such a method is that it “requires that a reader entertain some form of a theistic worldview before the explanation can [sic] evaluated” (46). We saw that historians should bracket their worldview in order to consider other perspectives is essential to the practice of history in the first chapter. Additionally, multiple perspectives can be a good way to examine the potential hypothesis, but Webb seems to think it a bad thing for the reader to adopt the view. By refusing to adopt any other perspective outside of the reader’s present view it is difficult to see how they may potentially learn something new. By this logic one could equally argue that skeptics should be the one’s engaging in critical theistic history since otherwise they would be requiring theists to adopt a skeptical position before reading their work. Parallels could also be drawn in other areas of history where there are differing paradigms (i.e. Marxist vs non-Marxist interpretations). Thus, although Webb favors MN because it “allows historians who have differing worldviews to participate together in the historical enterprise in spite of their differing worldviews”

epistemological method, we should strive to examine the past openly, critically, and with a more fruitful methodology that seeks a fuller and more robust understanding of the past. It has, moreover, been pointed out by proponents of PMN that excluding the supernatural by definitional fiat is an unjustifiable position philosophically and is counterproductive since it allows the opponents of MN to rightly accuse MN of inappropriate bias and dogmatism.³⁹¹

An inflexible acceptance of MN, thus, makes one unnecessarily vulnerable to significant and avoidable objections.³⁹² In order to avoid these problems, one simply need not be dogmatic and impose methodological naturalism *a priori* which artificially limits our knowledge of the past.³⁹³ Inquirers of the past must remain open and allow the evidence to direct them while refusing to allow arbitrary (or tyrannical) assumptions to be forced upon them. Philosopher of history, Aviezer Tucker, provides a good reminder that there “are *no a priori* shortcuts. To reach any reasoned conclusion about miracles or any other past event, it is necessary to examine hypothesis about the past in competition with one another over the best explanation that

(47), it is difficult to see that MN actually delivers on this promise for the reasons just mentioned. Moreover, when we pair the shortcoming of Webb’s objections to critical theistic history and the fact that the open method that we have been advocating here and in chapter two, then we see that it is our method that creates a better environment for historians of different worldview would still be able to fruitfully dialogue and participate in historical research despite their differing worldviews.

³⁹¹ Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman, “How Not to Attack Intelligent Design Creationism,” 227, 232, 241, 242; Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman, “Grist to the Mill of Anti-Evolutionism,” 1151, 1153, 1163; Dawes, “In Defense of Naturalism,” 12–13.

³⁹² Benjamin C. F. Shaw, “What’s Good for the Goose Is Good for the Gander: Historiography and the Historical Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 15, no. 2–3 (December 11, 2017): 305–8.

³⁹³ Although we noted that there are both theists and skeptics who appeal to MN (and conversely skeptics and theists who appeal to a more open method), Clarke notes that many, but not all, metaphysical naturalists are metaphysical naturalists precisely because they have adopted a form of MN. Clarke, “Naturalism, Science and the Supernatural,” 128–30. He then adds, consistent with our arguments and methodology, that “philosophical naturalists must allow for the possibility of the supernatural when formulating a naturalist ontology” (132). Martin makes a similar comment regarding methodological naturalism when he writes, “Other secular scientists, it may seem, can be theologically neutral. Why must only secular historians be closet methodological atheists? The answer is that other scientists also are closet atheists.” Martin, *The Elusive Messiah*, 107.

increases most the likelihood of the broadest scope of evidence.”³⁹⁴ There are no shortcuts to good scholarship, let alone excellent scholarship.³⁹⁵ Indeed, these very types of “*a priori* shortcuts” are reflective of the vices discussed in the first chapter since they impose artificial conceptual frameworks that necessarily constrain one’s inquiry.

Ethnocentrism

It is curious that MN is now used to dogmatically to deny inquiry into certain questions considering that MN largely stemmed from the Enlightenment which itself sought to undue the dogmatisms of its own day.³⁹⁶ Wright helpfully calls attention to this irony writing that the

underlying rationale of the Enlightenment was, after all, that the grandiose dogmatic claims of the church (...) needed to be challenged by the fearless, unfettered examination of historical evidence. *It will not do*, after two hundred years of this, for historians in that tradition to turn round and rule out, *a priori*, certain types of answer to questions that remain naggingly insistent.³⁹⁷

One may infer that for Wright those that seek to dogmatically insist on MN are no different than earlier ecclesiastical authorities who sought to dogmatically impose their views on others.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Aviezer Tucker, “Miracles, Historical Testimonies, and Probabilities,” *History and Theory* 44, no. 3 (October 1, 2005), 73-390 (390). See also 381, 385.

³⁹⁵ “[T]he freer the historian from alien intrusions, the more demanding his task becomes. He cannot loftily dismiss whole complexes of material as *a priori* unhistorical, nor even begin with the supposition that non-historicity holds until proved otherwise.” Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, PA: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 151.

³⁹⁶ Eddy and Boyd note that such a method is exemplified when it is open to investigate supernatural activity. Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 16–17, 51–53, 58, 82–90. Adding that dogmatic methodological naturalism claims to be the truly critical method but ironically refuses to be critical of itself (55, 75, 78, 80). Additionally, it should be pointed out that Cicero and others acknowledged such views well before the Enlightenment (Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.28). E. P. Sanders states “the view espoused by Cicero has become dominant in the modern world, and I fully share it.” E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 143.

³⁹⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 3:713 (emphasis added). See also Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:93 fn. 26; Keener, *Miracles*, 2011, 193–94.

³⁹⁸ As Keener observes, “dogmatic irreligion is no less blinding than dogmatic religion.” Keener, *Miracles*, 2011, 194.

Michael Bird echoes Wright's complaint, "My point is that those who think that religion has a monopoly on dogmatism better think again, and unless the whole debate is going to be reduced to a slanging match between competing presuppositions we had all better be prepared to take the evidence seriously."³⁹⁹ Indeed, the prescription of MN on scholarship has led many in recent years to refer to such an imposition as intellectual imperialism or ethnocentrism derived from Western Enlightenment rationality.⁴⁰⁰

James Crossley, who argues in favor of a form of MN, recently raised concerns against the charge of ethnocentrism.⁴⁰¹ His (somewhat understandable) concern is that the term ethnocentrism could simply be used as a label to dismiss opponents while also failing to realize that the accusation alone does not establish whether or not a specific miracle has occurred.⁴⁰² He

³⁹⁹ Michael F. Bird and James G. Crossley, *How Did Christianity Begin? A Believer and Non-Believer Examine the Evidence* (London: Peabody, MA: SPCK: Hendrickson, 2008), 49. We may add that given the desecularizing of philosophy that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century and the dozens (or so) of positive arguments that theists have put forward, a "slanging match between competing presuppositions" may appear as a less than desirable battleground for such dogmatists. On the desecularizing of philosophy see Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism," *Philo* 4, no. 2 (2001): 195–205. Regarding the dozens of arguments for theism see Jerry Walls and Trent Dougherty, *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). The latter is based off a lecture given by Alvin Plantinga in 1986.

⁴⁰⁰ Some scholars refer to the dogmatic imposition of MN as a form of intellectual imperialism. Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 33; Martin, *The Elusive Messiah*, 193–200; Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 48–51, 55, 70–73, 80. The articles in *History Compass* mentioned above refer to "Dogmatic Secularism." Keener examines the issue of ethnocentrism in Keener, *Miracles*, 2011, 2, 166, 213–225, 454–55; Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 743, 762, 828–30.

⁴⁰¹ For some of his comments on the historian's inability to comment upon the supernatural see Crossley, "The Nature Miracles as Pure Myth," 86–106 (esp. 87–92, 99, 100). See also Crossley's comments in Bird and Crossley, *How Did Christianity Begin?*, 62–63. It is important to note that Crossley does not claim to be an antismiraculist, but rather is focused on different questions that focus on anthropological and sociological issues (Bird and Crossley, xviii, 51; Crossley, "The Nature Miracles as Pure Myth," 86–87, 92–100, 105–106). However, some scholars may see such a move to seemingly avoid discussions on the miraculous and focus upon anthropological/sociological issues as illustrative of ones biases Padgett, "Advice for Religious Historians," 289–90; Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 4; Contributors, "Dialogue: A Way Forward," 210 fn. 27 (Zimmerman), 218 (McGrew). Crossley has, of course, engaged in these discussions as well as being interested in anthropological/sociological questions as should be evident by the fact the two articles we referenced above by Crossley are in debate/dialogue books that engage in a multitude of issues (including the miraculous).

⁴⁰² Crossley, "The Nature Miracles as Pure Myth," 105. Crossley also encourages the examination of ones the "ethnocentric underpinnings of academics." Others have shared the concern regarding the use (or misuse) of certain labels to pigeonhole scholars. See Craig S. Keener, "A Brief Reply to Robert Miller and Amy-Jill Levine,"

is also concerned that this may be more of a rhetorical move since those that raise the charge find themselves in the same bind since those in non-Western countries “presumably do not believe plenty of things Bird, for instance, believes in and many of them will no doubt practice things Bird dislikes.”⁴⁰³ In other words, there is an “acceptance of the Other without (too much) Otherness, accepting those bits that are useful and can conform to positions within contemporary liberal discourses.”⁴⁰⁴

A few comments should be made here in an effort to address Crossley’s apprehensions. First, it is not clear where Crossley gets the impression that that these scholars are, in fact, using the charge of ethnocentrism as a label that functions as an automatic disqualifier of their opponents or if it is just a possibility. Such “pigeonholing” is something these scholars are typically just as concerned about themselves.⁴⁰⁵ Similarly, these scholars do not believe the charge of ethnocentrism somehow validates the occurrence of a specific miracle, but that ethnocentrism can *a priori* close the door to the evidence for any miracle claim. If, for example, Keener thought that the charge of ethnocentrism was sufficient enough to establish a specific miracle, then presumably his two-volume work on *Miracles* could have been considerably shorter. Nevertheless, we certainly can agree with Crossley’s main point here that merely assigning a label to one’s opponent does not automatically grant one a victory nor does this

Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 117; Powell, “Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies,” 128.

⁴⁰³ Crossley, “The Nature Miracles as Pure Myth,” 104.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 103. Crossley surprisingly suggests that we “might also owe something to the Enlightenment” when we ask questions of whether or not a given miracle actually occurred (102). This last comment is particularly strange as people have reflected on the historicity of miracles long before the Enlightenment, but also because Crossley does not think historians should entertain such questions.

