

Research Article

The Historian, the Christian Apologist and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus: A Re-evaluation

Stephen Smith¹

1. Independent researcher

Christian apologists generally insist on the historicity of Jesus' bodily resurrection because the biblical evidence supports it. However, history relies upon the use of widely-accepted historical methods which can be applied to all past historical events, from which biblical history is not exempt. Apologists often introduce God as a *deus ex machina* to override the necessity of applying secular historical methods to claims for the miraculous, including the resurrection of Jesus. In the present paper I deploy two well-respected methods – historical analogy and inference to the best explanation – to argue that biblical history, no less than any other, must adhere to such approaches if it is to be worthy of the name. I also discuss the place of statistical inference in historical enquiry and argue that its application to the historicity of alleged events like the resurrection is of limited value. Potentially, these events are open to historical enquiry if the aim is to provide a natural explanation. The claim that they were engineered by God, however, is beyond the scope of the historian.

Correspondence: papers@team.qeios.com — Qeios will forward to the authors

1. Introduction

Are Christian apologists¹ who undertake the task of writing about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth justified in regarding themselves as historians? At one level they are writing about the past, even if it is a dim and distant one, and rely on such data as is available, so in that sense we might answer in the affirmative. On the other hand, there are several problems, some of which are unique to their enquiry.

First, although by no means all biblical scholars are Christian apologists, many of them are, and these have a vested interest in affirming that Jesus was the Son of God and that God raised him from the dead.

Now, we all have our biases, but responsible historians tend to reduce these to a minimum^[1], whereas Christian apologists seek to emphasise them. They affirm from the outset the very position they are seeking to justify through historical argument.

Second, all the authors of the New Testament wrote on the basis of their faith that Jesus was God's Son. Luke and John take an overtly physicalist stance to Jesus' resurrection appearances. With regard to Paul, we cannot be so sure. His chief asset is that he is the earliest of all the New Testament writers (c. 48–60 CE), but he appears less physicalist than the Gospel evangelists regarding the resurrection. Plenty of ink has been spilled over this issue, however.

Third, there are no substantial pagan sources about Jesus to offset the Christian bias of the evangelists. Roman historians like Tacitus and Suetonius focused on the politics of empire and the wars which sometimes accrued from them or on the lives and times of the emperors. Any references to minor religious figures like Jesus or some other messiah were simply a by-product of these essential issues. Most Romans, at the outset, were decidedly not Christian apologists.

Finally, there is the question of the alleged resurrection of Jesus himself. Mark 15: 33–37 has us believe that Jesus died on the cross at approximately 3.00 p.m. on Good Friday and that the necessary obsequies had to be hurriedly arranged prior to the commencement of the Sabbath at around 6.00 p.m. In any event, Jesus must have been brain-dead for some two hours before he was interred. If he was subsequently raised “on the third day” (*tē hēmera tē trite*, 1 Cor. 15: 4), therefore, it could not have occurred other than by God's fiat. But a case in which God Almighty overrules the course of nature to interfere with the outcome of a purely physical event cannot be the business of genuine history, but rather of theological speculation.

For all these reasons, the Christian apologist is on the back foot from the outset. No act of God, or an earthly event that is somehow engineered by God, can be susceptible to historical enquiry. Christian apologists argue otherwise, but in the remainder of this paper I will attempt to show that the application of specific historical methods, accepted as such by competent historians, will not support the kind of arguments that apologists are bent on expounding.

Until the last forty years or so, biblical historians proceeded largely irrespective of what secular historians were doing. The absence of relevant data beyond the Bible itself was a serious impediment, but finally biblical scholars began to recognise that it was necessary to apply genuine historical methods to the biblical texts if they were to be taken seriously by historians in general. Three, in particular, have been flagged up by Christian apologists with an interest in historical “respectability”: the principles of

historical analogy, antecedent probability and inference to the best explanation (IBE). To these we might add an interest in statistical analysis which is often commandeered by IBEers as a supplementary tool.

2. The Principle of Historical Analogy

Although the principle of analogy can be explored in some depth^[2], the basic issue, as applied to the question of miracles by the celebrated German theologian Ernst Troeltsch^[3], is that what has occurred in the past can generally be aligned with what occurs today. Modern society can learn from previous examples that inform the present – in politics, for example^[2].

On the other hand, what we know today can affect the manner in which we assess what earlier societies believed. For Troeltsch, in his discussion of miracles, it appears that, despite claims to the contrary, the modern world runs along naturalist lines, with little sign that modern arguments for the miraculous can be convincingly verified. Speculation concerning miracles occurring today prospers where ignorance thrives, and Troeltsch reasoned that the daemon-haunted world of ancient societies was, in reality, little different from our own in that respect.

In his assessment of the issue, Michael Licona^[4] simply flips the coin by asking us to consider what would happen if we could show that miracles *do* occur today. Surely then, by analogy, we would be justified in arguing that the miracle accounts from the New Testament, including Jesus' resurrection, are feasible. The evidence normally provided, however, is far from convincing.

