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Evidential Apologetics

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The evidential method of apologetics has much in common with the classical method, with the chief difference being the way in which historical evidences are used. Evidentialism may be characterized as the “one-step” approach to this question, in that historical evidences can serve as a species of argument for God. Instead of having to prove God’s existence *before* moving to specific evidences (the “two-step” method), the evidentialist treats one or more historical arguments as being able both to indicate God’s existence and activity and to indicate which variety of theism is true.¹ Like the other methods, evidentialism can be rather eclectic in its use of various “positive” evidences and “negative” critiques and answers to detractors. Yet it tends to focus chiefly on the legitimacy of accumulating various historical evidences for the truth of Christianity. After a brief discussion of another matter, I will provide an overview of some other facets of the evidentialist position.

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A BRIEF WORD CONCERNING EPISTEMOLOGY

Although this volume concerns apologetic methodology, I must first make some comments on a preliminary matter. The evidentialist apologetic method discussed in this chapter is not necessarily the same as an evidentialist epistemology. The epistemic position holds that beliefs are justified only if one has conclusive evidence for them. Typically, this evidence might take the form of internal states to which the knowing subject can have direct access (e.g., sensory states or rational intuitions) or propositional evidence. While the apologetic strategy says that there are good arguments for Christian theism, its adherents seldom comment concerning the type or amount of evidence, or how much argumentation is necessary to justify belief. Indeed, we will see below that some evidentialists even hold that the Holy Spirit can provide direct confirmation to the individual concerning the truth of Christianity *apart* from any evidences. As David Clark (a classical apologist) points out, the apologetic method is not to be equated with its epistemic namesake.²

¹ Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a scholar is a classical apologist or an evidentialist, often because that scholar does not indicate his or her position on the question of whether historical evidences are able to show that God exists.

² David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 106. For Clark’s own position, see pp. 108–9.

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Not only does an evidential (or evidential-like) apologetic methodology not require an evidentialist epistemology, but the former can be accommodated by any of several epistemic viewpoints. Instances are not difficult to find. Much more obviously, traditional foundationalists like internalists J. P. Moreland³ and R. Douglas Geivett⁴ favor an evidential apologetic methodology. A “weak foundationalist” such as C. Stephen Evans argues (in fallibilist terms) from miracles to Scripture and the actions of the God who gave it.⁵ A reliabilist like William Alston (who calls his view an “internalist externalism,”⁶ described as a “bridge” or “halfway house” between internalism and externalism⁷), at least in principle, could also appreciate arguments from miracles, as could a Reidian foundationalist like externalist Alvin Plantinga.⁸ The point here is that more than one epistemic stance could encourage the use of some form of evidential apologetic methodology, whether or not it is held that such evidence is necessary.

SOME TENETS OF AN EVIDENTIALIST METHODOLOGY

Let us turn now to some of the emphases of the evidentialist method of doing apologetics. What are its distinctives? Where is it similar to the other major apologetic systems?

³ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987). Moreland has affirmed to me on several occasions that a “one-step” argument (from historical evidence to the existence of God) is not only a viable move, but is a potentially forceful theistic argument. Cf. J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielson, *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 57, 73–74, 239.

⁴ R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); R. Douglas Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Miracles,” in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Action in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 178–95. See pp. 179–87 in particular for Geivett’s argument that “ascends” “from miracles to the existence of God” (p. 187).

⁵ C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking About Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), chap. 5; C. Stephen Evans, *The Quest for Faith: Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), chap. 9, cf. p. 35.

⁶ See the following works by Alston: *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); “Knowledge of God” in *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism*, ed. Marcus Hester (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁷ These last two descriptions of Alston are given by Alvin Plantinga in *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 184–85.

⁸ In the text of Alvin Plantinga’s unpublished and informal essay “Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments,” he lists (but does not explain) the argument from miracles (p. 13) as one of the probabilistic arguments that can “bolster” or perhaps even “convince” faith (p. 1).

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First, I have said that the chief interest of this method is the postulating and developing of historical evidences (one species of propositional data) for the Christian faith. This is its single, major contribution to the issue. Not only is it thought that these evidences provide the best means of deciding between the theistic systems of belief, but also that they can be utilized as an indication of God's existence and activity.⁹

Second, however, historical occurrences are not brute facts that interpret themselves. While the event itself is objective, its meaning is also derived from the context, which involves a number of factors. Although the past is of crucial importance, evidentialists recognize that human factors always enter into historiography. Events must be chosen for study, and since there is more than one perspective on what has happened, there is almost always more than one point of view. Personal preferences and prejudices can substantially color our interpretations, not to mention the affect of our worldviews on our research.¹⁰

It is for reasons such as these that the careful application of historical principles, tempered by various sorts of critical analyses, are necessary in order to recognize and offset as much as possible the subjective element. Although such biases can never be completely eliminated, it is still possible to reach sturdy conclusions within the canons of historical research. There is, however, no reason to succumb to a relativistic epistemology

⁹ We will return to this subject below, providing an example of one such approach.

¹⁰ In spite of comments to the contrary, even John Warwick Montgomery emphasizes that these subjective elements are inevitably present in evaluations of historical events. See his volume *The Shape of the Past: A Christian Response to Secular Philosophies of History* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 13–14, 73–74. Unfortunately, Montgomery does not always seem to be this clear, such as when he apparently groups history with the hard sciences in a rather positivistic fashion, or insists that, properly understood, historical facts “speak for themselves” and “carry their interpretations” (John Warwick Montgomery, *Where Is History Going?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969], 163–68, 194; cf. *The Shape of the Past*, 286–287, 293). Comments like these have drawn an outcry from scholars, possibly because Montgomery does not spell out his views carefully enough. See the following articles: Ronald H. Nash, “The Use and Abuse of History in Christian Apologetics,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1971): 217–26; Ronald VanderMolen, “The Christian Historian: Apologist or Seeker?” *Fides et Historia* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1970); Ronald VanderMolen, “‘Where Is History Going?’ and Historical Scholarship: A Response,” *Fides et Historia* 5, nos. 1–2 (Spring 1973): 109–12; Earl William Kennedy, “John Warwick Montgomery and the Objectivist Apologetics Movement,” *Fides et Historia* 5, nos. 1–2 (Spring 1973): 117–21. Montgomery's defenders have also fired back their salvos: Paul D. Feinberg, “History: Public or Private? A Defense of John Warwick Montgomery's *Philosophy of History*,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1971): 325–31; Steven A. Hein, “The Christian Historian: Apologist or Seeker? A Reply to Ronald J. VanderMolen,” *Fides et Historia* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 85–93.

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of history here. Historiography is certainly capable of determining the past. We just must be careful not to read biases into the accounts.¹¹

Third, evidentialists also engage freely in “negative” apologetics, arguing against the theses of those who would seek to defeat Christian theism. This defensive apologetic strategy could perhaps deflate aspects of the opponent’s argument or even rebut it entirely.¹² This could involve responding to detractors on a number of fronts, such as (but not limited to) philosophical, scientific, historical, theological, or biblical challenges.¹³

An example taken from the previous tenet may help here, in response to certain recent trends in postmodernism. If it is held that historical research is hopelessly subjective, or that objective data cannot be attained for other reasons, an evidentialist might respond on several grounds. These postmodernist notions could be charged with self-contradictions at more than one level, as many major researchers have noted. Or it could be asserted that informal logical fallacies have been detected, or that inconsistent historiographical applications are apparent in the skeptic’s own position. Further, much subjective bias can be recognized and thwarted. Finally, the historical method is capable of rendering positive historical conclusions, too, as recognized by professional historians of almost all persuasions. Just because radical relativists might continue to shake their heads and disagree, this is decidedly not the same as refuting the evidentialist’s position. It is the latter, not the former, that needs to be done.¹⁴

¹¹ For details, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1996), appendix 1; idem, “Philosophy of History, Historical Relativism, and History as Evidence,” in *Evangelical Apologetics*, ed. Michael Bauman, David Hall, and Robert Newman (Camp Hill, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1996), 93, 104–6; Frank Beckwith, “History and Miracles,” in Geivett and Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles*, 87–91.