⁴⁰⁵ Craig S. Keener, “Assumptions in Historical-Jesus Research: Using Ancient Biographies and Disciples’ Traditioning as a Control,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 29 fn. 10, 13.

charge establish that any miracle has, in fact, occurred even if we disagree with Crossley's justification.

However, the charge itself is important if it is accurate and Crossley acknowledges that it is for certain thinkers (e.g. Hume).⁴⁰⁶ It is important because, as Crossley also agrees, scholars can fall into ethnocentric thinking unintentionally.⁴⁰⁷ It is therefore helpful when the academic community brings such "blind spots" to our attention. We certainly do not want our understanding of reality or the past to be dogmatically limited to what we know (or have experienced).⁴⁰⁸

Second, the fact that Bird or any of these other scholars do not agree with everything their non-Western counterparts is not a strong argument that they are somehow retaining degrees of ethnocentrism. On the one hand, it is not clear how much one must accept of the other in order to avoid this charge from Crossley or how he determined where the line of "too little" acceptance is located. On the other hand, if it is to be an all or nothing approach, then he would seem to be presenting a false dichotomy between ethnocentrism (rejecting the other entirely) on one hand and xenocentrism (accepting the other entirely) on the other.⁴⁰⁹ So long as one is open to the views of others, which requires a bracketing of their own views in the process, then dialogue between the different views and evidence is occurring. The problems of ethnocentrism occur when the self is elevated above all others in such ways that promote monologues and inhibit

⁴⁰⁶ Crossley, "The Nature Miracles as Pure Myth," 102, 104.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁰⁸ Walter Wink, "Write What You See," *FourthR* 7 (May 1994): 6; Contributors, "Dialogue: A Way Forward," 199 (Keener), 220 (McGrew).

⁴⁰⁹ Such holistic agreement rarely, if ever, occurs within the same cultures let alone cross cultures.

dialogues (as Crossley would undoubtedly agree).⁴¹⁰ The very problem that can be found in Hume's dismissal of miracles.⁴¹¹

Agency

Richard Taylor has helpfully identified two kinds of explanation. For example, one could explain the campfire by referring to a *match* starting the fire or a *man* starting the fire.⁴¹² These two kinds of explanations refer to different aspects of the same past event (scientific and agency). The important explanation for our present purposes is agent explanation.⁴¹³ Agent explanations can generally be identified by a *telos* or intentionality. Taylor writes that “any true assertion that something *does* occur *in order that* some result may be achieved does seem to entail that the event in question is not merely an event, but the act of some agent.”⁴¹⁴ While history is concerned with a multitude of topics (individual people, governments, etc.), one form of explanation that historians will frequently appeal to is that of agency. As Wright notes, history

⁴¹⁰ For an interesting discussion on this issue see Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*, trans. Diane Kerns and Katie Digan, *Making Sense of History* 28 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 200–213. For more detailed discussion see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

⁴¹¹ While many references could be given on this point, we will simply refer to Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 136–37.

⁴¹² Richard Taylor, “Two Kinds of Explanation,” in *Miracles*, ed. Richard Swinburne (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 103. See also Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970), 53–57.

⁴¹³ Hume's definition above appeared to be more concerned with the scientific component rather than agency.

⁴¹⁴ Taylor, “Two Kinds of Explanation,” 107 (emphasis in original). Taylor rightly adds that even if an agent's “actions were quite unprecedented, they would nevertheless be understood, intelligible, and in that sense explained, if they did satisfy these conditions—that is, if they could be truly represented as an appropriate means to some end.” *Ibid.*, 112

is “the study of aims, intentions and motivations.”⁴¹⁵ Historians frequently seek to know what caused certain people (or groups) to act in certain ways in order to achieve certain goals (i.e. knowing the motive is essential to legal cases).

Agency can be a broad category and it need not apply exclusively to *human* agency.⁴¹⁶ Historian Christopher Pearson has argued that although many historians believe agency to be a uniquely human characteristic, animals should be recognized as agents who are also capable of acting intentionally.⁴¹⁷ For Pearson, militarized dogs, although *not having the same caliber of agency* as humans, nevertheless exhibit the ability to act with forms of intentionality that can, and have been, discussed historically.⁴¹⁸ Thus, historians already examine the past actions of non-human agents with lesser degrees of agency than humans.

Divine agents with *potentially greater degrees of agency* should similarly be open to historical investigation.⁴¹⁹ Since historians already discuss agency in both humans and non-

⁴¹⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:111. See also 91, 95. Cf. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies*, 119.

⁴¹⁶ Human agency may be the most interesting and popular (thus a reason for studying it and writing it), but that would in no way diminish the fact that there are other forms of agency whereby intentional acts are performed.

⁴¹⁷ Chris Pearson, “Dogs, History, and Agency,” *History and Theory* 52, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 128–45.

⁴¹⁸ Licona has made a similar suggestion (using the term “persons” instead of agents), but more unique in that he refers the *possibility* of alien interaction with humans in order to demonstrate that agency could exist beyond humanity. Licona, “Historians and Miracle Claims,” 112–13. The overall point here would still apply even to those who suggest that history is a study of the *human* past since the types of events described here would involve human interaction with non-humans (be it dogs, aliens, or the divine).

⁴¹⁹ We must add the nuance of the potential immateriality of some divine agents. Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 59. Regarding the ability of a divine immaterial agent to act causally within the physical world see Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 105–8. J. P. Moreland also notes the similarity between human and divine agency. J. P. Moreland, “Science, Miracles, Agency Theory and God-of-the-Gaps,” 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), 143. That divine action could nevertheless be detected is also affirmed by skeptics such as Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman, “How Not to Attack Intelligent Design Creationism,” 240. Who also make reference to the noted atheist Victor Stenger’s work where he cites eleven examples that would support divine action, although some of these seem surprisingly weak. Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), 231–34.

humans, it would seem odd to refuse to address divine agency (a category of non-human agency).⁴²⁰ If we can recognize the intentional actions in other agents, we should also be able to recognize, at least to some extent, intentionality in divine agents should they so choose to act.⁴²¹

Disembodied Agency

While we have noted the analogy to human and non-human agency, it may be objected that divine agency is relevantly different from the above examples since there is no physicality to divine beings. Humans have physical bodies in which they are able to cause various events in the physical world. Their agency does not manifest itself by thoughts, but by physical bodies. Dogs, as non-human agents, similarly have physical bodies that enable them to act in the physical world. Divine beings may not have such physical attributes and thus cannot be investigated by the historian since there is no observable person to link an alleged miraculous event.

Given this absence of physicality one may think that a historian would be equivalent to the two explorers searching for the gardener in the late Oxford philosopher Antony Flew's famous parable.⁴²² According to the parable, two explorers were walking in the jungle when they came across a clearing where flowers and weeds were growing. One explorer believes this area had been intentionally tended by a gardener and the other explorer disagreed. They decided to

⁴²⁰ For Clarke, "A miracle is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a nonnatural agent." Clarke, "The Supernatural and the Miraculous," 278.

⁴²¹ "One can definitely speak of a 'plan' here, if this is understood as a purposeful undertaking directed towards a goal." Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 334 fn. 60. Ehrman notes that when apparent miraculous events occurred, "the only questions for most ancient persons were (a) who was able to perform these deeds and (b) what was the source of their power? Was a person like Jesus, for example empowered by a god or by black magic?" Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226.

⁴²² Although Flew published the parable (and presented it in 1950), he reports that it was developed by philosopher John Wisdom. Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1963), 96–99. It appears that this objection, or one close to it, is part of the reason why Webb defines the supernatural as "beyond" the natural world of time and space. Webb, "The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research," 46.

setup a watch to see if a gardener came, but they saw nobody. They then decide to add an electric fence and bloodhounds to their search, but still no gardener was detected. The “believer” suggests that the gardener must be “invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound.”⁴²³ The “skeptic” responds by asking “Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”⁴²⁴ One of the points of this parable for Flew, who raised this argument in the era of logical positivism, was that empirical verification of the gardener was needed.⁴²⁵

While it would be easy for the historian to avoid the discussion of miracles altogether when confronted with complex questions such as these, it is important that we engage them to see if they constitute a solid objection to our ability to identify the occurrence of a miracle and it seems they do not.⁴²⁶ First, we should note a rather simple qualification that the divine could create a physical manifestation of itself before any action occurs. Possible examples of this could be found in burning bushes, an angelic appearance, Jesus, etc.⁴²⁷ It seems logically possible that

⁴²³ Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” 96.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁴²⁵ Another aspect of this parable was to identify the possible unfalsifiability of some views (Flew, 99). While logical positivism was shown to be self-refuting, one may find the responses to Flew helpful. See R. M. Hare, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1963), 99–103; Basil Mitchell, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1963), 103–5.

⁴²⁶ This objection is important to consider since it would not only affect the historian but also non-specialist believers in miracles. The objection seeks to nullify our epistemic access, as humans (not just as historians), to the divine.

⁴²⁷ Given the ambiguity on the distinction between the supernatural and the natural noted above one could *potentially* include ghosts or NDEs into the conversation, but this would be beyond the purview of our discussion.

immaterial divine beings *could* become physically manifested if they so desired and thus nullify this objection.⁴²⁸

Second, the immateriality of agent not enough to preclude our belief in their agency *a priori* since there are, as Fales points out, many “things that scientists study [that] are not—not straightforwardly, at any rate—locatable in space: space itself, properties, *human minds*.”⁴²⁹ Human minds are a particularly helpful analogy in our discussion since we are arguing that historians can possibly identify the actions of a divine mind. The ideas and wills of different *human minds* cause their bodies to act within the world. In other words, one’s immaterial mind and will is able to produce events within the physical world.⁴³⁰ In a similar way, the *divine mind* could cause events to occur in the material world.⁴³¹

In seeking to address the concerns of the invisible gardener, we argued that although a divine being could be manifested physically, it need not do so. Historians are able to identify the actions of a divine mind in ways analogous to the human mind. Thus, much like Flew eventually found the Gardener, so too can the historian.⁴³²

⁴²⁸ Boudry et al. note an interesting story of *Non Serviam* by Stanislaw Lem in which a computer programmer exists apart from his created computer universe in which the programmer could chose to reveal his existence or not to his computer universe. Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman, “How Not to Attack Intelligent Design Creationism,” 240.

⁴²⁹ Fales, *Divine Intervention*, 4 (emphasis added). Cf. 1.