Craig Keener's^[5] compendious account of Christian miracles across the ages carries a substantial section on alleged resuscitations (pp. 536–79) – some of them relating to people who are supposed to have been dead for some considerable time, but it is entirely lacking in objective historicity. Here is a brief example:

The raising of the dead, often with abundant witnesses, has been reported in numerous cases in Mozambique, that has grown around the ministry of Heidi and Rolland Baker ... They reported at least fifty-three cases by 2007, and the cases reported have increased considerably since then. One widely watched DVD includes an interview with one man who had been raised and immediately healed of his injuries; this raising, Rolland Baker indicated, was public knowledge. In one reported case, Pastor Surpresa Sithole was praying for a family twelve hours after a six-year-old girl's death and holding the child's hand. Unexpectedly, the girl returned to life, dramatically affecting the village.^[5]

The remaining forty pages of this section proceeds in the same vein. Now, if believers wanted to use such accounts analogously, what justification would they have for doing so? It might be said that without Jesus' example² and resurrection, such modern resuscitations could not be taking place, although there is obviously a distinction between resurrection (*anastasis*) and resuscitation. God would certainly be required to effect a resurrection. The overall impression, however, is the obvious credulity with which Keener reports these anecdotes. Names and general locations are given in some instances, but no specific data that would allow independent and disinterested researchers to examine any of these cases effectively. The outstanding objection is that if so many resuscitations are occurring, it is remarkable how few of them have reached the attention of the national press. It would not be feasible to use anecdotal data of this kind to make any well-considered historical judgements on the possibility of resurrections or miraculous resuscitations.

A somewhat different but related line of enquiry was presented some years ago by Phillip Wiebe in his *Visions of Jesus* ^[6]. Happily, Wiebe was more open-minded than Keener and reported his cases in an even-handed manner. These comprised thirty-six claims by twenty-eight individuals to have witnessed visions of Jesus, taken by most recipients to be objective experiences. Could it be shown that Jesus was present on at least one of those occasions, there would be some justification in arguing for the reality of Jesus' own resurrection, since objective visions, if they were such, visions would not otherwise be possible. Clearly, however, their objectivity must be challenged on the basis that they differ considerably from one another, suggesting a measure of subjectivity. Most of the percipients were already believers of one kind or another and interpreted their experiences in terms of their existing beliefs. The most common reaction, in fact, was to identify the figure on impulse. No description extended beyond the common presuppositions about what Jesus would look like if he appeared today. The essential features of Wiebe's survey can be distilled from the table below:

a) The Participants			
i) Gender:	Male – 39.28%	Female – 60.72%	
ii) Age bands:	0–15 years	5.55%	
	16–30	44.44	
	31–50	38.90	
	51–70	8.33	
	71+	2.77	
iii) Presence of stress symptoms at time of experience:	51.05%		
b) Mode of Experience			
Ocular sighting only:	61.11%		
Sighting by another means:	2.77		
Auditory experience only:	2.77		
Both “seeing” and “hearing”:	30.55		
Uncertain:	2.77		
c) Environment			
	Normal: 69.45%;	Altered: 30.55%	
	Percipient alone: 50%;	With others: 50%	
d) Form of Jesus’ Appearance			
i) Traditional appearance?	Yes – 83.33%	No – 16.67%	
ii) Complete humanoid form?	Yes – 72.22%	No – 27.78%	
iii) Solid or transparent?	Yes – 86.11%	No – 8.33%	Uncertain – 5.56%
iv) Distinct facial features?	Yes – 72.22%	No – 27.78%	
v) Radiance?	Yes – 36.11%	No – 63.89%	

vi) Moving or still?	Yes – 83.33%	No – 16.67%	
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Table of Experiential Data

The most remarkable of Wiebe's cases, and the only one to claim a collective sighting, is the final one in his collection (Case 28, pp. 77–82) in which an entire congregation of some fifty people on one occasion in 1954 and two hundred on another one in 1959 supposedly observed Jesus' presence at their Pentecostal Holiness Church, Oakland, California. More striking still is the fact that, on the second occasion, one member of the congregation happened to have an 8mm cine camera with him and filmed the entire incident. Wiebe twice interviewed the pastor of the church, Kenneth Logie, in 1965 and again in 1991. During his first visit he was able to view the film for himself. The views of those who saw it were mixed, even among those who had been present on the evening in question. Some believed it to be genuine while others took it to be a clever hoax. Wiebe, taking a measured stance, agreed that the figure looked like the traditional conception of Jesus, but denied Logie's claim that his face could be clearly seen and also cast doubt on the figure's animation. This range of reaction indicates that a degree of suggestibility might have been at work – that people viewed these images according to their presuppositions. At his 1991 interview with Logie, Wiebe naturally wanted to view the film again but was told that it had been stolen from the pastor's apartment.

Three points in particular suggest that the apparent Christophanies at the Pentecostal Holiness Church cannot simply be taken at face value. First, they must be set against the church's charismatic tenor as a whole, of which Wiebe provides a flavour:

[The pastor] says the church went through a period of extraordinary healings, exorcisms, prophetic insights, glossolalia, resuscitations, and so on. ... He reports an experience ... in which the roof of the church was bathed in visible but non-consuming fire, causing the neighbors [sic] to call the fire department. He also reports that images and crosses, hearts and hands mysteriously appeared on the walls of the church [from which] flowed streams of liquid having the consistency of oil^[6].