¹² Cf. John Pollock’s differentiation between “undercutting defeaters” and “rebutting defeaters” in his *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), 38–39, 48. For Plantinga’s evaluation of Pollock’s notion of defeasibility, see Plantinga, *Warrant*, 216–21.

¹³ For evidentialists who employ such tactics, see Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, chaps. 7–8; R. Douglas Geivett, “John Hick’s Approach to Religious Pluralism,” *Proceedings of the Wheaton Theology Conference 1* (Spring 1992): 43–53; John Warwick Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1970), pts. 1 and 2; *The Shape of the Past*, pt. 2; *Where Is History Going?* chaps. 4–7; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), chaps. 2, 5; Clark Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case: An Examination of Christianity’s Credentials* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), chaps. 2–6, 14.

¹⁴ For details on each of these critiques, see Habermas, “Philosophy of History, Historical Relativism, and History as Evidence,” esp. pp. 100–108; on the charge of self-contradictions and other problems, see James Harris, *Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1992); Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: State University of

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On the other hand, the postmodernist might charge a lesser degree of subjectivity. Then the evidentialist may have to patiently show, perhaps in a specific case, both how bias can be counteracted and how positive historical data can be established.

Fourth, it is impossible to force anyone into the kingdom of God by our use of logic and/or evidences. The reality of sin separates persons from God and plays a monumental role in how God's truth is viewed by the unbeliever (Rom. 1:18–32; 1 Cor. 2:14). Human agency is not responsible for regeneration. Apart from God's influence, conversion will never take place.¹⁵

Fifth, this does not mean that there is no common ground between the believer and the unbeliever. Apologists largely agree that there is ontological commonality in areas such as general creation, God's image in humans, and the data of history, each of which is "public." They disagree, however, concerning whether there is any epistemological common ground, especially over the issue of how the unbeliever views truth.¹⁶

While we cannot sift through all the details here, evidentialists insist that there are a number of epistemological similarities in areas such as sensory data (perception), scientific theories, and the general rules and application of inference. Unbelievers can at least be intellectually challenged to view data that oppose their belief systems, even

New York Press, 1988); Christopher Norris, *Beyond Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

¹⁵ It is not difficult to find evidentialists who include substantial treatments of sin in their apologetics. An example is Bernard Ramm, who lists sin as one of the major issues for Christian apologetics and follows the subject through several thinkers. See his *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 17–27. For other examples, see John McNaugher, *Jesus Christ: The Same Yesterday, Today and Forever* (New York: Revell, 1947), chap. 5; Clark H. Pinnock, *Live Now, Brother* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), chaps. 1–3; John Warwick Montgomery, *How Do We Know There Is a God? And Other Questions Inappropriate in Polite Society* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1973), 54–62; Norman Anderson, *Jesus Christ: The Witness of History* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 93–110; Henry M. Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs: Practical and Useful Evidences of Christianity* (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1974), chap. 11. The apologist's specific view of sin may depend more on his theological emphases than on his particular apologetic method.

¹⁶ Ronald B. Mayers, *Both/And: A Balanced Apologetic* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 215–17; Richard L. Pratt Jr., *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 88, 92–93; Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 19, 44, 46, 52, 82.

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though they will frequently disagree with believers and even though they cannot be converted by the facts alone.¹⁷

Sixth, evidentialists emphasize that the Holy Spirit may work through the use of apologetics (just as he does through preaching or witnessing), not only in bringing unbelievers to himself (Acts 17:1–4), but also in providing full assurance to believers (perhaps even apart from evidences) that they are the children of God (Rom. 8:16). This ministry is not just tacked on to the end of the evidences as an expendable extra, but is simultaneous with it. Without the interceding of the Holy Spirit, no one comes to God.¹⁸

Seventh, the vast majority of evidentialists are eclectic in their approach to apologetics: while they agree that their method is a viable way, it is not the only way to argue. Most evidentialists, for example, encourage various forms of natural theology with regard to arguments for God's existence.¹⁹ In other words, they are still separate from classical apologists in that they think that a one-step argument from historical evidences (such as miracles) to God is feasible, and they often use this as their favorite argument.²⁰ This does not, however, keep evidentialists from advocating the use of many other sorts of evidences and techniques, as their writings reveal.

¹⁷ Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, chap. 15 and conclusion; John Warwick Montgomery, *Sensible Christianity*, 3-vol. tape set (Santa Ana, Calif.: Vision House, 1976), vol. 1, tapes 2–4.

¹⁸ Contrary to what seems to be a common misconception, evidentialists have published widely on the relation of the Holy Spirit to apologetics. See the major treatise by Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959). For other examples, see Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, 14–19, 65–66, 119–25; idem, *Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal: A Challenge to the Church* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), chap. 2; Gary R. Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), chap. 8; idem, "The Personal Testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Believer and Christian Apologetics," *Journal of Christian Apologetics* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 49–64.

¹⁹ For several instances, see Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, chaps. 1–4; Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God*, chap. 6; Francis J. Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles: A Critical Analysis* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989), chap. 5; Stephen E. Parrish, *God and Necessity: A Defense of Classical Theism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997); Montgomery, *How Do We Know There Is a God?* 9–12; idem, *Sensible Christianity*, vol. 2, tapes 1–2; Clark Pinnock, *Reason Enough: A Case for the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980), chap. 3. More popular accounts are found in Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs*, chap. 9; Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968), chap. 2.

²⁰ Arguably the best way to distinguish between evidentialists and classical apologists is to find out whether they are willing to utilize historical evidences as a separate argument for the truth of theism. While both types of scholars generally like a variety of arguments for God's existence, only evidentialists think that miracles, for example, can successfully provide one of these arguments without first establishing a theistic universe by another means.

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A final word concerning the results of apologetics: I have spoken here almost as if the sole mission of this discipline is to reach unbelievers with the gospel, or at least to challenge them in a pre-evangelistic sense, all by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, not only is apologetics exceptionally useful with believers, it may even be its major value. This is an area where we need to apply theory to life in a variety of ways, and radically so. We need to be as committed to the practical, ministry task as we are to the scholarly pursuit.²¹

In sum, evidentialist methodology has a couple of distinctives, while on other issues it takes positions that are similar to those of the other methodologies. Its most characteristic feature is its specializing in propositional evidences, of which the historical variety is the most prominent, moving on to God and the truth of Christianity by what we have called the one-step approach. The emphasis on there being enough ontological and epistemological common ground to speak meaningfully to an unbeliever is also a central concern. The fact that other apologetic evidences and approaches are rather frequently welcomed separates evidentialism from at least some adherents to the other methods. On the denial of brute historical facts, the use of “negative” apologetics, the actual and pervading presence of human sin, and the active ministry of the Holy Spirit throughout the apologetic endeavor (and beyond), evidentialists are closer to emphases that are regularly found in each of the apologetic methods. In these less distinctive areas, those within each of the methodological camps could also disagree among themselves, depending on the theological distinctives involved.