⁴³⁰ Some may object that this analogy is dependent upon a view of the mind as being immaterial. While there is renewed discussion on the mind-body problem, even if it turns out that physicalist notions turn out to be correct, we cannot know these things *a priori*. Such relationship on the mind-body relation is best left open and discussion on multiple models be considered. Thus, rather than being dependent upon a specific view of the mind-body relationship, we are grounding it in a model that allows for the possibility of historical investigation that is open to a number of different positions on this issue. For a recent discussion mind-body dualism see Jonathan J. Loose, Angus J. L. Menuge, and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

⁴³¹ For more details on this analogy see Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 30, 105–8, 110, 155–57, 169.

⁴³² Antony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (NY: HarperOne, 2007). Flew found teleological arguments convincing for theism (155).

Context

Agent explanation is important because it provides the type of explanation proper to understanding miraculous events as something different from natural laws (and avoids “God of the Gaps” accusations that merely consider the “oddness” of an event) and more about intentionality, will, and purpose.⁴³³ In order for agents to act with intentionality, a context is necessary. Cutting someone with a knife could be a good thing or a bad thing, it depends on the context. If the context is a surgery, then its good, but it would be bad if the context were a robbery.⁴³⁴ Without knowing the context, one is unable to move towards a desirable goal because they do not know what specific actions will help them achieve their goals. The context of the agent’s situation will help reveal which actions will assist in achieving their goals and which ones will not. Context is absolutely crucial to understanding the actions of agents, including divine agents.⁴³⁵

Interestingly, as we have argued, miracles are often considered a form of the teleological argument. For a specific discussion on this topic see Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 148–62. One may also see the special issue of *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 2 (2013) on “Ramified Natural Theology.” To this we may also add Alvin Plantinga’s highly influential work Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1967). Further discussion on this topic, although interesting, is beyond the scope of our discussion.

⁴³³ Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 64–66, 89.

⁴³⁴ Such differences in context would be essential in court cases where the motive of the agents plays such a pivotal role. For example, in the surgical example, if the patient dies during the surgery, then the surgeon will not get a first-degree murder charge *unless* some additional information is provided to suggest that he planned to murder their patient. Without such positive evidence, however, one would be reasonable to believe that the patient died to any number of other *unintended* causes since the event occurred during a surgery which is the sort of context in which the goal is to save or preserve life and not take it.

⁴³⁵ This includes unique (possibly divine) actions. Even if such actions, as Taylor notes, “were quite unprecedented, they would nevertheless be understood, intelligible, and in that sense explained if they satisfied these conditions—that is, if they could be truly represented as an appropriate means to some end.” He also points out that this is what is done routinely in law courts when trying to determine motive. Taylor, “Two Kinds of Explanation,” 112.

How would this apply to divine agents? Philosopher and skeptic Larry Shapiro has questioned our epistemic ability to know that God was the causal Agent in Exodus when Moses confronts Pharaoh (even if one grants the events occurred as described). He sees no reason to think that God would express Himself through might and to do so is just speculation.⁴³⁶ Perhaps God's nature is one that prefers to turn the other cheek instead? For Shapiro, we do not have access to God's intentions or desires so any comment about God's actions (i.e. using might) is conjecture. If one considers this event *without a context*, then it certainly is difficult to know how God might act.⁴³⁷

However, the Exodus account, which Shapiro grants for the sake of the argument, does provide a context for which understanding of the actions of the agents involved makes sense, including God's actions.⁴³⁸ Among other factors, there is a clear challenging of power occurring whereby God informs Moses that Pharaoh will not let Israel go unless a "strong hand" is used (Exod 3:19-20; 6:1). Thus, the context enables us to understand why God would use might in this situation (*in order that* Israel may be released), while in other situations He may act differently just as human agents act differently in different situations.⁴³⁹

While it is true that Shapiro grants the evidence for the sake of the discussion, the point we are highlighting is that when the evidence is considered within the context it occurred, a

⁴³⁶ Shapiro, *The Miracle Myth*, 44.

⁴³⁷ Gregory offers a humorous anecdote that reminds us of the ambiguity of trying to identify the intentions of an agent when they act in such ways that are consistent with mutually exclusive paradigms. Gregory, "The Other Confessional History," 132–33.

⁴³⁸ For more details see Benjamin C. F. Shaw and Gary R. Habermas, "Miracles, Evidence, and Agent Causation: A Review Article," *Philosophia Christi* 20, no. 1 (January 2018): 189–91.

⁴³⁹ On the importance of context see Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 148–62, 187–88; Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 63, 66; Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 8, 28. For Licona, context is a criterion for identifying a miracle. Licona, "Historians and Miracle Claims," 119ff.; Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 163–66.

historian could recognize the intentions of the divine agent. Clarke made a similar point two decades ago when he wrote,

If we accept what we are told in the Old Testament, it is reasonable to believe that God supernaturally intervened in the world because he intended that the Israelites were enabled to cross the Red Sea....Without the context of such a plan God's intervention would be difficult to understand, and we would hesitate to attribute the parting of the Red Sea to the activity of a supernatural being at all, either preferring a natural explanation, if we can find a viable one, or admitting that we do not know how to explain the occurrence, and letting the matter rest.⁴⁴⁰

The point that we are making, then, is that the context enables us to see that if this event occurred, then supernatural intentions are made evident by the actions carried out in the empirical world.⁴⁴¹ If the information suggests that a divine agent has acted by parting the Red Sea or resurrection Jesus, then the historian would be conducting their historical method in ways analogous to human agents or other non-human agents.⁴⁴²

Conclusion

In summary, we suggested that history is a discipline that requires the freedom to be able to openly inquire into the past and miracles are the intentional actions of divine agents within

⁴⁴⁰ Clarke, "Hume's Definition of Miracles Revised," 53. The late Ben Meyer noted that in the Gospels the "supposition of the concrete possibility of miracles is fundamentally grounded in the *positive openness to a divine act* of salvation as the intelligible context of the miraculous. *If the salvific context is overlooked, the concrete possibility of miracles evaporates.*" Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 101 (emphasis added). He then adds, "If, furthermore, the critic cannot seriously imagine anything which might give religious significance to a resurrection of Jesus...nothing of the sort can commend itself to him as a viable hypothesis in accounting for the transforming paschal experience of the disciples."

⁴⁴¹ Habermas writes "Historical facts are not self-interpreting. They require a context in order to achieve special significance. However, when events are coupled with other factors, meaning may ensue." Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 65. He helpfully uses Caesar's crossing the Rubicon as an example writing, "that a Roman military commander crossed a small river in northern Italy in 49 B.C. might seem rather insignificant, at least when taken in isolation. But new insight develops when it is understood in its context. Julius Caesar led an army across the Rubicon River, which, against the background of Roman law, constituted an act of civil war" (65).

⁴⁴² Although we are not doing so here, in the case of Jesus's resurrection, one could argue for the divine action pattern surrounding Jesus' life which provides context for interpreting the resurrection as a miracle. Habermas, 89–121. For a discussion on divine action pattern see David Basinger, "Christian Theism and the Concept of Miracle: Some Epistemological Perplexities," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 1980): 137–50.

time and space. We highlighted that historical methods must be abandoned if they artificially restrict what can be studied *a priori* because such methods improperly imposed epistemic restraints that distort our knowledge of the past. Additionally, history is frequently concerned with the explaining the actions of agents. The intentions of agents are best understood by considering the context in which their actions occurred and should not be neglected. Thus, historians can quite properly investigate the important and significant questions regarding alleged actions of divine agents, including the resurrection, and draw conclusions on the basis of positive and publicly available evidence as they would with human agents.

Historical Concerns: “What About...”

As should be clear, we have advocated for a historical methodology that is able to freely investigate the action of agents in the past. While there are apprehensions in such a method that allows for divine agents, our approach has already sought to take these concerns into account. However, it will be helpful to briefly address two of the strongest and most common concerns directly and show how they have been incorporated into our method.⁴⁴³

Faith and its Relationship to History

A common objection to the historian’s ability to access miracles has to do with faith and evidence. Many presume belief in miracles to be known through (subjective) faith and apart from

⁴⁴³ We have decided not to discuss a number of other objections because they appear to be far weaker than the two we will be discussing. Some of these weaker objections include the following the claim that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence (how does extraordinary evidence differ from ordinary evidence?) or if we accept a miracle in one religion we must then accept all miracle claims (why not evaluate miracle claims on a case-by-cases basis?). A number of other common objections have been addressed above either directly or indirectly (God of the gaps reasoning, etc.).

publicly available (or objective) evidence.⁴⁴⁴ Ehrman provides a helpful illustration of this response,

[F]aith in a miracle is a matter of faith, not of objectively established knowledge. That is why some historians believe that Jesus was raised and other equally good historians do not believe he was. Both sets of historians have the same historical data available to them, but it is not the historical data that make a person a believer. Faith is not historical knowledge, and historical knowledge is not faith.⁴⁴⁵

This objection, although common, has a few significant problems to overcome if it is to be sustained.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ Deines notes that the assumption of religious truths being equated with subjective truths is pervasive in academia. Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 7–9.

⁴⁴⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 173. This comment appears to explain why Ehrman’s understanding of “canons of historical evidence” cannot demonstrate a miracle. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226. Similarly, but from a different angle, Willi Marxsen, “The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical and Theological Problem,” in *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ*, ed. C. F. D Moule, vol. 8, *Studies in Biblical Theology* 2 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1968), 17, 19–22, 25.

⁴⁴⁶ The late Jewish scholar Alan Segal writes “For me, this is the mark of faith; it does not depend on rational argument. If it did, it would be reason, not faith. The same is true with the resurrection.” Alan F. Segal, “The Resurrection: Faith or History?,” in *Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 137. For a different view from another Jewish scholar, Pinchas Lapide writes, “I cannot rid myself of the impression that some modern Christian theologians are ashamed of the material facticity of the resurrection. Their varying attempts at dehistoricizing the Easter experience which give the lie to all four evangelists are simply not understandable to me in any other way.” Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 130. After citing comments from Bultmann, Rahner, Braun, Marxsen, Zahrnt, and Limbeck, Lapide provides a humorous response to their unhistorical paraphrasing of resurrection (129). E. P. Sanders similarly noted that the “need for rational explanations is a modern one. The numerous efforts have a *conservative aim*: if Jesus’ miracles can be explained rationally, it is easier for modern people to continue to believe the Bible is true.” Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 159 (emphasis added). Given the list of scholars noted by Lapide, it is debatable how “conservative” this aim actually is, but Sander’s point illustrates how some are willing to redefine the NT conceptions in order to fit in with modern sensibilities. For example, Thomas Sheehan, “The Resurrection, An Obstacle to Faith?,” in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Sourcebook*, ed. Bernard Brandon Scott, vol. 4, *Jesus Seminar Guides* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2008), 93–104. Lüdemann helpfully offers this response, “Is it not also important to measure one’s own faith by the faith of the first witnesses or if need be to have it corrected from there? Otherwise it threatens to be arbitrary.” Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 1. Nevertheless, other scholars today would agree with Ehrman, Segal, et al. scholars on this point. For example see Roy W. Hoover, “Was Jesus’ Resurrection an Historical Event?,” in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Sourcebook*, ed. Bernard Brandon Scott, vol. 4, *Jesus Seminar Guides* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2008), 75–92; Miller, “Back to the Basics: A Primer on Historical Method,” 15–17. More recently Carnley has sought to describe how faith can arise through experience Carnley, *The Reconstruction of Resurrection Belief*.