Here we have a curious mixture of Pentecostal charismata (Acts 2: 1–13: 1 Cor. 14) and other wonders that might have been suggested by these. It is surprising that neither the pastor nor anyone else in the

congregation produced any written accounts of these events^[6]. It also seems suggestive that the less effusive denominations such as the Methodist, United Reform, Quaker and Salvation Army, whose members are equally as faithful, rarely record episodes of this frequency and fervency.

Second, signs and wonders are simple enough to describe but not amenable to explanation, unlike the structure of the physical world which, in principle, is conducive to a complete explanation. Surely it is incumbent upon the charismatic believer to concede that all events, including the “miraculous,” may be explicable in principle.

Finally, the importance of the film appears to cut in two directions. Apart from the fact that the visual quality was poor and probably contributed to the split reaction to its reception, presumably it was intended to convince doubters that Jesus was still alive and able to appear at will as the resurrection accounts suggest. If so, however, this would surely diminish the need for faith which takes pride of place in the Scriptures and is consistently commended by Jesus himself (Matt. 8:10; 9: 2, 22, 29; 15: 28; 17: 29; 21: 21; Mark 4: 40; 5: 34, 36; 10: 52; 11: 22; Luke 7: 50; 17; 19; 18: 8; 22: 32, etc.).

Speaking analogically, it appears that, despite the obvious discrepancies of detail, there are certain points of similarity between the events that occurred at Kenneth Logie’s church and the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. In both cases the most avid believers were the ones most likely to interpret the christic visions as manifesting Jesus’ real presence, either bodily or in spirit visually interpreted. The assumption in either case is that Jesus himself would have been conscious of being present at the time and in the place where his followers claim to have encountered him. On the other hand, “some doubted” (Matt. 28: 17) and were more circumspect about their experience. After all, there is a mountain of evidence now for the view that some people “see things” that simply are not there (hallucinations), or misinterpret objects that are (delusions), not to mention those whose claims are consciously fraudulent. In sum, historical analogy seems to suggest that whatever conclusions we draw in respect of Wiebe’s Case 28, they are equally as applicable to the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances.

So far, I have deployed the principle of analogy to paint a somewhat gloomy picture of the possibility of the bodily resurrection of Jesus on the grounds that if it occurred it would have been one of a kind and so not amenable to analogy. Marcel Sarot^[7], however, warns against this tendency, pointing out that history should not be shoehorned into a single concept. He turns to German theologian Karl Barth’s understanding of history as a marriage between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, of which the former is a subset of the latter. The crucifixion of Jesus was *Historie* in the sense that its details are, in principle, recoverable

through the application of traditional historical method. The resurrection of Jesus cannot be recoverable in that sense because it would involve the recovery of a brain-dead person, not simply someone in a coma. So, did Jesus truly rise?

The believer will say: Yes, it is *Geschichte*, it is a fact and it really took place. Anyone who would have been there would have found the grave empty. But the believer will also have to admit that this is not *Historie* in the strict sense, for it cannot be ascertained by the methods of historical-critical science. [But this] approach ends in deadlock when applied to the Resurrection, given that it cannot establish what really happened.^[7]

I cannot help but feel that Sarot is wanting to have his cake and eat it here: the tomb was empty because Jesus was raised from it by God, but this fact is beyond historical criticism, even though it really occurred. In effect, Sarot is demanding that the historian should operate with one arm tied behind his back. But if God raised Jesus from the dead and God is beyond historical scrutiny, our only genuine option is to deny that the resurrection was a historical event in the sense understood by secular historians.³ We cannot classify this event as genuinely historical if the chief actor is immune from scrutiny.

3. Inference to the Best Explanation

In their article on historians and miracles, Licona and Van der Watt^[4] present a section on antecedent probability in which they challenge the sceptical view that a miracle, by definition, must be accounted the least likely explanation of an event, even when it is *prima facie* an extraordinary one^[4]. Thus, any natural explanation of Jesus' bodily resurrection is preferable to the status quo. Admittedly, the view that individual disciples such as Peter hallucinated Jesus' post-mortem presence^[8], while various groups of disciples were the victims of delusion^[9], does not seem very likely *per se*, but surely no less likely than a bodily resurrection. As this question is encompassed by the wider issues addressed in the method known as Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE), I shall turn to it now.

The historian who, more than any other, has drawn the attention of Christian apologists to the IBE method is C. Behan McCullagh^[10].⁴ He outlined five essential criteria for ascertaining the best explanation for an event, topped and tailed by two others which we can overlook for present purposes. Despite his own adherence to the Christian faith^[10], he never allows this to override his judgement as a professional historian and in his sole reference to Jesus writes: "[The resurrection] hypothesis is of greater explanatory scope and power than other hypotheses which try to account for the relevant

evidence, but it is less plausible and more *ad hoc* than they are. That is why it is so difficult to decide on the evidence whether it should be accepted or rejected.” ^[10]. In a later contribution ^[11] he expanded his thoughts on the resurrection. Briefly, his assertion is that as a candidate for the application of historical methods such as IBE, the resurrection of Jesus attested in the Gospels fails at least some of the established criteria noted below. For instance, “... while the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead would imply that he was able to appear to his disciples, that hypothesis is weakened by the fact that it is entirely *ad hoc*.” ^[11]. In other words, there is no plausible evidence for such an event. However, it is still amenable to *interpretation* (^[11], my italics).