I have said that the argument from historical events to Christian theism is probably the single identifying feature of an evidential apologetic methodology. I will develop below one possible example of such a position.

DIFFERENT USES OF EVIDENCE

Before outlining a possible approach, it might be helpful to comment briefly on internal differences in evidential methodology. The most common tactic is one that, after certain preliminary questions, begins the discussion of evidences by establishing the trustworthiness of Scripture, then moving on to the tenets of Christian theism.²² While

²¹ Thankfully, this theme is also prominent among evidential writers. For a few examples, see J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), esp. pt. 3; Pinnock, *Reason Enough*, chaps. 5–6; idem, *Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal*, chaps. 2–3; Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt*, chaps. 6, 7, 9; Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998), pt. 3.

²² In classical apologetic approaches, too, Scripture is often the first evidential move after preliminary questions and the establishment of a theistic universe.

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this can be very helpful, it must be done very carefully. Just because a work is generally trustworthy, it does not always follow that everything in it (and especially the supernatural) is true. In this latter step, we thus need to proceed cautiously.

I prefer a method that I call the “minimal facts” approach. The major idea is to utilize data that have two characteristics: they are well-evidenced, usually for multiple reasons, and they are generally admitted by critical scholars who research this particular area. Of the two, having well-attested grounds is certainly the more crucial. And we should remember that not only do such grounds come in many shapes and forms, but evidentialists are able to use the data basically wherever it is found, even beyond the area of history. They just insist that the historical avenue be *one* such way.

The criterion regarding critical scholarship is less significant. Not only may the critics themselves be mistaken, but the intellectual climate may change. Nevertheless, their data remains useful to a methodological approach. Positive apologetics is all about having reasons, and 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.

In what follows, I will use this minimal facts strategy even though, due to space limitations, I am not always able to show here exactly how these requirements are fulfilled. The reader may consult the listed sources for details, since this is at least the explicit apologetic method in my works.

AN OUTLINED EVIDENTIALIST CASE

It is not possible in the scope of this chapter to attempt to defend even a single detailed argument for Christian theism. All I can hope to do here is to furnish a broad outline indicating one direction that might be taken in such an enterprise. Other evidentialists may have differing views, perhaps even taking another approach altogether.

Jesus' Teachings

The first step of our case is concerned with Jesus' teaching. According to the New Testament,²³ Jesus' ministry was characterized by a number of unique theological claims.

²³ There is more than one way to examine the nature of Jesus' claims. I have said that one method is to begin with a defense of the trustworthiness of Scripture and then move on to the biblical proclamation of Jesus' deity. But it is simply not possible here to develop what has been done in detailed volumes in other evidential (and evidential-like) treatments. (See the texts below.) The other way I have mentioned is to utilize those New Testament texts that are both well evidenced and have gained a fair amount of critical acceptance, building on a minimalistic foundation. While I cannot provide more than a modest amount of the necessary argumentation and even less documentation to show the data in favor of the statements I

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He seemed constantly to be making pronouncements that alternately pleased, surprised, or infuriated his listeners. But whatever the response, he made various distinctive proclamations. As Stephen Neill attests in his standard study of world religions, no matter how critically we view the Gospels, we still discover the singular nature of Jesus' message:

Jesus is not the least like anyone else who has ever lived. The things he says about God are not the same as the sayings of any other religious teacher. The claims he makes for himself are not the same as those that have been made by any other religious teacher.²⁴

What are some of these distinctive items? Did Jesus, for example, claim to be deity? I will briefly address only two subjects: two of Jesus' teachings about himself and what he said concerning his role in the coming of God's kingdom.

About Himself. Perhaps the best insight we have concerning what Jesus thought about himself comes from the titles he used.²⁵ Two of these are especially instructive.

1. His favorite self-designation was "Son of Man."

(a) This title appears in all of the Gospel strata (Q, Mark, M [unique to Matthew], L [unique to Luke], and John), meaning that it has excellent support in the best sources.

(b) It is also exceptionally difficult to explain away as a later addition. The title would not have been attributed to Jesus by the unbelieving Jews, for they had no reason to exalt him. Neither would early Christians have been responsible for it, since, paradoxically,

will make, it will have to suffice to say that I will stick to claims that are well-defensible, providing details wherever possible. Other crucial data are provided in the texts I will list later. As far as defending the reliability of the New Testament, see the following: Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?* 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960); Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable? A Look at the Historical Evidence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986); idem, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972); R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986); David A. Fiensy, *The Message and Ministry of Jesus: An Introductory Textbook* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996).

²⁴ Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 233. See also Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984); Stephen Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

²⁵ The reader who desires more details may consult the sources that follow.

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this title is not applied to the earthly ministry of Jesus anywhere else in the New Testament! So it was presumably not a very popular designation in the mid to late first century, when the New Testament was being written. Thus, for reasons like these, Son of Man appears to be Jesus' own choice of descriptive application.

(c) Some of Jesus' usages of the title Son of Man are more generic, referring to his own ministry. In one such instance, Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins, which was properly recognized by the Jewish leaders as a prerogative of God alone (Mark 2:1–12). Donald Guthrie says about this incident: "Jesus as Son of man was exercising authority which he himself knew was legitimate only for God."²⁶ Oscar Cullmann emphasizes: "This meant a conscious identification with God."²⁷

(d) Two other ways in which Jesus used the title concern the suffering and rising Son of Man (Mark 8:31; 9:31), as well as his coming in judgment to set up God's kingdom (Mark 8:38; 13:26). The latter, in particular, is similar to Daniel 7:13–14, where the preexistent Son of Man is sent by the Ancient of Days to the earth.²⁸ Cullmann summarizes the matter: "By means of this very term Jesus spoke of his divine heavenly character."²⁹

2. Another crucial title is Jesus' use of "Son of God." It provides us with insights of a different sort.

(a) In the highly respected text in Matthew 11:27, Jesus declared that he had a unique relationship to the God of the universe, being the only one who knew him intimately. Reginald Fuller concludes that Jesus "was certainly conscious of a unique Sonship to which he was privileged to admit others."³⁰

(b) Further, Jesus referred to God in highly personal terms, calling him *Abba*, which means "Father" or perhaps even "Daddy" (Mark 14:36). This certainly set him apart from

²⁶ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 280.

²⁷ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 282.

²⁸ Two other passages that perhaps date from the first century A.D. and are very helpful in understanding the Jewish significance of this title are 4 Ezra 13 and 1 Enoch 37–71. For the relevant texts and thoughtful commentary, see C. K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 235–37, 250–55.

²⁹ Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 162; cf. 142, 151.

³⁰ Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribners, 1965), 115.

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the Jewish teachers of his day. Joachim Jeremias summarizes his seminal study of this topic:

Abba ... is ... an authentic and original utterance of Jesus, and ... implies the claim of a unique revelation and a unique authority.... We are confronted with something new and unheard of which breaks through the limits of Judaism.³¹

(c) One way critics determine the reliability of a text is when a particular reading introduces a pithy problem. Many critical scholars have maintained the authenticity of Mark 13:32 because it is too difficult to explain in terms of being a late addition. Why, in order to make Jesus call himself the Son, would the problem be introduced concerning whether Jesus had knowledge about the time of his return? Couldn't someone make a simple assertion of Jesus' deity if that is what he had wanted to do? As a result, Mark 13:32 is taken quite seriously. Guthrie speaks for many scholars when he says, "It is impossible to suppose that a saying so Christologically embarrassing should have been invented. There is no strong reason to question its authenticity."³²

The title Son of God is certainly an important one. Cullmann contends that "Jesus' consciousness of being the Son of God refers both to his person and to his work: his work of salvation and revelation shows that the Father and the Son are one."³³ As a result, the Jews respond to Jesus' self-proclamations and "correctly interpret Jesus' claim to be 'Son' as identification with God."³⁴ I. H. Marshall testifies that the designation was both used by Jesus as a self-designation, and that it involved deity. For the early church, it was a means by which "it was not inappropriate to call Jesus 'God.'" ³⁵

3. One of the most intriguing passages is Mark 14:61–64, where both of these titles are combined. As Jesus stood before his accusers, he was asked if he was "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One." His affirmation brought the charge of blasphemy against him. At least four items in this passage are worth noting.

³¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 30.

³² Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 794, n. 14; cf. p. 308.

³³ Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 290.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 302. See also Cullmann's strong comments on p. 270.

³⁵ I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 123.

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(a) Jesus responded to the high priest's question by uttering the staggering words, "I am" (*ego eimi*), which may be a reference to the name by which God identified himself to Moses (Exod. 3:14).³⁶

(b) Jesus then changed the emphasis of his answer from the Son of God to the Son of Man.

(c) He said further that he would return "on the clouds of heaven," a description that is similar to wording in dozens of other passages in Scripture that are almost uniformly associated only with God.

(d) Jesus' affirmations clearly brought the charge of blasphemy. In the context of first-century Jewish theology, Jesus had crossed the line of no return. Royce Gruenler concludes, "This further evidences Jesus' messianic self-awareness and is exegetically the proper intent of the passage."³⁷

4. Although the titles Jesus used are probably the best indications of his messianic self-consciousness, they are not the only pointers. He had other relevant teachings, too, like placing his own authority above that of the most respected Jewish leaders (Matt. 5:20–48). We could also discuss his actions or the convictions of those around Jesus that he was sinless. The impression he made on those who were closest to him is evidence concerning his self-understanding.³⁸ Fuller summarizes what we can learn from some of Jesus' claims:

An examination of Jesus' words ... forces upon us the conclusion that underlying his word and work is an implicit Christology. In Jesus as he understood himself, there is an immediate confrontation with "God's presence and his very self," offering judgment and salvation.³⁹

About His Role as Spokesman for God. Second, Jesus claimed authority unlike that of other world religion founders. Many have claimed to be able to show their followers the right path or to introduce them to the way of salvation. Not only did Jesus make the functional claim to be able to lead his followers to the truth, but he added a crucial

³⁶ In John 8:58–59 we are told that Jesus made a similar claim, which also resulted in a charge of blasphemy.

³⁷ Royce Gruenler, "Son of Man," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1035.

³⁸ For these and other relevant considerations, see Terry L. Miethe and Gary R. Habermas, *Why Believe? God Exists!* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1993), chap. 27.

³⁹ Fuller, *Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 106.

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ontological component: he was the truth. What people did with him determined where they would spend eternity.⁴⁰

The critical community almost unanimously agrees that Jesus' central teaching was the kingdom of God and its entrance requirements. He repeatedly called individuals to act in light of this reality by responding to him and his message since he was God's select messenger.⁴¹ In no area was Jesus' authority more evident. All persons would be held accountable by how they responded to this teaching. Raymond Brown is clear about this:

An irreducible historical minimum in the Gospel presentation of Jesus is that he claimed to be the *unique agent* in the process of establishing God's kingship over men. He proclaimed that in his preaching and through his deeds God's kingship over men was making itself felt.⁴²

Brown adds that this message of the kingdom was the singular, distinctive target of Jesus' teachings from the very beginning of his ministry.⁴³

Contemporary critical scholars agree widely in recognizing this conclusion.⁴⁴ Rudolf Bultmann affirms that in the person, message, and deeds of Jesus, the kingdom was already dawning. Jesus issued the call to decision; individuals needed to choose whether to follow.⁴⁵ Reginald Fuller declares, "God is directly present in the word of Jesus, actively demanding unreserved obedience to his will from those who have accepted the eschatological message and its offer of salvation."⁴⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg agrees that Jesus revealed God like no one else has ever done before or since. In his person and message God disclosed himself to humankind in a unique way.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ See texts like Matt. 10:32–33; 19:28–29; 25:34–36; Mark 8:34–38; 10:45; John 10:10; 14:6.

⁴¹ On the centrality of the kingdom of God, see Matt. 6:33; 13:44–52; Mark 1:14–15; 4:3–34; 9:43–48. For Jesus' role as the central figure in this call, see Matt. 10:37–39; 25:31–46; Mark 10:28–30, 45; Luke 11:20; 14:25–35; 24:45–47; John 3:15–16; 6:47.

⁴² Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus: God and Man* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1967), 96–97 (my emphasis).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 59, 98.

⁴⁴ This is not to say that contemporary scholars agree with either each other or with orthodox theology on the subject of the deity of Christ.

⁴⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribners, 1951, 1955), 1:4–11.

⁴⁶ Fuller, *Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 105–6.

⁴⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 51.

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The result is that persons could enter the kingdom of God if they responded properly to Jesus and his message. William Strawson points out, “Throughout our Lord’s teaching there is a continual emphasis upon the urgent need to meet the conditions which God requires for entry into eternal life.”⁴⁸ But what were those specific conditions? Strawson summarizes that the requirement is dependence on Jesus Christ, who is himself the way to such life. Only by such action can persons be properly related to both God and others.⁴⁹ Brown concludes similarly:

We have indicated an area where [Jesus’] views were not at all those of his time, namely, the area of belief and behavior called for by the coming of the kingdom. And in this area, in my personal opinion, his authority is supreme for every century, because in this area he spoke for God. No age can reject the demand that one must believe in Jesus as the unique agent for establishing God’s kingship over men (a uniqueness which the Church at Nicaea finally came to formulate in terms of Jesus’ being “true God of true God”).⁵⁰

Although there are other indications, what Jesus taught about himself and his role as initiator of God’s kingdom are unique pointers to two crucial elements of his personal theistic worldview. From a variety of angles, we learn that Jesus thought of himself as deity. Although the particulars cannot be defended here, Jesus’ preaching in these areas is distinctive, even in the field of comparative religion. At this point, however, these are only his *claims*. Why did anyone believe them?

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

Although I must necessarily be even briefer here, I will attempt to sketch a case for the historicity of Jesus’ death and resurrection appearances. It must be carefully noted that it is not being assumed or asserted at this point that such an event is a miracle performed by God. We are only concerned here with whether Jesus really died and whether he appeared afterward. The interested reader who prefers more details, such as the actual data behind my summaries, or the critical methodology, interaction, and citations, can find these elsewhere.⁵¹

⁴⁸ William Strawson, *Jesus and the Future Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 226. In his second edition (1970), Strawson writes, “We assume then that there are conditions to be met if we are to obtain everlasting life” (p. 227).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2d ed. (1970), 227–28.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Jesus: God and Man*, 101.

⁵¹ Details may be found in some of my publications on this topic, such as: *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976); *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand

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The Death of Jesus. First, we have excellent reasons for the conclusion that Jesus actually died due to the rigors of crucifixion.

