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The Claim

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A Simple Unknowing's Inquiry
Into the Resurrection of Jesus

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by Dennis O'Donnell

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**PASSOVERTURE
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The Quest and The Question

"If you do not know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else"
—Terry Pratchett, *The Wee Free Men*

I once read that "Every quest begins with a first step".

I don't really think that's quite right. I think it's more like "Every quest begins with a desired destination or goal". After all, if you didn't have one of those in mind, where would you be taking your first step to?

But as soon as I say that, someone objects: "You don't need either a destination or a goal to be on a quest. I'm on a quest to find whatever I find once I get anywhere, so I don't have a desired destination". Upon hearing this, someone else says "By *that* definition, I'm on a quest whenever I go look in the refrigerator. That doesn't seem like it rises to 'quest' status to me".

** Sigh **. This is how it goes. We're talking about how a quest begins, and immediately, the conversation takes a sharp turn, becoming an argument over the definition of the word. It's the classic beginning of a bunny trail.

This is the sort of thing that so routinely happens when somebody tries to say something factual about Jesus. Depending on who we're talking to, of course. Someone says "Jesus of Nazareth once said...", and someone else interrupts, saying, "There was no Nazareth in the 1st century". Another steps in and says "The Gospels say there was" and yet another retorts "The Gospels are wrong". That then moves to "The Gospels are the Word of God, and God doesn't make mistakes", and a response of "Every religion has their Holy Books, and you can't figure The Gospels are any more 'divinely-inspired' than the rest of them". And so on and so on. And you can see what's happened there. The intended topic—a quote by Jesus—was never even discussed, having been lost forever in the briar patch.

It's a very daring thing, asking a question about Jesus. There's no telling if you'll ever get the question answered or if it'll just result in more questions. But, my guess is that if you're reading this book, you're a daring sort. Because here, we're inquiring into the *resurrection* of Jesus. I don't know of any single topic regarding Jesus that's more controversial or questioned.

Staying with my more "conventional" idea that "a quest needs a destination or goal", I stepped out on a quest once. It was decades ago. I didn't have a destination, per se. Rather, I had a goal. I wanted to find the answer to the question "Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?" (By stressing "*really*", I was referring to the "literal" bodily resurrection we've heard about for some 2000 years now).

The thing is, it was the *wrong question*. I just didn't know that when I started. That's because, when I started, I had no idea that there were so many ideas of "resurrection" floating around out there. And every one of those ideas insists on being the right one. (But not to worry—we'll get to all this in the next chapter).

For the time being, we're starting with the same initial (and wrong) question. So right out of the gate, we'll have to figure out the right question. Now, I say "*we'll*" have to figure out the right question, because even though I went through this process before, it was decades ago. I don't exactly remember every detail. So, this isn't one of those "journey" books, like "*My Journey to a New Diet and Eternal Bliss*", where you just sit back and observe my well-remembered steps. You can't think for a moment that, having picked up this book, you're on a guided tour. This will be more like working our way through a minefield at night than like a hike through the woods with a Park Ranger.

In truth, if I tried to retrace my own "journey" (such as it was), it would probably be the most confusing—and certainly one of the longest—books ever written. But I couldn't chronicle it at this point even if I wanted to. What began decades ago as an inquiry into Jesus' resurrection became the quest we're about to embark on. But it unfolded over a few years, with no map, no compass, and no sense that I was even on a journey at the time. And now, decades later, the trail's long gone and the landmarks have all blurred together. So, while it might not always be obvious why I'm heading in one direction or another, I'll do my best to explain the turns as we go. But we won't be moving in a straight line. Think more like hiking in fog, with the occasional glimpse of a signpost—and a strong suspicion that the only path you're ever going to see is visible in the rearview mirror.

However, we do have one big advantage. While I may not remember all the exact steps I took, I do remember one very important thing I learned along the way: Avoid bunny trails.

I suppose, decades ago, I became quite good at recognizing a bunny trail. It was that one thing that actually give a bit of structure to an otherwise very random, slipshod, disorganized process. Figuring out where *not* to go can tell us where we need to go. So as we take our steps, we'll make good use of the same technique.

But there was another thing I recognized: It's that most of what anyone says with great conviction about Jesus' resurrection is almost always a reflection of their own bias. People tend strongly to believe what they want to believe, and disregard the rest.

That kind of thing is something else we need to avoid. If we were, inadvertently, letting an already-held bias determine our steps in this quest, we may end up accepting or rejecting things simply because they agree or disagree with what we already believe.