First, historians come to different historical conclusions on all sorts of topics despite also having the “same historical data” available to them.⁴⁴⁷ In these situations, scholars (including Ehrman) do not typically accuse their opponents of having some generalized notion of faith.⁴⁴⁸ One is left wondering how those who conclude a miracle claim occurred are being treated differently.

It appears one reason for this is because of the assumption that miracles can only be known by “faith.” While it is unclear how Ehrman understands faith as an epistemology that can inform someone that a miracle has occurred, it would still need to be demonstrated that those who argue for the historical occurrence of a miracle are actually *doing* history differently rather than just being assumed.⁴⁴⁹ Contrarily, if they are doing history and providing the relevant data and arguments, then these must be engaged.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ Ehrman writes, for example, that historical Jesus research is a “hotly debated area of research” and that he is therefore only able to present what he believes to be the “most compelling” position. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 231. For an example outside Jesus research, different interpretations (i.e. Marxist and non-Marxist) of the French Revolution are mentioned in introductory works on the subject. William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 98–108. Licona makes a similar observation. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 156.

⁴⁴⁸ Ehrman does not think, for example, Jesus was a cynic philosopher, but he (rightly) does not accuse those who do as acting on some undefined notion of faith (or as a believer). Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 259. Cf. 229. As we noted, historians do not approach the data from a neutral position and there are certainly cases where scholars have imposed certain worldviews or assumptions into their historical work which affects interpretations. For an insightful discussion on differing interpretations of data see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 150–60, 286–94.

⁴⁴⁹ For example, Licona points out that it is hard to read Wright’s *The Resurrection and the Son of God* as the product of mere blind faith. Licona, “Historians and Miracle Claims,” 111.

⁴⁵⁰ Smith makes the distinction between those who use faith as appeals to “supernatural methods of justification” which are private as opposed to his understanding of methodological naturalism which relies on publicly available evidence. His view of methodological naturalism is one that refers to justification, not metaphysics. Thus, one could, in theory investigate miracle claims so long as the evidence is available for analysis. Smith, “Methodological Naturalism and Its Misconceptions.” An important nuance is that this understanding of faith should be distinguished between an existential private encounter with God. Such events, however, would only be evidential to the individual who had the experience. If a transformation occurs in the individual, that transformation could be considered indirect evidence to others. Although he may, at times, appear fideistic in his approach, Scot McKnight provides an example of experiential components. Scot McKnight, “The Misguided Quest for the Nature Miracles,” in *The Nature Miracles of Jesus: Problems, Perspectives, and Prospects*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 187. Cf. Contributors, “Dialogue: A Way Forward,” 196 fn. 1

Second, it seems that the notion of faith being used here appears to assume a form of blind or entirely subjective faith. This understanding of faith is problematic both for the historian and the believer. The problem for the historian is that it is only one understanding of faith among others and thus should not be used as the only interpretive grid for evaluating miracles.⁴⁵¹ As noted above, historians can, and should, conceptualize other models of faith (as they do with different worldview) rather than ones that make miracles impervious to investigation *a priori*.

The problem for the believer is, as Deines points out, in a world where there is no critical discourse on divine action, then “authority of the sentence, ‘God wills it’ is a dangerous weapon in the hands of religious leaders, and even more so, from a theological perspective, *within the reality of a fallen humanity*, for which ‘will to power’ is one of the most disastrous sins.”⁴⁵² Believers should be concerned that their faith does *not* become a type of Gnosticism whereby those who have “faith” are those who have the knowledge of the truth. One may rightly wonder where or what are the constraints for those who have faith or is it ultimately a great deal of subjectivity?⁴⁵³ Such understandings of faith would seem to render the Bible itself as secondary, if not irrelevant, while one’s experienced “faith” is paramount. Indeed, Wright warns that “without historical enquiry there is no check on Christianity’s propensity to remake Jesus, never

(Keener). One may also find helpful Gary R. Habermas, “The Personal Testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Believer and Christian Apologetics,” *Journal of Christian Apologetics* 1, no. 1 (1997): 49–64.

⁴⁵¹ For example, on the other end of the spectrum is Gregory A. Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013).

⁴⁵² Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 2 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵³ “But *how* should faith determine what one believes—does “anything go” so long as one believes it on faith, or are there constraints.” Martin, *The Elusive Messiah*, 152 (emphasis in original). Three scholars, for example, have provided “criteria” when it comes to miracle claims. See Steve Clarke, “When to Believe in Miracles,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1997): 99–100; Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 24–26; Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 79–87.

mind the Christian god, in its own image.”⁴⁵⁴ Historical evidence, then, is not only important for divine action and doctrine, but also for serving as a check on the temptation to make Jesus look like believer instead of the believer looking like Jesus.⁴⁵⁵ Thus, while the historical component is not sole thread in the cord of Christian (or religious) knowledge, it cannot and should not be dismissed *en toto*. Faith is certainly more than history, but that does not make it less historical.

A related issue is that some may see the need to “safeguard” their faith from being either less than certain or from the possibility of being falsified by deferring to faith and avoiding historical inquiries.⁴⁵⁶ Pannenberg makes a comment that would likely raise anxiety for some such as these when he writes “Whether or not a particular event happened two thousand years

⁴⁵⁴ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:10. One need not understand this comment as being making history mutually exclusive from the help of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁵⁵ “Theology does not rule out history; in several theologies, not only some Christian varieties, it actually requires it.” Wright, 1:95. See also Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 99; Padgett, “Advice for Religious Historians,” 302. Cf. A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 7. One could argue, for example, that if the accounts of Jesus were mythological in nature and Jesus never existed, then the faith that certain believers claim to experience would be an incorrectly interpreted experience. They may claim to have some experience, but it was not manifested as a result of Jesus since in this scenario Jesus is nonexistent. Thus, it is important that we know that Jesus actually existed if we want to affirm these experiences as involving something external. The same may be said with other events in Jesus’ life (i.e. death, resurrection, etc.). In short, the historical question to Jesus’ existence, which is beyond doubt, is still a historical issue that has impact on doctrines such as soteriology. Importantly, Paul in 1 Cor. 15:15 says that Christians would be lying about God if they say that God raised Jesus if God did not actually do this. Thus, no matter how much faith one may have, if God did not perform this act and one proclaims God as having done it, then that person is misrepresenting God according to Paul. A final distinction on faith, history, and doctrine may be found in Mk. 2:1-12 where there are existential (forgiveness of sins), empirical (healing of a paralytic [which confirms the forgiveness of the paralytic’s sins]), and theological (Jesus has the ability as the Son of Man to forgive sins [which was demonstrated in the healing of the paralytic as a confirmatory act that supported Jesus’ claim that the paralytic’s sins were forgiven]) components.

⁴⁵⁶ “Much Christianity is afraid of history, frightened that if we really find out what happened in the first century our faith will collapse.” Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1:10. See also 93-94. Similarly Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 4 (“Committed Christians within Biblical Studies sometimes try to bracket out a supra-historical core from historical examination to leave their central beliefs unthreatened”). See also 344. It should be noted that the skeptic is not immune from this concern. Wedderburn seems to think this issue only goes in one direction when he makes comments that history should not “become lackeys of another discipline [i.e. theology]” but neither should it be a tool for atheology; history cannot be forced to provide “fodder for theological systems” nor should it for atheological systems either; and he says that when the theologian or believer is confronted with historical problems they “have to re-examine their premises” and indeed so should the skeptic! He also believes that the history is a bed of nails for the believer. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, 7. See also 8, 16, 18.

ago is not made certain by faith but only by historical research, to the extent that certainty can be attained at all about questions of this kind.”⁴⁵⁷ Yet, for those who have this anxiety James D. G.

Dunn offers the following observation

The Liberal flight from history was also a search for an ‘invulnerable area’ for faith....But a crucial question was too little asked: whether we should expect *certainty* in matters of *faith*, whether an invulnerable ‘certainty’ is the appropriate language for faith, whether faith is an ‘absolute’....The language of faith uses words like ‘confidence’ and ‘assurance’ rather than ‘certainty’. Faith deals in trust....Faith is commitment, not just conviction.⁴⁵⁸

While the desire for certainty is understandable, “existential certainty does not translate into epistemic certainty.”⁴⁵⁹ Additionally, if Dunn is correct and faith is more like trust or commitment, then one need not speak of epistemology, let alone certainty. Rather the issues should focus on faithfulness.

Moreover, knowledge of a miracle alone does not appear to equal faith in the Biblical sense. In both the OT and NT miracles are expected to occur in other traditions and Jews and Christians are expected to be able to recognize the events without any subsequent faith or following-after the divine agent who performed them (e.g. Deut 13; Mark 13:22 [cf. Matt 7:21-23]; Matt 24:24).⁴⁶⁰ The knowledge of a miracle from a divine agent, for example, seeking to lead Israel astray, should be recognized and avoided by the Israelites in Deuteronomy 13. Thus,

⁴⁵⁷ Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 99. Similarly Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 361; Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 31.

⁴⁵⁸ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 1:104 (emphasis in original). See also Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 1.

⁴⁵⁹ Padgett, “Advice for Religious Historians,” 306.

⁴⁶⁰ Deines adds that even in the teachings of various religious traditions warn against false claims. Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 23. Adding, “But the critical task for a theistically motivated historiography remains to discern whether God’s involvement should indeed be seen or heard in an event...or whether revelatory claims function as an attempt to embellish someone or something for some particular reason” (24). See also Clossey et al., “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II.”

knowledge of these miracles does not require faith (in any sense) on the parts of Jews or Christians.