Let us turn, then, to what I feel are the four most important of McCullagh’s IBE criteria for ascertaining the likely truth of any proposed historical statement:

- The initial statement, or hypothesis, must be of *greater explanatory scope* than any other incompatible hypothesis about the same subject; that is, it must imply a greater variety of observable statements.
- The hypothesis must be of *greater explanatory power* than any other incompatible hypothesis about the same subject; that is, it must make the observation statements it implies more probable than any other.
- The hypothesis must be *more plausible* than any other incompatible hypothesis about the same subject; that is, it must be implied to some degree by a greater variety of accepted truths than any other, and be implied more strongly than any other.
- The hypothesis must be *less ad hoc* than any other incompatible hypothesis about the same subject; that is, it must include fewer new suppositions about the past which are not already implied ... by existing beliefs.

Craig^[12] appears to have been the first to use IBE as a means of underpinning his belief in Jesus’ resurrection with a historical method recognised by historians in general. Licona^[13] later built on this when he devoted the greater part of his substantial volume *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* to applying IBE in favour of his Christian apologetic stance. However, the bias bogey is ever with us, and Licona’s attempt to show that when each of the above criteria are applied, the resurrection hypothesis (R) is always equal to or more superior than any other is open to challenge.

i) Can R boast a *greater explanatory scope* than the best of the naturalist hypotheses, such as the hallucination hypothesis (H) and/or the collective delusion hypothesis (CD)? If Jesus was seen alive in what appears to have been his normal physical body, as Luke 24: 13–35, 36–49 and John 20: 10–18, 19–29;

21: 1ff imply, it would explain not only the sightings but also the reason for the empty tomb. The scope of the explanation is a wide one. By contrast, H and CD struggle to match this because, as hallucinations can only apply to individuals,⁵ CD would be required to explain the appearances to groups of disciples. The naturalistic alternative, therefore, would not fare well under the Occam's razor principle.⁶

However, as Cavin and Colombetti^[14] have noted, although R embraces *all* the data, not simply the empty tomb or the appearances, the explanation is only partial. There is an explanation of sorts for the empty tomb because if Jesus was seen to be bodily present as claimed, he cannot have remained in the tomb, assuming that his resurrection body was identical with his pre-mortem one. But how could a man who had been brain-dead for several hours have sprung back to life? The moment we introduce God into the equation we abandon genuine historical method. H reminds us that although hallucinations can be very diverse in nature ^[15] they sometimes include vivid visions of dead persons known to the percipient (e.g. ^{[16][17]} are often cited in this regard). Bereavement visions, in particular are frequently of this character ^{[18][19][20][21][22]}. It is not without interest that Jesus is said to have appeared to Peter (Luke 24: 34; 1 Cor. 15: 5) at the very moment when the latter was most conscious of his failure to stand by Jesus in his hour of need (Mark 14: 66–72) and may have felt a keen sense of bereavement at the time.

A further problem for R is that it takes no account of the text-critical history of the sources. If, for instance, the appearance traditions preceded the empty tomb ones, as *may* be implied by Paul (1 Cor. 15: 3–5), as he never mentions the empty tomb directly, the latter may have been prompted by claims of the appearances. If, on the other hand, the empty tomb traditions came first, these may have given rise to the resurrection accounts. We cannot simply assume that all the available data arose in response to actual experiences because the texts that have reached us are likely to have had a history of literary development.

ii) The question of *explanatory power* hangs on the form that the resurrection appearances are supposed to have taken. Licona thinks that R is more likely to succeed with the scenario of a physical resurrection rather than some form of visionary one. Yet it is not at all clear what the earliest Christians believed in this regard. Our only relevant pre-Gospel source is Paul who is ambivalent about the matter. His own conversion vision is never described by him in his letters, but Luke's three accounts (Acts 9: 1–9; 22: 4–16; 26: 9–18) are consistent in suggesting a visionary element to which Paul's companions were not privy. In describing the appearances of Jesus to others (1 Cor. 15: 5–7) he consistently uses the term *ōphthē*, “appear”, the same word he uses to describe his personal experience (1 Cor. 15: 8). For a genuine sense of physicalism we must turn to the accounts in Luke 24 and John 20–21 which, of course, are much later and

may betray some theological development. In any case, it is not clear from this that R is superior to the best of the natural hypotheses in this respect.

iii) How *plausible* are the contrasting hypotheses? R asks us to believe that a man who had been brain-dead for around thirty hours was raised from the tomb and communed with his followers in physical form. This would have been an absolutely unique occurrence. The alternative must be to devise a purely natural scenario which must inevitably invite a degree of speculation, but perhaps no more so than R. How about this one?