1. Numerous ancient historical sources record Jesus' death. We have the testimony of (a) several primitive, highly respected traditions that actually predate the New Testament books in which they appear,⁵² (b) the rest of the New Testament (and the gospel narratives, in particular), as well as (c) a dozen extrabiblical, non-Christian references to this event.⁵³

2. Several crucial medical facts indicate that death by crucifixion is clearly ascertainable. (a) Crucifixion victims essentially died of asphyxiation, complicated by other medical factors. Hanging in the low position on the cross insured death, and anyone who occupied that posture for more than a few minutes began to asphyxiate. (b) Ancient sources relate that final blows were sometimes administered to crucifixion victims to speed up or guarantee their deaths. The description and nature of Jesus' spear wound reveals that the weapon punctured his heart, insuring his death. (c) Further, if the spear also pierced one of Jesus' lungs, and he were not already dead, a fairly loud sucking sound would have signaled his executors that he had not yet died.

3. Since the work of David Strauss in the nineteenth century,⁵⁴ another reason has been the most influential in persuading scholars that Jesus had truly died. Critics have long accepted the fact that the earliest disciples at least *believed* that Jesus had been raised from the dead (see below). But this belief would have been defied by the sight of a Jesus who had not died on the cross. If he had shown himself to his followers a few days after the crucifixion, as the early sources indicate, he would have been in horrible physical condition: bruised, beaten, bloody, pale, limping, and in obvious need of medical assistance. But such a condition would have disallowed the view that he had been raised from the dead in a resurrected body. He would have been alive (barely) but not raised! Further, there would be no impetus for the prominent conviction that believers would

Rapids: Baker, 1980; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984); with Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1996); "Knowing That Jesus' Resurrection Occurred: A Response to Stephen Davis," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (July 1985): 295–302; "Jesus' Resurrection and Contemporary Criticism: An Apologetic," *Criswell Theological Review*, 2 pts., 4, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 159–74, and 4, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 373–85.

⁵² The ones that receive the most scholarly attention are Acts 2:23–24; 3:13–15; 4:10; 5:29–30; 10:39; 13:28–29; 1 Cor. 11:26; 15:3; and Phil. 2:8. Others include Rom. 4:25 and 1 Peter 3:18.

⁵³ Examples include Roman historian Tacitus, Jewish sources like Josephus and the Talmud, as well as other ancient writers like Thallus, Lucian, Phlegon, and Mara Bar-Serapion.

⁵⁴ David Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1879), 1:408–12.

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someday be raised just like Jesus. Who would want a body like this sickly one! In short, the swoon theory actually contradicts the disciples' belief that Jesus had truly been raised.

For reasons such as these, very few scholars today doubt that Jesus died by crucifixion. John Dominic Crossan boldly asserts, "That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be," and resulted in his death.⁵⁵ Marcus Borg lists Jesus' execution as "the most certain fact about the historical Jesus."⁵⁶

The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus. As strange as this claim is to many, that Jesus was seen after his death is confirmed by a large array of data. I will mention just a few of the lines of evidence for these appearances.

1. The most widely discussed New Testament text on the subject of the historical Jesus is 1 Corinthians 15:3–8.⁵⁷ (a) Virtually all scholars, whatever their theological persuasion, agree that Paul here records a primitive Jewish tradition(s) that is not his; he received it from another source. There are many literary indications of this, such as: (i) the use of "delivered" and "received," which are not only technical terms for passing along tradition, but are Paul's direct comment that this is not his material. Other indications include (ii) the Jewish parallelism and stylized accounts, along with (iii) the proper names Cephas and James. Further, (iv) the triple "and that" (*hoti*) clauses, which are typical of Hebrew narration, (v) the two references to Scripture being fulfilled, as well as (vi) the possibility of an Aramaic original also point in this direction. Finally, (vii) the terminology, diction, and structure are all non-Pauline.

(b) This creedal testimony is exceptionally early. Not only is it older than 1 Corinthians, but it very likely predates even Paul's conversion. The predominant view is that Paul probably received the material from Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, when he visited Jerusalem, around A.D. 33–38 (Gal. 1:18–20). Of course, those who gave it to Paul had it before he did. (c) As a minimum, Paul received the data from someone he, an apostle, deemed to be a trustworthy source.

2. Not to miss another significant factor, Paul personally witnessed an appearance of the risen Jesus. (a) The apostle provides his own testimony in more than one place (1 Cor.

⁵⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 145; cf. 154, 196, 201.

⁵⁶ Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), 179; cf. 178–84.

⁵⁷ For historical details, extensive critical sources, and other argumentation for the following discussion, see Gary R. Habermas, "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," in Geivett and Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles*, 262–75. Cf. the other sources listed in n. 51 above.

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9:1; 15:8; cf. Gal. 1:16). He did not have to rely on the word of others, because the risen Jesus had also appeared to him. (b) Three times in the book of Acts (9:1–9; 22:1–11; 26:9–19) we find non-Pauline accounts of this occurrence.

3. That Paul was accurate in his report of Jesus' appearances to others is provided on more than one front. (a) Paul actually sought out the apostolic leaders for the purpose of checking out the nature of the gospel (including the resurrection, 1 Cor. 15:1–4) that he preached (Gal. 2:1–10). The apostles Peter, John, and James the brother of Jesus specifically approved Paul's proclamation (vv. 6–10). (b) Some substantiation of this last claim is also provided in Acts 15:1–31, even though it is debated whether this is the same occasion that Paul describes in Galatians 2 or another similar conference. Either way, Paul's message of the gospel was confirmed by other apostles according to more than one source.

4. Further indications confirm the resurrection reports made by the other apostles too. (a) Paul testifies that the other apostles were preaching the same message that he was preaching in regard to Jesus' appearances (1 Cor. 15:11, 14–15). (b) The pre-Pauline creed reports the crucially important information that Jesus appeared to groups that included apostles, plus over five hundred persons at one time. Paul's statement that most of these last witnesses were still alive (1 Cor. 15:6) implies that he may have known some of them. (c) As we have already seen, Paul knew personally some of the individuals in the list. In each of these ways, Paul is tied to the mainline apostolic reports of Jesus' appearances. (d) The Gospels also describe these appearances to the Twelve and to others (Matt. 28; Luke 24; John 20–21; cf. Mark 16:6–7). Any confirmation of these separate narratives would argue for this same point from another non-Pauline perspective.

5. Jesus' brother James was an ardent unbeliever during Jesus' public ministry. This family skeptic also witnessed the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7). Critics need to explain this special appearance too.

6. An additional pointer concerning the apostolic witness to the postmortem appearances of Jesus comes from a number of creedal statements in the book of Acts.⁵⁸ Many scholars think that these speeches reflect some of the earliest Christian preaching in that they are brief proclamations that are theologically unadorned. The resurrection is at the center of each of these portions. This would certainly give us one of our best insights into the apostolic message after Pentecost.

7. That Jesus' tomb was empty does not by itself prove a resurrected body, but it would strengthen the case in that direction. For one thing, it makes naturalistic theories

⁵⁸ See Acts 1:21–22; 2:22–36; 3:13–16; 4:8–10; 5:29–32; 10:39–43; 13:28–31.

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much more difficult to formulate, whether for Jesus' appearances or for the vacant tomb itself. Here are a few of the *many* evidences that the tomb was unoccupied that first Easter morning: (a) The earliest report in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 strongly implies an empty tomb. As part of the triple *hoti* clause, and especially in a Jewish context, the progression from Jesus' death, to his burial, to his resurrection indicates that something happened to his body. (b) The early creedal proclamation in Acts 13:29–30, 36–37 also declares that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was later empty.