From an *inverted perspective*, in the New Testament we find examples of people who believe that a miracle occurred but do not commit themselves to following Jesus (Mark 3:22; Matt 11:16-19). Similar examples come from recent times. For example, there have been some scholars who have accepted Jesus' resurrection while refraining from commitment (i.e. faith) to Jesus as Messiah or Lord.⁴⁶¹ In short, knowledge alone does not yield commitment.⁴⁶²

Third, those who argue that historians are unable identify a miracle because it is an act of "faith" can be the very ones who provide hypothetical examples where a miracle is *expected to be identified* by their readers as a miracle but *apart from faith*. In other words, *they presume their readers will recognize a miracle given the right constellation of evidence and not by faith*.⁴⁶³ By presenting a hypothetical example of a miracle occurring in the world, they have simultaneously provided an example of how one could identify a miracle historically.

⁴⁶¹ One well known scholar who takes this view is the late Pinchas Lapide. Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*. In a recent work on Jewish research on Jesus' resurrection, David Mishkin notes other Jewish scholars who accepted Jesus' resurrection but remained Jewish, he then adds that "belief in the historicity of the resurrection does not necessarily lead to a personal faith." David Mishkin, *Jewish Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 212 cf. 110–13, 115–16. Of those who take up the issue in Hinduism, more appear to be more willing to accept a spiritual resurrection or objective vision of some sort which is more consistent with their theological outlook. Bradley Malkovsky, "Some Recent Developments in Hindu Understandings of Jesus," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 23 (January 1, 2010): 5–6; Sandy Bharat, "Hindu Perspectives on Jesus," in *The Blackwell Companion to Jesus* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 258; Balwant A. M. Paradkar, "Hindu Interpretation of Christ from Vivekananda to Radhakrishnan," *The Indian Journal of Theology* 18, no. 1 (1969): 75. For some helpful overviews and themes on Hindu views (e.g. swoon, spiritual body, travels to India) see, Sandy Bharat, *Christ Across the Ganges: Hindu Responses to Jesus* (Winchester, U. K.: O Books, 2007), 6 fn. 4, 57, 58, 61, 66–67, 83–84. Cf. 116.

⁴⁶² One may know, for example, simple mathematics but fail to be faithful to it if they wish to commit financial fraud of some sort.

⁴⁶³ When we refer to the "right constellation of evidence" we are referring to various elements such as agency, context, and other relevant empirical data needed to demonstrate the event's occurrence.

For example, in addition to Ehrman's comments above, he also argues against the historian's ability to discuss miracles when he writes, "Many historians, for example, committed Christians, observant Jews, and practicing Muslims, believe that they [miracles] have in fact happened. When they think or say this, however, they do so not in the capacity of the historian but in the capacity of the believer."⁴⁶⁴ Yet without acting in the capacity of a believer or appealing to faith, Ehrman then goes on to suggest that *it would be a miracle* "if a preacher prayed over a bar of iron and thereby made it float."⁴⁶⁵ The reader is *expected* to be able to envision such an event occurring and recognize it as miraculous because of the agent who caused the bar to float and the context in which it occurred despite the fact the reader does not (or may not) not faith or is acting in the capacity of a believer.

The reason readers can recognize the event as a miracle is because the right constellation of events has occurred which provide positive evidence that a divine agent has acted in that context. Ehrman appears to be aware of this which explains why he is able to use it as an example of what a miracle would look like.⁴⁶⁶ Yet, if, according to the objection, we can only conclude that a miracle occurred *by faith* or *as a believer*, it is not clear how this is so. In his

⁴⁶⁴ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 229.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 227. See also 229. More fully, Ehrman presents this example in the context of the natural sciences whereby one could perform a number of tests and seeing that the iron bars will sink in every instance. Interestingly, it is not just that the iron bar floats contrary to the normal working of nature that makes the event a miracle, but when the preacher prays over an iron bar and it floats is when it becomes a miracle. Thus, we see Ehrman incorporating, at least to some degree, an element of context and agency whereby God is answering the preacher's prayer in his hypothetical example.

⁴⁶⁶ Ehrman contends that his example is how the natural sciences could possibly identify a miracle, but history could not do so since it "cannot operate through repeated experimentation." Ehrman, 227. Yet this overlooks the fact that in Ehrman's example he is performing the role of a historian by describing the past experiments in which the iron bars sank every time with the exception being when a preacher prayed over a bar and it floated. Moreover, as noted above, what helps historians (or anyone) identify a miracle is the evidence, context, and agency involved, not whether we can conduct repeated experiments since a divine agent could possibly work through nature.

hypothetical situation, if there was in fact evidence of a priest who prayed over a bar of iron and evidence that the bar of iron floated, then historical evidence could be used to demonstrate that a miracle has occurred. It seems the reason the reader would understand the example given by Ehrman is precisely because they have the epistemic ability to identify miracles. This includes the layman and the specialist as well as the believer and unbeliever. The use of hypothetical examples is evidence of our ability to recognize a miraculous event in the past given the right constellation of evidence. Ultimately, then, it is not *merely* a matter of faith (or perhaps faithfulness), but simply the *right evidence* in the *right context*.

The Domain of Philosophy and/or Theology

Another objection is that historians should pass the question of miracles to other disciplines. The objection suggests that historians do not have the right tools to adjudicate miracle claims. We might wonder what exactly are these tools, who has them, and, most importantly, why is the historian unable to use them? The general sentiment is that philosophers and theologians have these tools.

Princeton University professor Dale Allison provides an interesting example of this point. Although he used to think these sorts of questions could be answered historically, he has changed his mind. He now thinks the

discussion has to be handed over to the philosophers and theologians, among whose lofty company I am not privileged to dwell. They, not me, are the ones who can address the heart of the matter, the problem of justifying – if such a thing is possible – a worldview, the thing that makes the resurrection of Jesus welcome or unwelcome, plausible or implausible, important or unimportant.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁷ Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 351; Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, 89; Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 226. Despite their arguing for “supernatural occurrences,” Eddy and Boyd raise a similar concern in Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 40, 87–89. A *slightly* different shift appears in Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 66–78.

This is an understandable objection. Nevertheless, this comment raises several considerations worth noting.

First, and perhaps most important, several philosophers from differing backgrounds do believe historians can conclude a miracle has occurred. Decades ago, Leon Pearl pointed out in the *American Philosophical Quarterly* that “*This matter is best left to historians and archaeologists; all that philosophical inquiry can do is clear the path for them.*”⁴⁶⁸ Skeptical philosopher Evan Fales contends that he “cannot find any principled reason why, *if* supernatural causation is metaphysically possible, its presence could not be detected.”⁴⁶⁹ While the Christian philosopher Stephen Davis writes “Could a historian *as a historian* affirm that Jesus was raised from the dead?...Could a historian *as a historian* affirm that *God* raised Jesus from the dead?....I believe the answer to both questions ought to be Yes.”⁴⁷⁰ As we have highlighted both here and in chapter two, there do not appear to be any reasons philosophically or theologically that prevent the historian from investigating miracle claims.⁴⁷¹ Indeed, as Pearl noted, the path has already been cleared!

Second, suppose we grant the point that historians, by the nature of their discipline, do not have the tools to examine miracles, why should we think that they could not obtain these

⁴⁶⁸ Leon Pearl, “Miracles: The Case for Theism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1988): 336 (emphasis added). See also Martin, *The Elusive Messiah*, 116–17, 188–89.

⁴⁶⁹ Evan Fales, “Reformed Epistemology and Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Philo* 4, no. 2 (2001): 176 (emphasis in original). See also the skeptical Smith, “Methodological Naturalism and Its Misconceptions.” The noted theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg makes a similar argument. Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 109.

⁴⁷⁰ Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 27. See also 26–34. Similarly C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 203.

⁴⁷¹ Larmer writes that the “job of the historian is not to decree in advance what can or cannot happen, based on his or her metaphysical predilections, but rather to seek to ascertain what did in fact happen. The question of whether events best understood as miracles actually occur is an empirical one, not to be decided by an arbitrary fiat that refuses to countenance the possibility of supernatural causes.” Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 180.

tools and apply them historically? Historians frequently cross-discipline in order to better understand the past.⁴⁷² For example, without being a psychologist, a NT scholar such as Allison could (and in fact has!) legitimately appropriated knowledge from the field of psychology in order to try to better understand the past.⁴⁷³ One could similarly, as a historian, likewise become familiar with various philosophical and theological issues related to miracles in order to better understand the past.⁴⁷⁴

Third, we might question whether any “special training” is needed. As noted in the previous consideration, hypothetical examples of miraculous events are provided and readers are expected to recognize the miraculous event. If special training in philosophy and theology is needed, authors would not provide such hypothetical examples since most will not be able to recognize them as such since they do not have the formal training. If it is not possible for us to identify a miracle in the past, then we are similarly unable to recognize a hypothetical miracle in the past? Of course, if it is possible that we can identify a miracle in the hypothetical past, then it is certainly possible that we can recognize a real miracle historically if a divine agent should act in the actual past.

⁴⁷² Licona argues that historians should cross-discipline and take into account the doctrine of God as it relates to a historical question (particularly miracles). Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 155–60, 166–67. Cf. Keener, *Miracles*, 2011, 2:665–66. Deines highlights the inverse relationship, that divine acts could potentially impact other disciplines. Deines, *Acts of God in History*, 26.

⁴⁷³ Allison draws from psychology in order to compare and contrast the disciples experiences of the risen Jesus with bereavement visions. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 269–99, 364–75. Those engaging in Allison’s work have suggested that not only was such a move legitimate, but also “impressive.” Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 626. See also Allison’s drawing from psychological research with respect to memory studies in Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013). Examples of his drawing from the field of psychology can be found at the opening of this work (2-10).

⁴⁷⁴ One might object to this last response by saying that we argued above that the historian cannot address metaphysical questions. To clarify, we did not say that historians cannot address metaphysical questions. History presupposes a variety of metaphysical beliefs (Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 156). The point we were making is that these must be held tentatively and bracket them when appropriate. This maintains the balance between an open approach to history, while also recognizing that we cannot help but approach the data from some perspective.

Final Comments

When we consider the historian's epistemic access to the past, we find that there do not appear to be any reasons *a priori* that a historian could not, in principle, investigate the actions of divine agents. Moreover, given the nature of the discipline as an open inquiry into the past, examining the alleged actions of divine agents is similar to historical investigation into human or non-human agents. This also means that they, like other claims about past events, should be critically assessed. Historians should not shy away from these investigations. Rather, given their training, they can be incredibly helpful in the discussion. While some historians have already begun doing this, it would be great to see others likewise enter the dialogue.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

“We have seen that these three challenges are not nearly as difficult to overcome as those who posit them imagine....I have contended that none of them prohibit historians from conducting a sound investigation into the question, ‘Did Jesus rise from the dead?’”⁴⁷⁵

- Mike Licona

Independently of Michael Licona’s recent assessment, we have come to the same conclusions in this present work. Beyond what Licona concluded, we have found that these three roadblocks to studying the resurrection do not inhibit one from studying whether Jesus rose from the dead any more than they prevent other historical investigations that have reportedly occurred. Ultimately, these roadblocks may more appropriately be understood as bumps in the road for those studying the past. They do not prevent us from investigating or knowing past events such as Jesus’ resurrection in particular or other reported historical events in general. They can, however, give us a reason to slow down. By helping us avoid rushing down the road, they can help us refine our inquiry into the past. We will now summarize our findings then offer some final comments.