Joseph of Arimathea begs Pilate for Jesus' body (Mark 15: 43) in order to provide him with a decent burial. Pilate acquiesces (Mark 15: 45), thinking that Joseph is going to inter him in common ground. Later Pilate's centurion arrives to tell him that he has given the body to Joseph as ordered and that he has seen him carry it to a rock tomb a short distance away (John 19: 41). "Imbecile!" retorts Pilate, "What? And have that fellow's followers turn the site into a focus for further messianic dissent? Not on your life!" So the centurion is commanded to take his men and reinter the body in the plot of land reserved for common criminals. The women had seen Joseph place the body in the rock tomb on Good Friday (Mark 15: 47), and naturally expect to find it there on Easter Sunday morning. When they discover the tomb to be empty, they run to tell the disciples who begin to speculate on what has happened to the body. Peter is overcome with guilt (Mark 14: 66–72) and grief at the loss of his beloved master and in that vulnerable state believes that Jesus appears to him (Luke 24: 34; 1 Cor. 15: 5). Overjoyed, he runs to tell the other disciples.

To some this may all sound highly improbable, but it adheres to the outline of events as reported in the Gospels and is as sound as any other reconstruction. Is it really any less plausible than R?

iv) In regard to the *ad hocness* criterion McCullagh^[10] and Licona^[13] are at odds. The former says: "[R] is of greater explanatory scope and power than other hypotheses which try to account for the relevant evidence, but it is less plausible and more *ad hoc* than they are." Licona contests this, suggesting that R, using its trump card, has a perfectly credible explanation for the biblical resurrection account, albeit a supernatural one. In effect *ad hocness* concerns the nature and number of new suppositions.⁷ that must be taken into account to render the hypothesis convincing if the implications of existing beliefs alone cannot do it. The chief problem for RH is that the resurrection of Jesus is impossible without divine intervention; indeed, the very occurrence of the event is regarded by Christian apologists as proof of

God's existence. H has the advantage of not requiring a divine element, working instead entirely within the parameters of the natural world. As we have seen, however, HH alone cannot satisfy all the available data, given that many of the appearances are said to have been collective and require a supplementary hypothesis (CD). Often the matter comes down to personal bias, as is demonstrated by the diametrically-opposed judgements of McCullagh and Licona.

4. Statistical Inferences

During the present century Bayes' Theorem (BT) has become a popular resource for evangelical New Testament scholars in establishing the probability of miracles^[12], especially the bodily resurrection of Jesus, both historically^{[23][24]} and philosophically^{[25][26]}. Given that our present concern is a purely historical one, we must largely forego the latter here, although there is some inevitable overlap. In his book, Swinburne recognises the importance of establishing God's existence prior to any discussion of miracles, for only in doing so is it possible to discuss the resurrection as an act of divine fiat. As it is, the historical nature of our enquiry entails that we must assume, for the sake of argument, that those who argue for this singular event presuppose the existence of a divine agent who was not only able but inclined to bring it about. Despite this, however, I believe that the arguments of some apologists to the effect that BT demonstrates a near-certain probability for this scenario are highly dubious. I shall demonstrate this by reference to the detailed presentation of McGrew and McGrew^[23]. Bayesians aver that the conditional probability of any fact (F) being true or false can be expressed in terms of their ratio through the so-called Bayes' Factor. This is applied to the question of Jesus' resurrection by the McGrews. Thus:

$$\frac{P(F_1 \& \dots \& F_n | R)}{P(F_1 \& \dots \& F_n | \sim R)} \gg 1$$

They then state:

"It is a simple consequence of Bayes's Theorem that, where all the relevant terms are defined and the denominators are non-zero,

$$\frac{P(R|F)}{P(\sim R|F)} = \frac{P(R)}{P(\sim R)} \times \frac{P(F|R)}{P(F|\sim R)}$$

" (2009: 617)

The relevant facts, according to the McGrews, relate to i) the women's reports of the empty tomb (W);⁹ ii) the reports of sightings by the disciples (D); and iii) the testimony of Paul's experience (P),¹⁰ the BT formula being given as:

$$\frac{P(R|F_1 \& \dots F_n)}{P(\sim R|F_1 \& \dots F_n)} = \frac{P(R)}{P(\sim R)} \times \frac{P(W|R)}{P(W|\sim R)} \times \frac{P(D|R)}{P(D|\sim R)} \times \frac{P(P|R)}{P(P|\sim R)}^{11}$$

The women and the disciples, where they appear as groups, are not treated collectively but as individuals, in accordance with BT's conditional individuality factor. In each case the probability of their reports indicating in favour of the resurrection of Jesus as opposed to some natural alternative, is set at a ratio of 10:1.

At this point the first cloud appears on the horizon for the McGrew's case. How likely is it that each individual member of a group such as "the Twelve" witnessed the resurrection of Jesus by means of their individual perception rather than at the suggestion of a leading "influencer" like Peter? The only individuals acknowledged to have experienced the risen Jesus, possibly in carnal form (Luke 24: 36–49; John 20: 24–29), are Peter (Luke 24: 34; 1 Cor. 15: 5), Mary (John 20: 10–18) and James (1 Cor. 15: 7) – a far cry from the numerous "individual" sightings proposed by the McGrews. Still, we must work with what they have given us – at least initially.