(c) Not only did the Jewish leaders not disprove the witness concerning the empty tomb, but their polemic even admitted it (Matt. 28:11–15). One well-known principle of historical research generally recognizes what one's enemies admit. That the Jewish leadership could not even eliminate this physical component of the early proclamation is itself an indictment. (d) That the Gospels tell us the women were the earliest witnesses to the open sepulcher (Matt. 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–10; John 20:1–2) is another reason to believe the authenticity of the report. Since the testimony of women was not allowed in a law court, why would they be cited as witnesses unless that is what happened? (e) The city of Jerusalem is the last place the disciples should have preached the gospel message if Jesus' grave was still occupied. Producing the body would have quieted the message.

8. The transformation of the witnesses, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith, is an additional indicator of the strength of their convictions that they had seen their risen Lord. It is true that people are often transformed for false causes that they also believe in, but there is a qualitative difference here. Both the disciples and the others who are willing to die share a sincere belief. But very much unlike the others, the disciples were willing to suffer not just for their belief concerning who Jesus was, but precisely because they had seen him after his death. In brief, their transformation was not simply based on beliefs about Jesus, like so many others, but on the knowledge that they had seen him alive after his crucifixion.

9. That the resurrection of Jesus was the central component of early Christian belief is also a helpful indicator of its truth. The resurrection being the pivotal doctrine led to increased amounts of attention, with investigations by the earliest witnesses increasing their faith rather than revealing any obstacles. Paul knew that there was no Christian faith apart from the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:14, 17), so he visited the apostles Peter and James in Jerusalem to discuss the nature of the gospel proclamation (Gal. 1:18–20). So important was this theme that he returned fourteen years later to repeat a similar procedure before more church leaders (Gal. 2:1–10). Luke explains that the resurrection was the chief proclamation in the early church, leading to the disciples' persecution (Acts 4:1–3, 33).

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Peter tells us that it secures heaven for believers, allowing them to rejoice during suffering (1 Peter 1:3–5).

A number of other evidences for the resurrection appearances might be mentioned as well. But given that we are speaking here about ancient documents, it must be admitted that there is certainly a surprising amount of data, all pointing to the fact that Jesus appeared to his followers on several occasions after he died by crucifixion.

Critics typically respect such findings too. Reginald Fuller rather boldly proclaims about the early Christian belief in the resurrection: “That within a few weeks after the crucifixion Jesus’ disciples came to believe this is *one of the indisputable facts of history.*” Fuller notes that the traditional cause for this belief is Jesus’ appearances, then he concedes: “That the experiences did occur, even if they are explained in purely natural terms, is *a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever can agree.*”⁵⁹ Along the same line, James D. G. Dunn says the fact that the first believers had experiences they thought were postmortem appearances of Jesus “is almost impossible to dispute.”⁶⁰ After his detailed study of the sources, Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide concluded that Jesus actually rose from the dead, appearing to his followers soon afterward!⁶¹

Naturalistic Explanations. The resurrection of Jesus is such that the naturalistic strategy denies it, rather than attempting to interpret it within its own natural system. If an explanation is attempted at all, naturalists sometimes suggest alternative accounts that ignore any supernatural causation. These efforts have failed for several reasons.

1. Perhaps the chief theoretical reason for rejecting miracle-claims and seeking alternative explanations is the work of David Hume (and others who have followed him). But Hume’s response has been heavily criticized by many scholars.⁶² To mention just a few of the more prominent issues: (a) It is improper to reject the possibility of miracles in an *a priori* manner (a critical response that comes in many forms) without viewing the possible evidence for a miracle-claim. (b) No allowance is made for a potentially supernatural exception to nature’s regularity that would actually supersede the normal

⁵⁹ Both quotations are from Fuller, *Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 142 (my emphasis).

⁶⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1985), 75.

⁶¹ Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), esp. 125–28.

⁶² See esp. Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan, 1970); idem, ed., *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1989). Cf. Beckwith, *David Hume’s Argument Against Miracles*, chaps. 3–4, 6–7; Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry*, 82–113; Habermas and Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* 16–19; Gary R. Habermas, “Skepticism: Hume,” in *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 23–49.

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lawful explanation at that moment, due to the exercise of a greater power. The most highly evidenced miracles may have certain recognizable characteristics, such as being one-time events, without meaningful explanation by new expressions of the law in question. (c) An actual, heavily evidenced case for a miracle-claim would be difficult to explain, whether it came from (i) the past or (ii) the present. Each possibility would have its own advantages.

2. Each naturalistic theory concerning the resurrection falls prey to numerous rebuttals, even if one only uses data that are verifiable and admitted by virtually all critical scholars. In fact, these hypotheses are plagued by so many refutations that, in public debates, critics frequently even avoid choosing one of them because of the possibility that they will be forced into a corner.

Two intriguing trends in contemporary critical thought illustrate this. (a) In nineteenth-century theological liberalism, during the heyday of the naturalistic theories against the resurrection, the critics took turns decimating one another's hypotheses. For example, David Strauss dealt the most influential blow to the swoon theory (see above) of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Heinrich Paulus, and others. Strauss's hallucination theory, in turn, was disproved by Theodor Keim's attack. The legend theory was demolished by critical studies that isolated early New Testament texts like the creeds I addressed earlier. In this manner, the skeptics themselves revealed many of the weaknesses in these suppositions. (b) Twentieth-century critics have been even more radical, basically rejecting wholesale the naturalistic theories aimed at the resurrection. Comparatively seldom are these alternative hypotheses proposed today.⁶³

3. In almost all cases, no single alternative view can answer all of the factual data for the resurrection. At least two theories are needed. But since each is opposed by many facts, the critic actually has the difficult role of having to overcome the need for more than one improbable theory.

Perhaps an example would be helpful. I have outlined above some of the persuasive data that have basically caused even a generation of critical scholars to be convinced that the original followers of Jesus at least believed they had visual experiences of the risen Jesus. We may recall that Reginald Fuller termed the early Christian belief in the resurrection an "indisputable fact," concluding that both believers and unbelievers could agree that visual experiences of some sort occurred.⁶⁴ Thus, a successful natural response

⁶³ For details see Habermas and Moreland, *Beyond Death*, 125–26.

⁶⁴ See the above quotations by Reginald Fuller and James D. G. Dunn for examples.

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needs to account for this information. The most typical option is to charge that the disciples experienced hallucinations.

The rebuttals to such a charge, however, are prohibitive, as even a brief response reveals. (a) Hallucinations are private experiences, being “seen” by one person alone. But the appearances of Jesus were frequently to groups of people, as witnessed by sources such as the early creeds in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 and the Acts passages, as well as the gospel accounts. (b) Another major problem regarding hallucinations is that while these incidents are fairly rare, Jesus appeared to a wide variety of persons: men and women, hard-headed Peter, soft-hearted John, devoted Mary Magdalene, and others. Jesus also appeared in a wide variety of circumstances: singly and in groups, in Jerusalem and in Galilee, outdoors and indoors. To conclude that all of these persons were in just the right frame of mind for this rather uncommon phenomena appears to be incredulous. Briefly, the details we have are almost the opposite of what is needed for hallucinations.

(c) Continuing, hallucinations are rooted in the preconditions of one’s hopeful expectations, but the disciples despaired at the death of Jesus and did not expect him to rise. Their best friend of three years, to whom they had devoted their recent lives, had suddenly been taken from them. They had to have been distraught. This is simply good psychology, but it militates against these subjective occurrences. (d) It is also highly unlikely that hallucinations could produce the radical personal transformations of the disciples, causing them to be willing to die for their faith. Then what about (e) family skeptic James, Jesus’ brother, and (f) church persecutor Paul? Could it be seriously charged, apart from any historical data whatsoever, that these two critics longed to see the risen Jesus? (g) Finally, hallucinations have nothing to say concerning an empty tomb, so the body should still be there! At several of these points, the critic needs another thesis.