Can We Know the Past?

For Licona, “the standard challenges to historical knowledge noted by postmodern historians do not prevent historians from adjudicating on the historicity of miracles in general and the resurrection of Jesus in particular.”⁴⁷⁶ We similarly concluded that the challenges presented by the fact that inquirers are subjective beings with limited perspectives and horizons that filter our view of the world do not inhibit one from studying past events. Rather, we found that the relationship between objectivity and our subjectivity is deeply connected.

⁴⁷⁵ Michael R. Licona, “Jesus’s Resurrection, Realism, and the Role of Criteria,” in *Jesus, Skepticism and the Problem of History: Criteria and Context in the Study of Christian Origins*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and J. Ed Komoszewski (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 302.

⁴⁷⁶ Licona, “Jesus’s Resurrection, Realism, and the Role of Criteria,” 292.

We argued that as active subjects, we should strive toward the *virtues* that such subjectivity enables. These include things like allowing free and open disclosure of one's views pertaining to their object of inquiry which is done by refusing to impose inappropriate *a priori* conceptual frameworks upon the object. Along similar lines, one must be willing to bracket their own worldview when conducting research and evaluate the data from multiple perspectives. In doing so, they allow the object to be understood on its own terms.

On the other hand, we should be vigilant in guarding ourselves from embracing the *vices* that can compromise the integrity of our research as subjective agents. These include imposing one's own preconceived notions upon the data such that only what fits into this network will be revealed and contrary evidence will be ignored or discarded. Such a method risks refusing to "love thy neighbor" since it forbids them from speaking freely. Lastly, the subject is tempted to define reality (as opposed to discover it) based upon their desires, ideologies, presuppositions, and so on.

We concluded that the subjective component is vital to historical studies in general and historical Jesus research and the resurrection in particular. Subjective agents are those that can weigh different hypotheses and revise them in light of the evidence. Moreover, our conclusions can and must be held tentatively as new evidence comes to light. This means that we must be content with probable historical conclusions that are provided from limited historical-cultural positions.

How Do We Know the Past?

In this chapter we discussed two "tools" that were available for helping one know past events. The first was the Minimal Facts Approach (MFA) which seeks only data that is (1) highly evidenced and (2) widely agreed upon by a heterogenous group of scholars. While the

first criterion includes a variety of different tools one could use in knowing the past, the second criterion helps us evaluate the potential influence of our biases (either appropriate or inappropriate) since it requires agreement from scholars with wide ranging backgrounds. Such diverse agreement suggests the event is evidenced from multiple different vantage points (i.e. criterion one) and does not require an idiosyncratic position in order to be accepted.

The second tool historians can use when investigating the past is the use of historical criteria. These historical criteria add to the probability of an event having occurred and rarely, with the exception of contextual credibility, can they suggest that an event was unhistorical. It was important for us to discuss the role of the historical criteria so that realistic expectations could be set rather than ones that give the appearance of being overly objective or overly subjective. Licona makes a similar point when he writes, “Rather than jettisoning the criteria, a better route may be to admit that one’s expectations of the criteria have been idealistic and then revise those expectations accordingly.”⁴⁷⁷ Wise use of the criteria is required, and such wisdom necessitates the inquirer to recognize which context is appropriate for the criteria to apply and how much weight to place upon them. We then applied the criteria to the claim that Jesus was crucified as a test case in order to see how the criteria could be applied. We found that several criteria were met and that this can increase our confidence in the historical reality of that event.

Can Historians Investigate Divine Action?

Lastly, we argued that a historian *qua* historian is within their epistemic rights to comment upon divine action. We noted several reasons for this, many of which were related to issues we addressed when discussing the subjective components of historical inquiry. Namely,

⁴⁷⁷ Licona, 297–98.

the historical method must be one that is free and open to investigate past events without any possible explanations excluded *a priori*. Methodological naturalism as it is most often practiced does precisely this by imposing inappropriate conceptual frameworks which thereby can distort one's understanding of the past. As Licona argues, "One problem is MN would actually prevent scientists and historians from discovering the true cause if the nature of the cause is supernatural."⁴⁷⁸ Accordingly, such a method should be rejected in favor of one that is more free, open, and dynamic.

We then noted two central elements that the historian needs to consider when investigating alleged miracle claims. The first is that of agency. Miracles could occur through natural means or in ways contrary to our understanding of nature. One of the factors that distinguishes whether or not an event is a miracle is whether or not it can be attributed to an agent who is acting with intentionality and purpose. The second element is related in that it requires the context in which the event occurred to be taken into account, as should be done in any historical inquiry. In order to understand whether or not there was a divine agent acting with intentionality, the context must be taken into account.⁴⁷⁹ In so doing, it can demonstrate how the agent's intentions and aims could be recognized.

We then considered two common objections to our conclusion. The first had to do with the relationship of faith to history. We addressed this by noting that those who are believers in a miraculous event can operate the same as historians when presenting their case for a miracle and, conversely, that a historian could operate in a similar manner to that of a believer when arguing their case for a given historical event. Second, we considered whether or not the historian had the

⁴⁷⁸ Licona, 286.

⁴⁷⁹ This can include divine action patterns.

tools to discuss events that were so intertwined with other disciplines such as philosophy and theology. We saw that some philosophers have acknowledged that historians already have these tools. Perhaps more importantly, historians frequently cross-discipline when investigating the past and should not be restricted in this area either.

Conclusion

Jörn Rüsen points out that the “need for orientation in the practical day-to-day living of human beings is at the core of the historical cognitive process.”⁴⁸⁰ One of the reasons the past is studied is precisely because of the significance it can have in the present. Given the significance of its claims and impact of Christianity in the world, we should freely and openly explore its claims, especially the resurrection.

Although we noted that one can accept the historical reality of Jesus’ resurrection without becoming a Christian, many have accepted the historical reality of Jesus’ resurrection and then became Christians. The potential for this event to provide orientation and significance to one’s life is not lost on Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19. He recognized several areas of his life that would be radically different if Jesus was not raised from the dead before going on to discuss some of the implications that would follow if Jesus did rise.

By seeking to address the above three roadblocks to resurrection research, we have sought to provide fertile ground for those interested in studying the past. Although we have not discussed the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection itself, our goal was to remove these roadblocks in order to show that such an investigation can be responsibly conducted. The freedom to pursue

⁴⁸⁰ Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*, trans. Diane Kerns and Katie Digan, *Making Sense of History* 28 (NY: Berghahn Books, 2017), 45.

such an inquiry is critical for those who are seeking orientation and significance for their lives in the present (and possibly...the future).

Moving forward from this project, various avenues of research are presented. First, the issues related to the virtues and vices of our biases can be further investigated by drawing from other disciplines (i.e. psychology, philosophy, ethics, etc.). Second, further elaboration of the various criteria or principles for knowing the past can be identified beyond the broad methods we proposed. Lastly, further development regarding specific criteria used to identify a miracle can be pursued, such as a divine action pattern.⁴⁸¹ Each of these three areas would provide a helpful development of the arguments we have presented here.

⁴⁸¹ See fn. 442 above.

APPENDIX: LIST OF LISTS

In this appendix we will present lists from various scholars who either acknowledged a consensus regarding the various facts they list concerning Jesus and early Christianity or provided their own a general list or outline of facts that they accept. The appendix will be broken up into two different parts. The first will be lists that focus on historical Jesus studies more broadly. The second part will present lists that have data which are more relevant to investigating Jesus' resurrection specifically. No commentary will be offered in this appendix as its goal is to present as clearly as possible the differing lists presented by scholars.

Historical Jesus Studies in General

David Strauss

Peter C. Hodgson, editor of Strauss' *Life of Jesus*, provides a list of facts accepted and acknowledged by David Strauss. Despite Strauss' skepticism, the list presented by Hodgson is surprisingly significant.⁴⁸²

1. Jesus lived.
2. He was a disciple of John the Baptist.
3. Ministered in Galilee.
4. Jesus believed he was the Messiah.
5. Called disciples.
6. His discourses in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are largely authentic.
7. Jesus traveled to Jerusalem.
8. He proclaimed a second coming.
9. Jesus anticipated his death.
10. Jesus told the disciples farewell.
11. Jesus was arrested.
12. He was tried.
13. He was condemned.
14. Jesus was crucified.

⁴⁸² David F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. George Eliot, 4th ed. (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 2002), xxvii. Cf. 107, 640.

Günter Bornkamm

Günter Bornkamm noted the “indisputable” facts of Jesus’ life in his work on the historical Jesus.⁴⁸³

1. His home was Galilee.
2. But he was a native of Nazareth.
3. He was Jewish.
4. His father was a carpenter.
5. The names of His parents (Joseph and Mary).
6. The names of His brothers (James, Joses, Judas, and Simon).
7. His brothers, and mother, were originally unbelievers.
8. They later became believers.
9. Jesus spoke a Galilean version of Aramaic.
10. There is “no trace of the influence of Greek philosophy or the Greek manner of living” in His life.
11. Jesus was active in the areas around the hill country and Sea of Galilee.
12. He was baptized by John.
13. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God.
14. People flocked to Him.
15. He had disciples.
16. Jesus had enemies.
17. He died on the cross.

E. P. Sanders

E. P. Sanders provides multiple lists of undisputed facts regarding Jesus.

Sanders’ Lists of “Indisputable Facts”		
<i>Jesus and Judaism</i> ⁴⁸⁴	<i>The Historical Figure of Jesus</i> ⁴⁸⁵	
	During Jesus’ Life	Immediately After Jesus’ Life
Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.		
Jesus was a Galilean.	<i>Jesus was born around the time of Herod the Great’s death (4 B.C.E.).</i>	Jesus’ disciples initially fled.

⁴⁸³ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James M. Robinson, NY (London: Harper and Row, 1960), 53-55 (quote from 55).

⁴⁸⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 11. Cf. 321-322, 326. It should be noted that while we have ten facts listed, Sanders combines Jesus as a Galilean preacher and healer for his total of eight facts.

⁴⁸⁵ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 10-14 (list from 10-11).