Back when I embarked on my original quest, I was able to avoid these kinds of issues, and it was because I didn't hold to one view over another with any great conviction. I approached Jesus' resurrection as an "agnostic"—or "un-knowing"—about the existence of Jesus, and about his resurrection, and even about God. And, that's how I'm writing this present book—as one who is un-knowing, and isn't beholden to any one idea over another.

I would strongly suggest it would be to your advantage, as a member of this quest, to approach this book in the fashion I've written it: as an agnostic.

However, I don't mean the kind of agnostic that has looked into the question of the existence of God and decided, as their "official position", that "It can't be proven, so I don't know". Any Theist could say, "Of course it can't be proven, if, by 'proven', you mean 'supported with empirical evidence'". And saying so hardly makes them agnostic.

The kind of agnostic who leans heavily on this kind of argument is like a person trying to measure the depth of someone else's love of something by using a plastic ruler. They're looking for empirical evidence for something that can't be measured empirically. It's the wrong metric altogether. And the result of this faulty methodology is to conclude there's no reason to "believe in God". It's what I call "Stealth Atheism".

But, that's not the kind of agnosticism I'm talking about. I'm talking about agnosticism in the most genuine sense: "without knowledge" or "un-knowing". In this case, being "un-knowing" about Jesus, resurrection, God, miracles, or any other such thing. We'll proceed as if, in the course of this inquiry, we'll be hearing about those things for the very first time.

Now, I don't mean you, my "fellow quester", really need to be an agnostic. What I mean is that whatever belief you might already have about Jesus, resurrection, God, etc, you would do well to set it aside during this inquiry. This applies whether you're a Christian, or a militant anti-Christian Skeptic, or anything in between. We need to avoid, as best we can, proceeding with a bias. We're not trying to find one answer or another to be true. We want to let the true answers reveal themselves in the process. But we can only do so as "Simple Unknowings"—"true agnostics". Otherwise, our own biases will drag us kicking and screaming down bunny trails we ourselves create.

For my part, I'm once again donning the "agnostic uniform". I'm not here to supply answers. I'm here to ask questions.

Let's begin our quest, then, as the Fellowship of the Simple Unknowings. And let's begin as I did decades ago—with the wrong destination in mind.

Heading Out the Door

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to”.

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book 1)

There have long been two very short versions of Jesus' story commonly told: The first is simply that Jesus lived and died. The second is exactly like the first, except that it has “and was raised from the dead” tacked on the end.

Ironically, most people who know about the “Jesus of Christianity” believe the first story. Yet the only reason they know about Jesus at all is because of the second.

These days, pretty much everything we know about the “Jesus of Christianity” comes from 1st-century writings—writings that were preserved by people who believed he’d been raised from the dead. That belief is what kept those writings alive in the first place. It’s why they were copied and passed along, being preserved for history in the process.

For that early community, the resurrection wasn’t just one belief among many—it was *the* belief. As the Apostle Paul put it, it was “of first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3–5). They didn’t see Jesus as someone dead and gone. He was the risen Lord. The Messiah. It was that conviction—the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead—that pulled the whole community together and pushed it forward. To that community, the resurrection of Jesus had profound, earth-shattering implications that the world needed to understand, and thus the message itself and the motivation for telling and preserving that message were the same. And virtually every distinctively Christian doctrine hinges on the resurrection of Jesus.

But that’s all if Jesus was indeed raised from the dead. *If he wasn’t*, then:

There’s no reason to consider Jesus as having been “declared the Son of God with power”. That’s because his Son-ship was affirmed “by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4). But if that didn’t happen, there’s no affirmation.

Nor can he be called Lord, because “Christ died and *lived again*, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Romans 14:9). So if he didn’t “live again”, he’s not Lord.

Jesus’ death was meaningless in terms of redemption and salvation. After all, it certainly couldn’t be that he was “raised because of your justification” (Romans 4:25)—if he wasn’t “raised” at all. And obviously, he couldn’t be the “first fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20) of a broader resurrection of humankind that would usher in the New Heavens and New Earth, and he won’t be coming back to do that “ushering in”, if he wasn’t raised from the dead (1 Thess 4:16–17).

Minus the resurrection, the Believer is still “in his sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17), and hasn’t been given assurance of an eternal life (Romans 6:22), and isn’t being transformed into the image of Christ in this life (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Without Jesus having been validated by God in the resurrection, Jesus’ teachings are reduced from being *authoritative* expressions of God’s will to nothing more than philosophical platitudes. Anyone could say “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44) and “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39) and (at least) attempt to teach others to do so. But without that *authority*, they become mere suggestions—ones that people may follow or ignore as they please. Apart from Jesus’ validation by God in the resurrection, there’s no reason to consider Jesus’ teachings anything more than Utopian ideals of a dead Jewish fellow.