Many other critiques can be leveled at the hallucination hypothesis and other similar subjective suggestions. As Pannenberg concludes, “These explanations have failed to date.”⁶⁵

Due to space confines, we are not able to look specifically at other alternative possibilities here, but it is my contention that they would suffer similar fates. We are justified in rejecting the naturalistic hypotheses that seek to explain the resurrection in nonsupernatural terms.⁶⁶ Even the majority of critical scholars agree that these attempts

⁶⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 96.

⁶⁶ For many more details, see Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry*, 119–71; Habermas and Moreland, *Beyond Death*, 113–26.

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are seriously flawed. Raymond Brown concludes that, not only have critical scholars rejected these theories themselves, but new renditions of them are deemed to be unrespectable.⁶⁷

The Minimal Facts. In my opinion, the strongest case for the resurrection appearances of Jesus involves the use of those data that are both well grounded and that receive the support of the critical community. As I said above, the former is most decisive.

Even most skeptical scholars admit a minimal core of facts pertaining to Jesus' death and the following events. Some of the above citations indicate a general direction. Virtually no one doubts Jesus' death by crucifixion. It is also recognized that the disciples despaired, due to losing their friend to whom they had dedicated their lives. As well recognized as any New Testament fact is that, shortly after Jesus' death, these followers had experiences that they believed were appearances of the risen Jesus. As a result, they were transformed from being in a state of fear to being willing to die for their faith. Very soon afterward, the disciples proclaimed Jesus' death and resurrection as their central message in Jerusalem and the surrounding area, and the church was born. Two skeptics, Jesus' brother James and Saul (Paul), became believers after they also believed that Jesus had appeared to them.⁶⁸

The strength of this core is that these few facts are capable, in themselves, of both disproving the naturalistic hypotheses, as well as providing the best arguments for the resurrection. Yet they do so with a minimal amount of ascertainable data, so they cannot be rejected just because someone does not believe that the New Testament is a good source. It meets critics on their own (common) grounds, using their presuppositions and their methodology.

Confirmation of Jesus' Claims

I began by outlining a case for some of Jesus' major claims concerning himself. I did not decide whether they were true or false, but taken into consideration with the life he led, they are at least intriguing, just as they were in the first century.

I was also necessarily brief in my overview of Jesus' death and especially concerning the claim that afterward he appeared on several occasions to his followers. I discussed

⁶⁷ Raymond Brown, "The Resurrection and Biblical Criticism," *Commonweal*, 24 November 1967, esp. 233.

⁶⁸ These minimal facts are discussed in each of the sources in n. 51 above. For a detailed defense of each one, including a listing of more than thirty critical scholars who hold them, see Habermas and Moreland, *Beyond Death*, 126–36. Even though the empty tomb is not as unanimously admitted by critical scholars, it is still both well evidenced and well respected, and also needs to be used in a defense of the resurrection.

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two issues: (1) Did Jesus die due to the rigors of crucifixion? (2) Was he seen afterward by his followers? I outlined a few reasons for the facticity of both as historical events. Like the previous topic, much more could be said that cannot be pursued here. I did not, however, pose the question concerning the cause of the resurrection, which involves the issue of miracles. I did not conclude that Jesus' resurrection was a miracle. So far, I have treated this as simply a possibility—a miracle-*claim*.

Now we come to this last question, including the issue of confirmation. How might one know whether Jesus' claims were indeed true? Was he the Son of Man, Son of God, and the one who held the key that unlocks the door to eternal life in God's kingdom? What convinced many of his listeners that he spoke the truth in these crucial areas?

The New Testament gives more than one answer. Undeniably, many hearers were moved simply because of the attraction of Jesus' words and the authority with which he spoke them.⁶⁹ Others were impressed by the miracles he appeared to perform (Matt. 9:33; Mark 1:27; 6:2–3). We are told that Jesus encouraged faith on both grounds (John 5:36; 10:38; 14:11). Still others believed because of the prophecy he both gave (John 4:16–19, 29, 39) and fulfilled (Luke 2:25–38). But it might be argued that Jesus' powerful acts had the greatest affect on early believers. Why might this be so? A few considerations show that miracles, in theory, and Jesus' mighty acts, in particular, were taken by his audience as indicators of something beyond themselves. I will mention three such suggestions without assuming that the resurrection fulfills them.

1. Due to the very nature of their awe-inspiring character, miracles tend to point beyond themselves. Usually the attention is placed on the attendant message of religious significance, which is often considered to be confirmed in light of the miracle. As Richard Swinburne explains, this is an earmark of these events: "To be a miracle an event must contribute significantly towards a holy divine purpose for the world." On the other hand, if the event is extraordinary but without religious significance, it is "more appropriately characterised [*sic*] as magical or psychic phenomena rather than as miracles."⁷⁰ For instance, Swinburne argues that miracles can, in fact, provide evidence for God's existence and activity in the world.⁷¹

⁶⁹ See Matt. 22:46 (and parallels); Mark 1:22, 27; 6:2–3; 11:18; 12:17, 37.

⁷⁰ Swinburne, *Concept of Miracle*, 7–10.

⁷¹ See Swinburne's, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), chap. 12; cf. Swinburne's, "Historical Evidence" in idem, ed., *Miracles*, 151.

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2. Jesus apparently had similar ideas in mind. He claimed that his miracles validated his message.⁷² Perhaps surprisingly, that he believed this is conceded by numerous critical scholars⁷³ and serves as a contemporary witness to Jesus' thoughts about the truthfulness of his claims. More precisely, when answering the critics who accused him of blasphemy, Jesus proclaimed that his healing of a lame man served the purpose of letting his hearers "know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10). On another occasion, he reportedly told his accusers that his miracles showed that he was the Son of God (John 10:36–38). When asked for a sign, we are told that he even predicted that his resurrection would be his chief vindication (Matt. 12:38–40; 16:1–4).

3. Jesus' listeners seemed to acknowledge these concepts too. We read that many believed when they saw Jesus' miracles (John 3:2; 11:45). Then later, after Jesus' resurrection, Peter declared that this event was the chief sign of God's approval on Jesus' ministry (Acts 2:23–32). Paul says that the resurrection was God's vindication of the deity of Christ (Rom. 1:3–4). Paul also used the event as proof that God had corroborated Jesus' teachings, meaning that his listeners needed to repent and believe (Acts 17:30–31). It would seem that here we have the evidential use of miracles in the New Testament as an argument from history to the God who raised Jesus.

According to Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jesus put himself in God's place in numerous ways. When he was raised from the dead, "this for a Jew can only mean that God himself has confirmed the pre-Easter activity of Jesus."⁷⁴ The resurrection served as God's mark of approval on Jesus.

All of this must be understood within the context of Judaism, in which a person could be exposed as a false prophet if his proclamations did not come to pass. But if a true prophet was ignored, the people would have to account for it before the Lord (Deut. 18:18–22). A speaker would naturally be understood by his target audience against such a backdrop.

I said above that the resurrection is the best explanation for the historical data. If Jesus was raised from the dead, which his listeners presumed to be an act that only God could perform, such a sign would be a confirmation of Jesus and his teachings. This would seem

⁷² See Matt. 11:1–6; 12:38–40; 16:1–4; Luke 11:20; John 5:36–37; 10:25; 11:41–42; 14:11; 15:24 for examples.

⁷³ For instance, see Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:7; Fuller, *Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 107; Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 63–64; Brown, *Jesus: God and Man*, 97.