Jesus was a preacher.	He grew up in Nazareth, a Galilean village.	They saw Jesus (in what sense is not certain).
Jesus was a healer.	Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.	As a result, they believed Jesus was going to return and found the Kingdom of God.
Jesus called disciples (and spoke of twelve).	He taught in towns (not cities).	Followers started a community that awaited Jesus' return.
Jesus was only active in Israel.	He proclaimed the Kingdom of God.	They also sought to show others that Jesus was God's Messiah.
Jesus was involved in a controversy regarding the temple.	Around 30 C.E. Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover.	
Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem by the Romans.	Jesus created a disturbance in the temple area.	
Jesus' followers continued a specific movement after Jesus died.	A final meal was eaten with Jesus' disciples.	
Some Jews persecuted portions of this movement.	He was executed by the order of Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect.	

Craig Evans

Craig Evans provides a list of factors that have come to a consensus in historical Jesus research.⁴⁸⁶

1. Gospels provide significant historical data.
2. Jesus' ministry makes sense of what we know of first-century Palestine.
3. The church is understood as having been grounded in Jesus' ministry (as opposed to Easter faith alone).
4. Jesus was a miracle worker.
5. Romans were the primary actors in Jesus' death and Jewish involvement and responsibility are exaggerated.

⁴⁸⁶ Craig A Evans, "Life-of-Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology," *Theological Studies* 54, no. 1 (1993): 34.

James H. Charlesworth

James H. Charlesworth notes twenty areas of consensus among experts regarding both Jesus and Jesus research.⁴⁸⁷

1. Jesus was Jewish.
 - a. Noting only one scholar denying this fact, H. Stewart Chamberlain.
2. It is impossible to write a biography of Jesus, but his early followers were interested in his Jesus' life and teachings.
3. We can know several things about Jesus and the broad outline presented in the Gospels is largely reliable.
4. Scholars are trying to better understand the Jewish context of Jesus.
5. He led a "renewal" movement of some sort.
6. Jesus' actions at the temple was likely the major impetus for his death.
7. Scholars have paid increased attention to Galilee.
8. Jesus was a devout Jew.
9. Scholars are using newly discovered primary sources from Jesus' time in order to see how and in what ways they might help us better understand Jesus.
10. Jesus never quoted from these new primary sources but did frequently quote the Old Testament.
11. Jesus was highly influenced by apocalyptic thought and Jesus' message was eschatological.
12. Jesus' parables were Jewish.
13. Pre-70 Palestine archeology is stimulating Jesus research while also creating challenges.
14. Sociology, anthropology, and areas of psychology have been growing in importance regarding our understanding of Jesus.
15. Jesus was recognized as unusual since he claimed significant power and authority.
16. More scholars are defending the thesis that Jesus thought of himself in messianic and eschatological terms.
17. Scholars are also recognizing Jesus was a miracle worker and that many of his healing miracles are authentic.
18. Jesus' ministry began with John the Baptist and his message used similar eschatological tones.
19. Jesus clashed with all known Jewish groups and was not a Pharisee, Zealot, or Essene.
20. Jesus was sometimes offensive in his responses.

⁴⁸⁷ James H. Charlesworth, "Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity," in *Images of Jesus Today*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 5–15. It is important to note he then goes on to note various challenges to this consensus in the following pages (15-27).

Two additional points he makes,

21. Jesus' quoted the Old Testament because he accepted the authority of these writings.
22. Jesus proclaimed the dawning of the Kingdom of God is one of the strongest consensuses.

Paula Fredriksen

Paula Fredriksen of Boston University points out that there are various “indisputable facts” that no “reconstruction of the historical Jesus can persuade if it cannot meaningfully accommodate [them].”⁴⁸⁸

1. Jesus encountered John the Baptist.
2. He had a popular following.
3. Jesus preached the Kingdom of God.
4. He was crucified by Pilate.
5. Jesus' core followers began proclaiming the Kingdom of God and that Jesus was the Christ who had risen from the dead.
6. The message extended beyond the Jews and included Gentiles.

Géza Vermès

The noted Jewish scholar Géza Vermès likewise highlighted “non-controversial facts concerning Jesus' life and activity, and [endeavored] to build on these foundations.”⁴⁸⁹

1. Jesus lived in Galilee.
2. Jesus' hometown was Nazareth.
3. John the Baptist “inaugurated” Jesus' preaching.
4. He was successful in Galilee.
5. Jesus had a dispute with the Jerusalem authorities.
6. He was crucified under Pilate sometime around 26-36 C.E.

⁴⁸⁸ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 268.

⁴⁸⁹ Géza Vermès, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 3ff., 19-20 (quote from 3). Similar comments two decades later Géza Vermès, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 2ff., 18.

Robert Funk

Robert Funk of the Jesus Seminar observed that “there are a few assorted facts to which most critical scholars subscribe.”⁴⁹⁰

1. There is substantial evidence that Jesus existed.
2. He was born around 6 or 7 B.C.E. and died by 36 C.E.
3. Jesus lived in Palestine.
4. He was “attracted” to John the Baptist’s movement.
5. Jesus was baptized by John.
6. He had male followers (Simon Peter, James, John).
7. Jesus was “linked” with the reign of King Herod.
8. Herod Antipas was the Tetrarch that ruled Galilee during Jesus’ life.
9. Jesus was crucified under Pilate.
10. Jesus had women followers (Mary of Magdala).
11. His home was Galilee and his hometown was Nazareth.
12. He was a Jew.
13. His mother’s name was Mary.
14. He had four brothers: James, Joses, Judas, and Simon (whom Mark reports as originally skeptical although they later join the Christian movement).
15. He was an itinerant sage.
16. Jesus practiced exorcism.
17. He was popular the common people.
18. Some authorities opposed him in Galilee.
19. He was also opposed in Jerusalem.
20. His ministry lasted from one to three years.
21. Jesus challenged the temple and authorities.
22. He was executed by the Romans.

Dale C. Allison*

Although Dale Allison is not providing a list of facts, he presents a list that any “objective inventory of the major themes and motifs that appear again and again in the Jesus tradition would surely include the following:”⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹⁰ Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 32-35 (quote from 32).

⁴⁹¹ Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 46-48 (quote from 46). He also notes that “the same is true of certain formal literary features” (49). He then provides a list of eight different rhetorical strategies.

1. Kingdom of God.
2. Future reward.
3. Future judgment.
4. Suffering and persecution for believers.
5. Victory over evil.
6. Sense of something new is present.
7. Significance of John the Baptist.
8. “Son of Man” references.
9. God as Father.
10. Loving, serving, and forgiving others.
11. Special concern for the unfortunate.
12. Intention matters most.
13. Hostility to wealth.
14. Extraordinary or difficult demands.
15. Conflict with the religious authorities.
16. Disciples as students and helpers.
17. Jesus as a miracle worker.

Bart Ehrman

In his introductory work, Bart Ehrman offers a brief list of accepted facts about Jesus.⁴⁹²

1. Jesus was baptized.
2. He associated with sinners.
3. Jesus called twelve disciples.
4. Near the end of Jesus’ life he caused a disturbance in the temple.
5. He was crucified under Pilate.
6. After Jesus’ death his followers established Christian communities.

Luke Timothy Johnson

Luke Timothy Johnson presents a list of facts that historians can assert “with the highest degree of probability.”⁴⁹³

1. Jesus lived in the first century.
2. He was Jewish.
3. Jesus was executed by the Roman authorities.
4. A movement began in which Jesus was proclaimed as risen Lord.

⁴⁹² Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 264.

⁴⁹³ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Learning the Human Jesus: Historical Criticism and Literary Criticism,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 159.

5. The movement spread across the Mediterranean world within twenty-five years.
6. During this period some writings were made by believers in order to interpret their “experiences and convictions” about Jesus.

Morna Hooker

Morna Hooker, former University of Cambridge professor, notes that we know “quite a lot about Jesus” and then goes on to provide an overview.⁴⁹⁴

1. Jesus spoke with impressive authority.
2. He taught in parables.
3. His main teaching was the Kingdom of God.
4. Jesus was known for working miracles.
5. He was friends with social outcasts (which offended various leaders).
6. He called disciples.
7. Jesus demanded and inspired incredible devotion from followers.
8. He was killed by the Roman authorities.
9. Jesus’ disciples came to believe that he was raised from the dead.

David A. deSilva

David deSilva provides a list of ten facts that “historians” would answer as being “highly probable.”⁴⁹⁵

1. Jesus was from Nazareth.
2. His public ministry began with Jesus as a disciple of John the Baptist.
3. Jesus was a teacher, healer, and exorcist.
4. He had a group of followers, including a core group of twelve.
5. His mission was focused on Israel.
6. He preached that the Kingdom of God was coming.
7. Jesus challenged the Jerusalem authorities regarding the temple.
8. He was crucified by Pontius Pilate as a messianic pretender.
9. Jesus’ followers believed they had “encountered” him after his death.
10. His followers then started a movement.

⁴⁹⁴ Morna D. Hooker, “Foreward: Forty Years On,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T & T Clark, 2012), xv.

⁴⁹⁵ David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 167.

Robert M. Bowman Jr. and Ed Komoszewski suggest that the following eighteen facts are “so well supported historically as to be widely acknowledged by most scholars, whether Christian (of any stripe) or not.”⁴⁹⁶

1. Jesus was born around 6 or 4 BCE.
2. He was a Jew from Galilee.
3. Jesus was raised in Nazareth.
4. He spoke Aramaic and possibly knew Hebrew and Greek.
5. He was baptized by John the Baptist before John was arrested and executed by Herod Antipas, who was the tetrarch of Galilee.
6. He was an itinerant minister and traveled throughout Galilee and surrounding areas.
7. He had a number of disciples who followed him (including men and women).
8. Jesus preached the Kingdom of God.
9. He used parables.
10. He was known to be a wonder worker who conducted exorcisms and healings.
11. Jesus was compassionate to those regarded as outcasts (unclean, wicked, etc.).
12. Jesus engaged in debates with the Pharisees concerning the Torah.
13. He traveled to Jerusalem during the Passover, the same week of the crucifixion.
14. He caused a commotion at the Jerusalem temple just prior to being arrested.
15. Jesus ate a meal with the closest disciples which later Christians referred to as the Last Supper.
16. At the request of the Jerusalem high priest and the head of the Sanhedrin, Jesus was arrested.
17. He was then crucified around 30 or 33 CE just outside of Jerusalem, under the authority of prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate.
18. His disciples had experiences that convinced them that God raised Jesus from the dead and appeared to them.