All those wonderful “Blessed are” statements found in the Sermon on the Mount are nothing more than nice greeting-card ideas, rather than Eternal Truths, if Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead and validated as being “Son of God”. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God”, and “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” can each be followed by “...or not”, if one is only slightly cynical.

To top things off, if the foundational claim of Jesus’ resurrection wasn’t true, then there’s certainly no reason whatsoever to believe other claims Christians made about Jesus himself. Stories about him healing the blind and the lame, of walking on water and feeding 5000 people with a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread, and of his power over both Nature and over demonic powers are all suspect. They may just as well have been made up as was the fictitious story of the resurrection.

It boils down to this: If Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead, then all you are left with is a story of a dead Jesus. Minus the resurrection, Jesus can be ignored as easily as junk mail.

Granted, a Jesus who died without being raised from the dead could have, in his life, been an extraordinary fellow. He could have been a teacher of profound truths, and maybe even renowned as a faith-healer. And he could have been held in high esteem as a political or religious reformer, or as the prototypical social justice warrior who fought against racism and misogyny, and demanded the nation of Israel to accept all immigrants. And perhaps he was a wonderfully accepting person who welcomed the oppressed and the marginalized as an advocate of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Given a Jesus possessing these kinds of desirable attributes that others would aspire to imitate, it’s possible that some other religion that was based on nothing but the person, deeds, and teachings of Jesus might have arisen. After Jesus’ death, a group of his disciples could have continued to share the noble aims and Utopian ideals of the beloved-but-dead Rabbi. Maybe in this way, Jesus could have endured over the centuries to some degree, though probably among a relative few. Maybe he’d be viewed as something of a “Jewish guru” along the lines of a Galilean Buddha, a purveyor of philosophy intermixed with mysticism. But this would have led down an

entirely different path in history—and, consequently, I'd be relieved of the task of writing this particular book. But that's not the way things went.

The way things went is that the belief system that became known as “Christianity” was as tightly connected to Jesus' resurrection as was the veracity of Jesus being Lord and Savior. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Corinth:

“[I]f Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain”, and, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless” (1 Corinthians 15, vs 14 and vs 17 respectively).

To put this another way, Christianity, minus the resurrection of Jesus, can be tossed in the wastebasket like a used paper towel. It's a belief system that's an unmitigated farce, an outright sham, a Snake-Oil Salesman's dream-come-true of having bogus wares of false hopes to peddle to naive and foolish people. It's the “Emperor's New Clothes” being sold to the commoner—if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead.

At the bottom, it can hardly be a mystery that the resurrection of Jesus is considered the Central Tenet of Christianity: If there was no resurrection of Jesus, there is no Christianity.

The natural question to ask might seem to be, “Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?” (stressing “*really*” for the same reason I did in the previous chapter, meaning a “literal”, physical, bodily resurrection).

But that's a “yes or no” kind of question. We Simple Unknowings would have to decide, stepping outside the door, which of those two directions we're going. We'd either have to commit to one answer or another, then try to somehow “prove” that answer. And, whatever we'd be trying to prove might not be the right answer in the first place. But as Simple Unknowings—true agnostics—we've got no idea of whether we need to go the “yes” or the “no” route anyway.

This is the point at which we need to formulate the *real* question we're asking. But to get to that question and to illustrate how we're going to approach answering it, imagine this little scenario:

A man named Hobbs of Hebron is living in 1st-century Judea, and today he's shopping for matzah in the bustling marketplace. The usual crowd is there—vendors shouting prices, kids darting between stalls, the scent of olives and a haze of dust in the air. But at the far end of the square, a man stands on a low platform, apparently speaking to whoever will listen. Hobbs can't make out everything he's saying, but one line reaches him clearly: “Jesus was raised from the dead”. It's the first time Hobbs has ever heard anyone say that.

Now, Hobbs might assume “Jesus” refers to a person—but that might not be what the speaker means at all. And “raised from the dead” probably sounds like someone who died and somehow came back to life... but again, who knows if that's how the speaker is using the phrase?

To make any sense of what's just been said, Hobbs would have to answer a few preliminary questions—starting with the obvious: Who or what is this “Jesus” the speaker is talking about, and what does he *mean* by “raised from the dead”?

