

## The Best Arguments that the Resurrection of Jesus is Credible

William Lane Craig is possibly the best Christian defender of the faith of all time. His website Reasonable Faith is the go-to for the subject of apologetics. But as good as Craig is, he is less than truthful and you have to read him to see how representative of Christianity he is being. Craig's defence of the plausibility and truth of the Christian faith has been answered in the book, *Unreasonable Faith How William Lane Craig Overstates the Case for Christianity*. James Foder, the author, is an extremely able counteracting force. This page is about his best and essential insights regarding historical claims about the resurrection of Jesus and how plausibility says that Jesus if he lived at all is now dead.

### OCCAM'S RAZOR

Contrary to how it is often stated, Occam's Razor does not say that 'simpler explanations are more likely to be true'. Rather, it states that explanations which require fewer new (that is previously unestablished) assumptions, are to be preferred over those which require more such assumptions. Thus, it is essentially equivalent to the criterion of plausibility – given our background information, how likely is the proposed explanation?

### EXPLANATIONS OF HISTORICAL DATA

Explanations are judged in accordance with three main criteria: Explanatory scope: the larger the range of facts that an explanation can account for, the better is that explanation. Explanatory power: the more likely the facts are rendered by the explanation, the more clearly they are accounted for by it, the better is the explanation. Plausibility: the more likely are the propositions posited by the explanation given existing background knowledge (outside of the facts to be explained), the better is the explanation.

The set of seven criteria (originally formulated by C. Behan McCullagh) that Craig outlines as being the method by which historians judge the quality of explanations:

1. The hypothesis, together with other true statements, must imply further statements describing present, observable data.
2. The hypothesis must have greater explanatory scope (that is, imply a greater variety of observable data) than rival hypotheses.
3. The hypothesis must have greater explanatory power (that is, make the observable data more probable) than rival hypotheses.
4. The hypothesis must be more plausible (that is, be implied by a greater variety of accepted truths, and its negation implied by fewer accepted truths) than rival hypotheses.
5. The hypothesis must be less ad hoc (that is, include fewer new suppositions about the past not already implied by existing knowledge) than rival hypotheses.
6. The hypothesis must be disconfirmed by fewer accepted beliefs (that is, when conjoined with accepted truths, imply fewer false statements) than rival hypotheses.
7. The hypothesis must so exceed its rivals in fulfilling conditions (2) through (6) that there is little chance of a rival hypothesis, after further investigation, exceeding it in meeting these conditions."

I prefer the set of three over Craig's seven because three criteria are far more manageable than six, and furthermore Craig's six criteria are redundant.

### WAS JESUS MISSING FROM THE TOMB BECAUSE HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD? DID JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA HAVE JESUS BODY MOVED?

DISCUSSION POINT: Joseph of Arimathea himself wished to remove Jesus' corpse from his family tomb.

I propose that it is likely Joseph of Arimathea had always planned Jesus' original burial to be temporary, intending to rebury the body at another location after the Sabbath was over. Jewish law required bodies to be taken down before evening, as per Deuteronomy 21:22, "if a man has committed a sin worthy of death... and you hang him from a tree, his corpse shall not

hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day.” John 19:31 also mentions that Jesus’ body was taken down “so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath.” Joseph’s tomb may have been selected for the temporary burial as it was very close to the site of execution, and time was short before the onset of the Sabbath. This hypothesis is supported by the gospels, which indicate the burial was rushed. In Mark 15:42, for instance, we read that Joseph asked for Jesus’ body “when evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath.” Likewise, John 19:42 states that “therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.” The fact that the women came on Sunday morning to anoint Jesus shows that the burial had not been completed on Friday night, yielding further evidence of significant time constraints on the original burial. Thus, a temporary burial at a nearby tomb seems consistent with the requirements of Jewish burial practise and the specific facts of the case. Yet another reason for selecting Joseph’s garden tomb as a temporary burial site is that the Jewish and Roman authorities were concerned about keeping public order following the great uproar surrounding Jesus’ arrest and execution, and so wanted Jesus’ burial to be as private as possible to minimise the risk of any trouble or further riots. As such, the authorities wanted a quiet, private site to place Jesus’ body for a couple of days until the commotion surrounding his crucifixion had died down. A temporary burial in Joseph’s tomb is consistent with the time constraints under which the original burial took place, and the desire of the authorities to keep the matter as private as possible. Another possibility is that Joseph may have originally intended to leave Jesus’ body in his family tomb, perhaps because he was a sympathiser or even secret supporter of Jesus. However, after spending time with family and/or friends over the Sabbath and telling them what he had done, he had second thoughts and was prevailed upon to move the body of a convicted criminal from his expensive rock-hewn family tomb. In Jewish burial custom criminals were buried in a separate location to ordinary Jews, and having Jesus buried in one’s tomb (or even nearby to one’s tomb) would have been considered to be an insult. Furthermore, tombs in Jewish tradition were owned and utilised by the family, and having Jesus placed in the family tomb, even if Joseph himself had wanted to do this, might well have elicited sufficient opposition from his family to prevail upon him to change his mind. Indeed, one can just imagine Joseph going home and his wife yelling incredulously ‘you did what with our family tomb!?’ As the Encyclopaedia Judaica notes: “Bodies would be laid on rock shelves provided on three sides of the chamber, or on the floor, and as generations of the same family used the tomb, skeletons and grave goods might be heaped up along the sides or put into a side chamber to make room for new burials. This practice of family burial, though not universal if only because not all could afford it... was common enough to give rise to the Hebrew expressions ‘to sleep with one’s fathers’ and ‘to be gathered to one’s kin’ as synonyms for ‘to die’.” Craig has objected that the burial site for common criminals was very close to site of the crucifixion, and thus there is no reason why Joseph should have placed Jesus’ body temporarily in his own tomb. Even if successful, this response would not rule out the possibility that Joseph originally intended to bury Jesus in his family tomb but subsequently changed his mind. There are, however, two problems with this response. First, we do not know the relative distances of Joseph’s tomb and the common burial ground from the site of execution, as there is simply insufficient evidence of the detailed layout of Jerusalem at the time. What specific evidence we do have, namely the quotes from the gospels indicating specifically that Joseph’s tomb was selected because it was nearby, seems to indicate that whatever the exact geography was, Joseph’s tomb was close enough to the site of execution for it to be a very convenient burial site in a circumstance when time was of the essence. Second, even if the common criminal grave was closer than Joseph’s tomb, as I noted above the latter may have been selected because it was a quiet, private location away from the potential disruption of a crowd.

Craig argues that tomb robbery is implausible because nothing valuable was buried with Jesus’ body, and furthermore in the event of robbery the body itself would not have been taken, only any goods it was buried with. That nothing valuable was buried with the body seems questionable given that several of the gospels state that Jesus was buried with significant quantities of valuable spices, which robbers may have been interested in obtaining. This would also explain why the body was carried off, since the robes in which the body was wrapped were covered in oils which they would wish to drain off. Presumably it would have been easier to simply carry off the body and untangle all the linen later, rather than take the time to do that in the tomb.

Even if we take the story at face value, the guard was only set on the Sabbath after Friday night was over, as reported in Matthew 27:62-64, “Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said... give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people.” This event implausibly involves the Pharisees breaking the Sabbath, but even so it still leaves the Friday night open for a theft to have taken place. Thus, even in the unlikely event that a guard was present, theft is still a possibility.

Craig’s key point is that such appearances alone would not have led to the inference ‘he is risen from the dead’, because appearances by themselves would fit more naturally (given the Jewish context) into the category of a vision of Jesus having been assumed into heaven. While this objection might be applicable to accounts which deny the empty tomb, the RHBS model is predicated upon the historicity of the empty tomb. It is important to emphasise that I do not argue that the disciples experienced hallucinations of a resurrected Jesus per se. Rather, the RHBS model holds that they experienced collective experiences of Jesus appearing and speaking with them. They later came to interpret these experiences as resurrection appearances, as they found this to be the best fit with their theological beliefs, as well as with the fact of the empty tomb. As such, the RHBS model holds that the disciples came to believe that Jesus had been resurrected by exactly the same

process that Craig thinks led to this belief. Namely, they came to believe that Jesus had been resurrected because they found his tomb empty and subsequently had experiences of Jesus appearing to them.