⁷⁴ Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 67–68.

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to be Jesus' point in offering his resurrection as his chief sign, as well as the best way to understand the apostolic proclamation that this event vindicated the Christian message.

Why should Jesus' resurrection be taken today as an indication that his messages concerning his Father's approval and concerning his own nature and mission are true? One way to examine this issue is to discuss worldview possibilities. If naturalism is the correct paradigm, there is no God, Son of God, or supernatural realm. So either the resurrection did not occur, or it must be thought of as nothing more than a random, chance event, a freak of nature. One option would involve formulating a viable alternative explanation(s), but I have already said that the known facts are so much opposed to this that critics often shy away from it themselves.⁷⁵ On the other hand, if Christian theism is true, the resurrection not only occurred, but was a planned occurrence. It was an orderly event designed by God for an eternal purpose.

Which view is correct? Given the two outlooks, which one provides the best explanation of the data? One hint might be provided by the apparent nature of the resurrection itself, which seems to give an edge to Christian theism. The resurrection was certainly contrary to the known laws of death and life. It seems, at least so far, to be nonrepeatable—the only event like this in history (see below). Neither can the laws of nature be modified to make room for it.⁷⁶ To make things even more difficult for the naturalistic account, the earliest texts say that Jesus exhibited a glorified body with heightened powers, at least in the case of Paul's appearance. In terms of a contrast between this event and the so-called laws of nature, the theistic universe seems to gain some momentum.

What happens when we move more specifically to Jesus' situation? It is reasonable to conclude, in light of Jesus' unique claims about himself and the historical likelihood of the resurrection, that he was in the best position to interpret the meaning of this event. His testimony is that, as the chief miracle, his theistic perspective was verified by an act of the God of the universe. It was not some unknown "John Doe" who had been raised.

⁷⁵ Skeptics appear to be in a serious bind at this point. To espouse one or more naturalistic theories that viably account for all the resurrection data is exceptionally difficult, and this may explain the reluctance to do so on the part of many critics. But it would appear to be at least as serious a problem to accept the historicity of the resurrection and deny that it was performed by God. As Stephen T. Davis declares: "Skeptics apparently cannot agree that it has occurred ... without abandoning religious skepticism" (see Stephen T. Davis, "Is it Possible to Know That Jesus Was Raised from the Dead?" *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 [April 1984]: 152).

⁷⁶ On these issues, see Swinburne, *Concept of Miracle*, 26–32.

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The only time in history that a resurrection can be ascertained,⁷⁷ it happened to the only person who ever made specific claims such as these: that he, personally, was deity, that he was God's chosen messenger and only agent of eternal life, and who taught that his miracles (including his resurrection) were accrediting signs of verification. Add to this other factors, such as the moral character of his life, and we get a more complete picture. Negatively, especially in a Jewish context, God would not have raised a heretic from the dead. Positively, God placed his stamp of approval on Jesus by raising him.

It would seem, then, that the Christian theistic framework both accounts better for the known data, as well as being more internally consistent. On the Christian thesis, Jesus was raised from the dead and was thereby shown to be correct concerning his theistic perspective. The God of the universe raised Jesus, approving both Jesus' personal claims to deity and the central thrust of his mission—to offer the opportunity for eternal life. This appears to be Jesus' view and also best represents the repeated emphasis of the earliest apostolic witness that we find in the New Testament. As Marshall argues, the resurrection was the catalyst in the early recognition of Jesus' deity.⁷⁸

On the naturalistic position, we have a fair number of unnatural hurdles that we must overcome, including formulating an alternative theory and/or making a major adjustment to the laws of nature, as well as explaining Jesus' claims, his view of miracles, his character, and any remaining evidence for the resurrection. That Jesus' major or basic teachings were thus verified seems warranted. Jesus' distinctive claims were ultimately validated by his resurrection from the dead. In short, history's unique messenger also experienced history's most unique event.⁷⁹

Similar arguments have impressed many scholars.⁸⁰ For example, Swinburne asserts that numerous claims surrounding Jesus are unique among the world's major theistic religions and that extraordinary miraculous events are potentially a means of evidencing such teachings.⁸¹ Pannenberg, after developing a detailed argument to back his thesis,

⁷⁷ For this conclusion, see Gary R. Habermas, "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 167–77.

⁷⁸ Marshall, *Origins of New Testament Christology*, 128–29.

⁷⁹ Even if it is charged that others taught some similar things, believers could ask both for the corroboration of this claim, as well as the evidence to back it up. Jesus' teachings were still confirmed by his resurrection. These subjects are addressed at length in Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic*, esp. chaps. 2–3.

⁸⁰ Interestingly, leading scholars like philosopher Richard Swinburne and theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg are examples of nonevangelical methodological evidentialists.

⁸¹ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 222, 225–26, 233–34, 241–43.

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contends that the unity between Jesus' declarations and his resurrection provides confirmation of his mission.⁸² Prominent atheist Antony Flew even agrees that if the resurrection actually occurred, naturalists would have to be open to Jesus' teachings concerning Christian theism, including Jesus' own deity, even if it meant changing one's naturalistic worldview.⁸³

CONCLUSION

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I conclude that evidentialism is a viable apologetic methodology. Starting from any of a few potential religious epistemologies, it presents both more- or less-distinctive forms of argumentation (especially its distinguishing mark of arguing to God from history, an angle on common ground with the unbeliever, and methodological eclecticism), as well as sharing some perspectives with the other major apologetic methods. I prefer arguing from a "minimal facts" scenario, but that is an open issue.

I have constructed a brief example of an outline from Jesus' resurrection to the truthfulness of several of his theistic distinctives. Necessarily, my framework has been sketchy (including not listing critical interaction and sources that have been included elsewhere), hitting some of the chief points from a multifaceted case that has been developed in more detail in other places.

To close, I will return to a point raised earlier concerning applying apologetics to ministry. I contend that evidential arguments can profitably be utilized in strengthening believers who have questions or even factual doubts and in laying a theological foundation on which to build (along with the application of additional, nonapologetic methods) for those who have certain emotional struggles concerning their beliefs. Such a strategy might also be useful in witnessing to unbelievers by the power of the Holy Spirit. One advantage of the evidential method is in presenting the gospel. Rather than necessarily having to make an additional, separate move by proving God's existence before moving to the claims of Jesus when time is often at a premium, evidentialism specializes in the one-step approach, arriving at a more direct presentation of the gospel by using data that are still very persuasive. After all, we should never lose sight of our goal of not only ministering in various ways to believers, but, by the mercy and grace of

⁸² For Pannenberg's evidential system, see Pannenberg's "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," in *Revelation as History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, trans. David Granskou (London: Macmillan, 1968), 123–58. For his more specific application to Jesus, see Pannenberg's, *Jesus: God and Man*, 73, and Pannenberg's, "The Historicity of the Resurrection: The Identity of Christ," *The Intellectuals Speak Out about God*, ed. Roy Abraham Varghese (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1984), 263–64.

⁸³ Habermas and Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* 49–50; cf. 3.

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the Holy Spirit, allowing ourselves to be used to present the gospel to unbelievers. Outlining apologetic methodology should never be an end in itself.^{84 85}

⁸⁴ I would like to thank Dave Beck, Doug Geivett, and J. P. Moreland for their thoughtful comments on portions of this material.

⁸⁵ Habermas, G.R. (2000). "Evidential Apologetics". In S. N. Gundry & S. B. Cowan (Eds.), *Five views on apologetics* (pp. 91–121). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.