To each class of witness (W, D, P) the authors assign figures of two, thirty-nine and three respectively, thus giving factors of 10^2 , 10^{39} , 10^3 . "Sheer multiplication through gives a Bayes factor of 10^{44} , a weight of evidence that would be sufficient to overcome a prior probability (or rather improbability) of 10^{-40} for R and leave us with a posterior probability in excess of 0.9999."^[23]

At this point I am obliged to admit that the McGrews' methodology leaves me somewhat baffled. They number thirteen disciples: the eleven originals and possibly Matthias (Acts 1: 26) and James the brother of Jesus. Ordinarily, if each disciple is awarded a factor of 10:1 in favour of R, the combined total for the thirteen individuals taken as independent witnesses would be 10,000,000,000,000 (ten trillion:1). But by subtle means of the Bayes factor, and without any obvious clarification, they triple this figure to ten quadrillion:1 ($D^1 \dots D^{39}$). These figures are too large to be in any sense meaningful. The authors admit that their calculations are reliant on the assumption that "in matters other than the specific claims, the Gospels and the book of Acts are generally reliable"^[23]. In other words, their general reliability increases the probability that they can be trusted in cases of the miraculous. For the McGrews' argument to have

any chance of success, however, the individuality factor is all-important; but the data at our disposal will simply not bear the weight of this supposition.

Far more attention needs to be paid to the plain testimony of the relevant texts. Of the four instances where the risen Jesus is said to appear to an individual, it is generally recognised that Paul's experience was a visionary one, since none of his companions witnessed what he claimed to have done (Acts 9:7; 22:9). The plethora of other appearances, in whatever form, occurred to groups of between two (Matt. 28: 8–10; Luke 24: 13–35) and over five hundred (1 Cor. 15: 6), and group appearances involving a deceased religious figure always invite collusion, with different members of the crowd providing different, sometimes contradictory accounts of what they witnessed. I shall elaborate on this point below.

Clearly, the McGrews regard the individuality of witnesses to be paramount, quoting John Venn^[27] to good effect: "When two [or more] witnesses agree on a statement in a matter about which they might make many and various errors, the combination of their favourable testimony adds enormously to the likelihood of the event; *provided always that there is no chance of collusion*" [my italics]. But surely, this final clause is precisely the problem in the case of the resurrection accounts provided in the New Testament texts. In response the McGrews adopt a curious "win-win" approach, agreeing on the one hand that independence of testimony is better than collusion^{[27][28]}, but arguing on the other that in the case of R, collusion makes the reality of the event more likely because the disciples would have compared notes and assured each other of the reality of what they had witnessed prior to offering themselves up for martyrdom. Surely one cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

Perhaps self-conscious of the extraordinary claim they appear to be making, the McGrews supply a few provisos: i) that in matters beyond specific miracle claims, the Gospels and Acts are as trustworthy as any other source of secular history;¹² ii) that they are therefore accurate in reporting what the witnesses claim to have happened; iii) that the strength of their argument is not necessarily reduced by sceptical claims of collusion or dependence which is generally assigned to the accounts; and iv) that the statistical values they apply to each individual datum are contestable.¹³

There are several obvious drawbacks to this approach which most apologists overlook. The most basic of them is the commonsense observation that genuine resurrections (as opposed to resuscitations) are vanishingly rare. It has been estimated that, since the emergence of *homo sapiens*, some one hundred billion (100,000,000,000) individuals have walked our planet, only one of whom could conceivably lay

claim to having recovered from genuine brain death after, say, thirty hours. Not one such claim has ever been proven. That alone is a challenge for the apologist's case.

Second, thought must be given to the question of whether BT is even appropriate for application to historical issues. Clearly, scholars are sharply divided on this issue. Richard Carrier^[29], who happens to be a noted sceptic, appears to regard it as the fulcrum of historical enquiry around which traditional historical methods should revolve. On the other hand, Behan McCullagh, a historian highly respected for his even-handed approach despite his personal Christian convictions' comments:

[BT] has seldom been recommended as a form of historical inference because the information required to apply it is often unavailable. ... When there is no evidence in support of a contrary position, the probability expressed in the conclusion of a valid statistical syllogism whose premises are warranted may be taken as indicating a reasonable degree of belief in that conclusion. ... When there is evidence supporting a contrary hypothesis, however, it is best to decide which proposition to believe (if any) by judging which provides the best explanation of all the relevant data.^[10]¹⁴

In the present case, the correct option is not manifestly the bodily resurrection of Jesus, as natural alternatives such as hallucinations and/ or collective delusions can and have been suggested. McCullagh intimates that the best method to apply here is IBE beyond which BT adds nothing more by way of proof.

In BT the initial probability of a proposition depends on the reliability of the data. The method is widely applied to everyday life such as medical diagnosis, weather forecasting, risk assessment and spam filtering (proving that BT has its limitations). In these areas it is comparatively successful because it relies on verifiable prior information. It can no doubt be applied to modern history in cases where the initial facts are known. In ancient history, however, it is much less useful because so many of the details are vague; and in cases where the sources are clearly biased, as in the Gospel accounts, BT is not a useful tool at all, especially as we have no viable alternative accounts of Jesus' activities from the period in question.¹⁵

Third, many scholars, including Craig^[12], McGrew & McGrew^[23] and O'Connell^[24], appear to think that multiplying the statistical values for a proposition will produce the desired results, but McCullagh^[10] again points out that distortions accrue from this procedure, producing some manifest absurdities. In discussing the reliability of the resurrection accounts Craig asks us to imagine five witnesses to the event, each of which is 99% reliable (99:100), with odds of 1% (1:100) against for each

witness. He then multiplies the results for the probable unreliability for all five witnesses as follows: $0.01 \times 0.01 \times 0.01 \times 0.01 \times 0.01 = 0.0000000001$ – or odds of ten billion to one against the collective reliability of the witnesses.