Indeed, given all the alleged barriers to belief in the resurrection that Craig presents, it is unclear how, even under Craig's account, the disciples came to believe in the resurrection at all. Craig speaks as if the fact that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples explains why the disciples came to believe in his resurrection, but this obviously is not the case; after all, something being true doesn't by itself explain why people believe in that thing. There must be some connection between the event in question and the beliefs of those who come to accept it. In the case of the disciples, we are driven to ask how they were able to overcome their predilections against belief in a resurrection. The answer to this question, clearly, cannot be simply to state that Jesus was resurrected.

Craig is quick to demand evidence of the assumptions necessary for the various naturalistic proposals to explain the resurrection appearances; however, he provides no evidence at all in favour of the postulate that Jesus had some reason or motive to appear to his followers. The mere fact that he might have had such reasons does not constitute evidence that he actually did. What is Craig's evidence or basis, referring to generally accepted facts and not merely Christian theology, for postulating that Jesus had a reason for appearing to his disciples after his death? I do not believe he provides any, and therefore I do not believe he provides sufficient plausibility for this crucial aspect of his explanation.

#### MY COMMENTS:

We are told by Christians that Occam's Razor is good for science and history but not philosophy. But this ignores the fact that science is a philosophy in its own way. It is the only philosophy worth considering for to do philosophy you start with the facts and what is tested and science is about testing.

The gospels say that a miracle healing man called Jesus Christ lived. They say he died by crucifixion and three days later he rose again. The tomb he was placed in was found wide open with the stone that had been across the entrance moved back and the tomb was mysteriously empty. His body was gone. Certain witnesses claimed that Jesus appeared to them as a resurrected being. Only one gospel, Matthew, claims that the tomb was guarded but admits that the guards were not watching it all the time - they were in the land of nod.

Believers do not like the thought that when you apply Occam's Razor to the gospel stories about Jesus coming back from the dead that the best explanation for the missing tomb is that it was no miracle. Simple as that. You don't need to go any further. If you find a dead body with a knife in its chest then you simply say it is murder. That is the main thing. How it happened and who did it is next. You don't need to explain how the resurrection was not a miracle. You can know it was no miracle without knowing how it seemed he rose. You don't need to identify x's murderer to know that x was murdered.

It could be that Jesus was moved in secret or those who reported the tomb empty went to the wrong one - perhaps because they were misled by Joseph of Arimathea. The Razor has priority over any theological views because surely theology should start with facts and truth and what is tested too? Otherwise it is just a chimera - pure fancy. In other words do science and history and then see if you can build a philosophy or theology on it.

The point that there is no evidence at all in favour of the postulate that Jesus had some reason or motive to appear to his followers is an excellent one. "The mere fact that he might have had such reasons does not constitute evidence that he actually did." It refutes Christian attempts to say the data is explained by a real resurrection from the dead. A ghost that appears for no reason is less believable than one that appears and gives a reason that makes sense. Jesus himself does not say why he needs to rise when he did and in the way he did and why he needs to appear. Even if he did say, the problem then is that it is hearsay. He didn't write the gospels.

We have the right and duty to reject any supernatural story that sounds random. Even believers agree with that for if Jesus rose without any religious connotations or spiritual ones it would just be another unimportant historical detail such as Oliver Cromwell's hair colour.

The Christian says that the guards must have been sure Jesus was still in the tomb when they set up. But why does the gospel not say that? It is a glaring omission. Matthew made it up there and then which is why it has this plot hole. If it had been an old story he would have had to deal with people pointing out, "But Jesus could have been taken before the guards came along?"

Defenders of the alleged evidence for the resurrection always stretch stuff to make it sound convincing. If the evidence is flawed or full of holes it does not matter how many believed in the resurrection in the first century.

The evidence that the vanishing body is a miracle is non-existent. The gospels saying the tomb was empty does not amount to saying it is clear that it was a miracle even if it was. Christians say you need the vanishing body and the visions to be sure enough that this was a resurrection for visions are common enough. But if the visions are supported by evidence what

use is that when the other half is missing – the evidence for a tomb being emptied by God?

Craig says the first resurrection tale, the Mark story of the resurrection, has no theological colouring which gives it much historical strength. This is an extremely odd assertion regarding a story about God's Son coming back from the dead. And theology has overlaps with other disciplines so it is not always easy or possible to tell if religious considerations are absent. It depends on the intention of the author. Notice Craig accidentally undermines theology by making history matter more!

The evidence that Jesus rose is faulty so we must assume that if he lived at all then he is dead.