⁴⁹⁶ Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, “The Historical Jesus and the Biblical Church: Why the Quest Matters,” in *Jesus, Skepticism and the Problem of History: Criteria and Context in the Study of Christian Origins*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and J. Ed Komoszewski (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 22-23 (quote from 22).

Resurrection Related Lists

Gary R. Habermas

In 1976 Gary Habermas first presented a general list of facts in his Michigan State University dissertation.⁴⁹⁷

1. Jesus died on the cross.
2. He was buried in a tomb.
3. The disciples were distraught and lost all hope.
4. The tomb Jesus was buried in was found empty a few days later.
5. The disciples had experiences they believed to have been of the risen Jesus.
6. The disciples were then radically transformed, being willing to suffer and die for their beliefs.
7. The disciples began their preaching in Jerusalem.
8. The church started.
9. Sunday, not Saturday, was the primary day of worship.
10. Paul was converted from being a persecutor of the church to a follower of Jesus because of an experience he believed he had with the risen Jesus.

In Habermas' debate with Antony Flew he presented the following "known historical facts."⁴⁹⁸

1. Jesus died by crucifixion.
2. He was then buried.
3. After Jesus' death they were distraught and without hope.
4. Although not as widely recognized, the tomb was found empty a few days later.
5. The disciples had experiences they believed to have been of the risen Jesus.
6. As a result of these experiences, the disciples were transformed.
7. Jesus' resurrection was central to the preaching in the early church.
8. The message was especially proclaimed in Jerusalem.
9. The church began and grew.
10. Sunday became the primary day of worship.
11. James, Jesus' brother and skeptic, converted to Christianity.
12. Paul, the early church persecutor, converted by an experience he believed to have been with the risen Jesus.

⁴⁹⁷ Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1976), 315–16. Although G. E. Ladd's book was published prior to Habermas' dissertation, we included Habermas first since he reported that he had developed these facts years earlier. See chapter two.

⁴⁹⁸ Gary R. Habermas, "Affirmative Statement: Habermas," in *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1987), 19–20.

In *Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Habermas has noted the acceptability of using different lists of facts. The table below presents two varying lists that he believes could be used depending on the context or the skepticism of one's interlocutor.

Habermas' Lists from <i>Risen Jesus Future Hope</i>	
<i>Known Historical Facts (Larger List)</i> ⁴⁹⁹	<i>Minimal Facts (Smaller List)</i> ⁵⁰⁰
Jesus died by (Roman) crucifixion.	Jesus died by (Roman) crucifixion.
He was buried, probably in a private tomb.	The disciples had experiences that they thought were of the risen Jesus.
Afterward Jesus' death, the disciples were discouraged and lost hope.	The disciples were transformed and willing to die for this belief.
The tomb was empty shortly after the burial.	The disciple's proclamation of the resurrection began at the beginning of the church (i.e. it was very early).
The disciples had experiences that they thought were of the risen Jesus.	James, the brother of Jesus and a former skeptic, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.
The disciples were transformed and willing to die for this belief.	Saul (Paul), the church persecutor, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was the risen Jesus.
The disciple's proclamation of the resurrection began at the beginning of the church (i.e. it was very early).	
They proclaimed it in Jerusalem, where Jesus had just recently been crucified and buried.	
Jesus' resurrection is central to the Gospel.	
Sunday became the day for Christians to gather and worship together.	
James, the brother of Jesus and a former skeptic, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.	
Saul (Paul), the church persecutor, became a Christian due to an experience that he believed was the risen Jesus.	

⁴⁹⁹ Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 9–10.

⁵⁰⁰ Habermas, 26–27.

G. E. Ladd

Although very similar to Habermas, G. E. Ladd provides a list of facts on three separate occasions in his work on Jesus' resurrection, though he does not specify why his list changes.

Ladd's Lists		
List 1 ⁵⁰¹	List 2 ⁵⁰²	List 3 ⁵⁰³
Jesus' death.	Jesus' death.	Dying and rising Messiah was totally unexpected.
Jesus' burial.	Jesus' burial.	Jesus' death.
Disciples were discouraged and disillusioned.	Disciples were not expecting Jesus' death and were confused as a result.	Jesus' burial.
Disciples (sudden) transformation to be witnesses for the risen Jesus.	Empty tomb.	Disciples were discouraged and disheartened.
Empty tomb.	<i>Empty Tomb alone is not proof of the resurrection.</i>	Empty tomb.
Rise of the Christian church.	<i>Disciples had experiences which they interpreted as Jesus risen from the dead.</i>	<i>Grave clothes were not disturbed.</i>
Conversion of Saul.	<i>Judaism at that time did not have a concept of a dying and rising Messiah.</i>	Disciples had experiences of the risen Jesus.
	<i>Resurrection proclaimed in Jerusalem.</i>	<i>The experiences led to the resurrection faith.</i>
		Rise of the Christian church and its belief on the risen Jesus.
		Conversion of Paul.

Stephen Davis

The philosopher Stephen Davis presents the following lists of facts in his work on Jesus' resurrection.

⁵⁰¹ George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 13.

⁵⁰² Ladd, 93.

⁵⁰³ Ladd, 132–33.

Stephen T. Davis' Facts from <i>Risen Indeed</i>	
List 1 ⁵⁰⁴	List 2 ⁵⁰⁵
Jesus died on a cross.	First-century Jews had no concept of a dying and rising Messiah.
Christians later came to believe God raised him from the dead.	Jesus died.
Resurrection was the center of their message.	He was buried.
They claimed it was the resurrection that transformed them.	The disciples were initially discouraged.
They were initially disheartened after Jesus' crucifixion.	He tomb was found empty soon after the burial.
They were transformed into being bold and courageous.	Some of the disciples had experiences they understood to be with the risen Jesus.
	These experiences convinced them that Jesus was raised from the dead.
	They started a movement that grew.
	The movement was based on the belief that Jesus rose from the dead.

Jürgen Moltmann

Jürgen Moltmann's lists some "relatively well-attested historical facts."⁵⁰⁶ The implication is that they would be well accepted by most scholars. However, he notes, due to his historical methodology, that "all that can actually be proved about them are the assurances of the women that at Jesus' empty tomb they heard an angelic message telling them of his resurrection, and the assertions of the disciples that they had seen appearances of Christ in Galilee."⁵⁰⁷

1. Jesus was crucified and died publicly.
2. The women were the ones who learned of resurrection at Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem.
3. The disciples fled to Galilee.

⁵⁰⁴ Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 15.

⁵⁰⁵ Davis, 180.

⁵⁰⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, "The Resurrection of Christ: Hope for the World," in *Resurrection Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 74.

⁵⁰⁷ Moltmann, 74.

4. The disciples returned to Jerusalem and openly shared that Jesus, who was crucified, was raised from the dead by God and was Lord and redeemer of the world.

Michael R. Licona

In his massive study, Michael Licona presents the following list of facts with Jesus predicting his death (and vindication) bracketed out of his investigation, while the conversion of James and empty tomb are considered second-order facts.⁵⁰⁸

1. Jesus was understood to be a miracle-worker and exorcist.
2. Jesus understood himself as God's eschatological agent.
3. *Jesus' predictions of death and vindication.
4. Jesus' death by crucifixion.
5. Appearances to the disciples.
6. Conversion of the church persecutor Paul.
7. *Conversion of James the skeptical brother of Jesus.
8. *The tomb was found empty.

David Mishkin

David Mishkin notes the following list of facts as generally accepted by Jewish scholars who have written on the subject.⁵⁰⁹

1. Jesus was crucified.
2. He was then buried.
3. Disciples' believed they saw the risen Jesus.
4. The tomb in which Jesus was buried was found empty.
5. Paul converted to Christianity.

⁵⁰⁸ Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 277–464.

⁵⁰⁹ David Mishkin, *Jewish Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 203–10. In his dissertation, he also included the growth of the early church David Mishkin, "Jewish Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus" (PhD, diss., University of Pretoria, 2015), 194.

Justin Bass

The most recent list of facts surrounding Jesus' resurrection are presented by Justin Bass. He concludes the following are "bedrock facts."⁵¹⁰

1. In the early 30s AD, Jesus was killed by crucifixion.
2. Claims about Jesus being raised from the dead is "unparalleled" in three ways:
 - a. Optimism evaluation of a crucified Messiah.
 - b. Two-stage resurrection plan with Jesus first and the general resurrection later.
 - c. Divine claims associated with the one crucified.
3. Jesus' followers (both individually and in groups) and at least one enemy were convinced Jesus appeared to them shortly after the crucifixion.
4. Peter, James, and Paul were among those who saw Jesus individually and at least one of the group appearances was to the Twelve.
5. Paul was a Pharisee who persecuted the early church prior to converting to Christianity after becoming convinced Jesus appeared to him.
6. Paul was with Peter for two weeks while also meeting with Jesus' brother, James.
7. Shortly after Jesus died, Paul received various traditions regarding Jesus. The tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 should be dated within ten years of Jesus' death.
8. Those who believed that Jesus appeared to them created a movement that was founded upon "love and sacrifice" which captured the Roman empire, established Western civilization, continues to influence nations and billions of people today, and is referred to as Christianity.

Andrew Ter Ern Loke

Andrew Loke makes several historical considerations that he argues are "well established" but does not comment upon their being widely agreed upon.⁵¹¹ These include the following:

1. Jesus was crucified around AD 30.
2. Groups, such as the apostles who knew Jesus, and individuals, including skeptics like Paul, reported seeing a resurrected Jesus soon after the crucifixion.

⁵¹⁰ Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity: The Unalterable Facts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 200–201.

⁵¹¹ Andrew Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ: A New Transdisciplinary Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 202. Cf. 17. Loke also includes five general considerations (202-203) which are:

1. No group would be willing to suffer, die, and be condemned by God for what they do not believe.
2. Without an external stimulation, groups would be unable to agree upon details regarding a perceived visual experience of the external world.
3. Many who had hallucinations subsequently recognized that they, in fact, had a hallucination.
4. No mere human would, naturalistically, have a transphysical body such as that of the resurrected Jesus.
5. Strauss' critique is still an important consideration against the Swoon Hypothesis.

3. They were threatened but willing to die for their religion.
4. The claim that Jesus resurrected was very important for the earliest believers.
5. They had a reverent fear towards bearing false witness about YHWH.
6. There was skepticism about bodily resurrection within the group as well as outsiders.
7. They followed the commonsense notion of inquiring with available eyewitnesses.
8. There was “mobility and networking” within the earliest Christians.
9. It is not likely that the author of Matthew would have risked blatant falsification by creating or inventing the guards at the tomb.

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