Jake O'Connell^[24], comes to grief using the same process of multiplication. He divides the resurrection stories into separate pericopae, awarding each one odds of 100:1 or 10:1, depending on circumstances, in favour of the bodily resurrection of Jesus as opposed to any alternative hypothesis (~R), finally arriving at a figure of one quadrillion to one (1,000,000,000,000,000:1) – a figure of virtual certainty for R. The McGrews^[23] adopt a more or less identical process, reaching the same inflated figure of probability – in excess of 0.9999 in their case.¹⁶

All this looks suspiciously like a facile attempt by the Christian apologist camp to produce the outcome that their presuppositions require. Beginning with a figure 0.01 for a single witness, the sum exponentially acquires fantastic proportions with the introduction of each subsequent witness. Statistics may have their place, but so does commonplace reason. We should remember that each witness is supposed to be *independent*, and if each of five independent witnesses (in Craig's case) is just 1% unreliable, the contention that, multiplied, they would become increasingly less unreliable may be correct statistically but dubious rationally. It should be remembered, too, that conversely five 1% unreliable witnesses are, *ipso facto*, 99% reliable ones, and their reliability also diminishes according to this method, if less alarmingly (from 0.99 to 0.95099). It also seems odd that a witness's reliability and unreliability can diminish simultaneously when treated collectively. Reason (sans BT) would surely suggest that the less unreliable a witness becomes the more reliable s/he ought to be.

Despite other leading apologists following Craig's example, not all statisticians are as enamoured of BT in this form. In a personal communication to me on this matter, Efraim Wallach wrote:

If several independent and essentially identical witnesses to [an event] are ... assigned reliabilities (meaning the probabilities that their assertions are true) ... the combined reliability of their testimonies is $R = 1 - (1-r_1)*(1-r_2)*\dots(1-r_n)$. Thus, for three witnesses, each with a reliability of 0.9, the combined reliability is 0.999; it drops to 0.875 for three semi-reliable (0.5) witnesses and to 0.21 for 10% [$r = 0.1$] reliable ones.

Clearly, Wallach does not agree with the method deployed by the above-named apologists since his alternative approach appears to produce figures that rely on combination but not multiplication. In his example, the combination of three witnesses, whatever the percentage of their reliability as individuals,

always increases proportionately rather than diminishing in combination. Ronald Meesters (personal communication) adds: “BT will never convey anything interesting about the resurrection of Jesus, simply because the prior, the choices of data, and the pieces of evidence are the result of personal choices.”

In the final analysis, this judgement must apply to the alternative hypotheses for the data too. A key motive for the apologist in using BT to establish the probability of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is to show that R is significantly more probable than any natural alternative. What is not emphasised, however, is that these comparisons are relative. Even if R should prove to be the most probable explanation of the data, it would not demonstrate the extent of its likelihood. The best that the Christian apologist could hope for would be to show that, although R is a highly unlikely explanation of the data, it is the least unlikely of the available alternatives. And even that assertion is debatable.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to show that when various methods developed and used by professional historians are applied to the alleged bodily resurrection of Jesus in the same way as they are applied to all other historical events, the nature of this one creates difficulties. Historical analogy, strictly applied, must be a non-starter because as interpreted by Christian apologists the resurrection of Jesus by God is without analogy. If it occurred it must, *ipso facto*, have been a once-only event. Moreover, God’s involvement would defy all attempts to explain it historically. Of course, the traditional approach can be challenged by hypotheses that do not require divine solutions, such as HH and CDH, although these come at the cost of infringing the Occam’s razor principle which is a fundamentally sensible one. Another alternative, which I have omitted here for the sake of argument, is that nothing happened at all: the story could be pious fiction rather than history, even if such a figure did exist.

The IBE method, so clearly expounded by C. Behan McCullagh, has been adopted by a number of Christian apologists, notably Willian Lane Craig and Michael Licona, but applied in ways of which McCullagh, from a refreshingly neutral perspective, would not approve. Indeed, although allowing that RH is the best explanation on offer for the *explanatory scope* and *explanatory power* criteria, he denies that this applies also to the *plausibility* and *ad hocness* criteria.

Perhaps the most glaringly unsatisfactory method for present purposes is BT. In its proper place it can be very effective, but not in ascertaining the probability of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The chief problem is that individual presuppositions are allowed to run riot. In the hands of Christian apologists like the McGrews and O’Connell (as well as the philosopher Richard Swinburne) the highly improbable

numerical values fed into the equations suggest that the resurrection of Jesus is just a whisker short of certain – so we are urged to believe. But equally, the sceptic Michael Martin, though somewhat less extreme, sets the probability rate for RH at 0.36, much lower than the 0.5 figure he thinks must be achieved if RH is to be accounted worthy of rational belief. Result: stalemate. The whole debate over the “correct” use of BT in this instance seems to be an exercise in futility.

In conclusion, although the problem of bias can hardly be avoided entirely, historical methods cannot be successfully applied if scholars presuppose the conclusions they have set out to reach. Needless to say, this applies to Christian apologist and sceptic alike – myself included! If the methods at our disposal have been proved by experience to be effective, those who adopt them to further their enquiries should follow regardless of where they lead.

Footnotes

¹ A Christian apologist is one for whom the traditional tenets of the Christian faith take pride of place and cannot be overruled by any kind of rational argument that seeks to challenge them. In the case of the resurrection of Jesus, which of course reigns supreme in the hearts and minds of Christian apologists while being airily dismissed by sceptics, we are presented with the strange phenomenon of scholars from both sides of the divide using identical historical methods to present their respective cases and reaching diametrically-opposed conclusions. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the application of Bayes’ Theorem. Compare, for instance, the apologist presentations of William Lane Craig^[12], Timothy and Lydia McGrew^[23] and Jake O’Connell^[24] with the sceptic Michael Martin^[30].

² The Gospels record at least three resuscitations performed by Jesus: Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5: 21–24, 35–43), the widow’s son at Nain (Luke 7: 11–17) and Lazarus (John 11: 1–44).

³ Cavin and Colombetti^[14] argue that the standard model of quantum physics would allow for the natural resurrection of a human being, “but only as an astronomically improbable statistical fluctuation.”

⁴ Among his apologist acolytes are William Lane Craig^[12] and Michael R. Licona^[13] who applies the IBE method to the question of Jesus’ resurrection throughout.

⁵ According to Aleman and Larøi^[31], a hallucination can be defined as “a sensory experience which occurs in the absence of corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, has a sufficient sense of reality to resemble a veridical perception, over which the subject does not feel s/he has direct and voluntary control, and which occurs in the awake state.” Adapted from the definition in David^[32].

⁶ The original Latin translates as “It is vain to do with more what can be done with less”, or, dressed in its Sunday best, “Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.”

⁷ My provisional reconstruction of events set out above is a clear example of *ad hoc* usage. It fits most of the data but these are just as open to any reasonable alternative explanation. What cannot be ascertained is which, if any, is correct.

⁸ That is to say: the probability of the various relevant facts supporting theism, given the resurrection, is far higher than the relevant facts given no resurrection where, on a scale of 0–1, 0 = absolute impossibility and 1 = absolute certainty.

⁹ Here the women’s testimony should be restricted to the sightings (Matt. 28: 8–10; John 20: 10–18) rather than the empty tomb itself.

¹⁰ Note that Paul never claimed his experience of the risen Jesus to be a physical one (contra the accounts of Jesus’ appearances in Luke 24: 36–49 and John 20: 24–29), a fact that appears to be confirmed in Acts 9: 1–9; 22: 4–16 and 26: 9–18.

¹¹ P = probability; Fn = cumulative facts; R = resurrection; ~R = no resurrection; W = women’s testimony; D = disciples’ testimony; P = Paul’s testimony. The numerical values applied to these lies in the hands of individual scholars, and wholly at their discretion which, to my mind, constitutes a fatal flaw in the application of BT to cases like this.

¹² I take this to mean that all biblical references to *secular* events in the story (e.g. the death of Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12: 20–23, which is corroborated in Josephus, *Antiquities* XIX. 343–50)^[33], should be treated on a par with accounts of secular history by competent historians generally. Of course, this does not necessarily imply that accounts of miraculous events with religious significance should be treated in the same way.

¹³ In case we should think that the McGrews are a couple of lone wolves howling in the wilderness, it should be remembered that they are merely representative of others who assign very high probability values to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Richard Swinburne’s final estimate of 100/103^[26], for example, is remarkably close to that of the McGrews, while Jake O’Connell^[24] devotes an entire book to reaching the same overwhelming conclusion.

¹⁴ Admittedly, this judgement dates back over forty years.

¹⁵ There are intriguing snippets such as the famous comment by Tacitus (*Annals* XV. 44)^[34] that “Christus ... had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.” This incidental comment is good evidence for the facts as revealed, but not for the Christian belief that Christ had been raised from the dead, for which Tacitus, and most Romans in the late first century, had nothing but contempt, as the context of this comment makes clear.

¹⁶ It is as well to point out that Bayes’ Theorem is not restricted to the use (or abuse) of Christian apologists, but has been deployed by sceptics such as Michael Martin^{[30][35][36]}, with Stephen Davis^[37]^[38] weighing in for the opposition. This only serves to confirm that scholars of very different persuasions feel free to use BT to state their case. This is made possible only because the various participants in the debate simply nominate the values that will best serve their purpose. Thus, by applying values of 0.1 to $P(R|T)$ – hence 0.9 to $P(\neg R|T)$ – and 0.2 to $P(E|R\&T)$ – hence 0.8 to $P(\neg E|R\&T)$ – Martin claims to calculate a final value for R of 0.36, which falls far below the 0.5 he says is required for rational belief in the resurrection – a conclusion naturally disputed by Davis.

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