But answering these preliminary questions will only get Hobbs so far: they don't tell him *why* that particular speaker decided to make that particular claim in the first place. Was this supposed to be something that really happened? Or was he just a storyteller telling tall tales? Was he repeating something he'd heard someplace else, or did he just make this up? Who knows?

We're in the same boat as Hobbs. As the Simple Unknowings we are, all we've heard about “Jesus” is this claim—“Jesus was raised from the dead”—and we want to know who it's about, and what it's supposed to mean, and what was behind it.

So it's this that leads us to the question we'll be attempting to answer—our **Primary Question**:

“What gave rise to the *claim* that Jesus was raised from the dead?”

Do you see what just happened? We Simple Unknowings made a bit of headway. We stumbled out on a quest, to search for the right answer to a question. But, we had the wrong question. And now? We don't.

The difference between the two questions is quite noticeable, though. The first question has to do with Jesus, the second has to do with the claimants. We don't yet know a thing about Jesus, or for that matter, about what “raised from the dead” even means. But, we do know that somebody first made that claim, else, we wouldn't have heard it ourselves. We want to know what lay behind their making that claim.

Now, I need to point this out: The wording of our Primary Question is simpler than the actual task before us. In fact, it's quite ambiguous. But, I've chosen this wording as a “shorthand” version to use throughout this book, because the “longhand” version would be far too complex to use as we move ahead. So, let me explain more carefully what I mean by our Primary Question.

The Primary Question clearly mentions the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. But that's not what the question is about. It's about something very ordinary humans do: they make claims. For whatever else we are, we are claim-makers. We make them at breakfast, over coffee, in courtrooms and schoolrooms, in love relationships and in hate relationships, sometimes claims that are significant, and sometimes trivial, sometimes true, and sometimes false. “Honey, I put the trash out”, is heard a million times a week. We say, *this happened*. And, underneath, there's always a reason we say it.

Primary Question: Going forward, it's important to remember that the Primary Question is “What gave rise to the *claim* that Jesus was raised from the dead”.

It's that “underneath” part we're interested in. That's the “*What gave rise*” part. The claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” was first made by some real person who concluded it was a good idea to say it, aloud, to somebody else. What we want to know is what specific experience led that person to think “Jesus is living again”, such that they'd make that claim.

To be as clear as possible, we're not going to settle for a generic answer like “Oh, they just came to believe Jesus was alive again—at least, in some respect—and so they said so”. We're after something more concrete. For example: “After Jesus died, someone saw a spitting-image lookalike of Jesus and mistakenly concluded he was alive again. So they claimed Jesus had been raised from the dead”. This is the minimum granularity of explanation we're looking for. Anything less would simply beg the question.

Ultimately, understanding how they arrived at that explanation is the puzzle we have to unwind. But, that “unwinding” is going to require considerable work. There will be lots of chaff to winnow from the wheat.

The claim itself, though, is basically our “muse” that leads us to the starting point—our Primary Question. The thing is, we can't even begin to answer our Primary Question—“What gave rise” to that claim—until we've first answered those preliminary questions about who or what Jesus was, and what was meant by “raised from the dead”, and probably a few others. And not just answered them, but answered them correctly.

Asking the right preliminary questions can be of vital importance in a lot of situations. A detective doesn't solve a case by leaping straight to “whodunnit” without first asking what was done. A surgeon doesn't make the first incision without asking where the pain is—and why it's there. Many a muffin has been ruined because no one stopped to ask, “Is this baking soda or baking powder?”

Consider the claim “Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon”. If we wrongly identify Julius Caesar as a farmer, and “the Rubicon” as the name of a road that passed between his house and his fields, we'd say that claim was, with a very high degree of certainty, a true claim. That farmer would have had to cross that road to get to his fields to work every day. But our assessment of that claim would be nowhere near the truth. In fact, it wouldn't have anything whatsoever to do with the reality of the thing, because we would have answered the preliminary questions incorrectly.

That's the thing about preliminary questions: Not only do you have to answer each one correctly, you also have to know what all of them are if you want to get anywhere. If you don't know all of them, it's like trying to follow a map that's missing half the landmarks. You might feel like you're making progress—choosing paths, taking turns—but the whole time, you're navigating with incomplete information. You could end up lost without even realizing it.

We Simple Unknowings will spend considerable time on preliminary questions. We'll need to find them all, and then answer them. But the scope of this book will be limited to answering our Primary Question of “What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead?”

The question of whether it's *true* that Jesus was raised from the dead becomes a Secondary Question.

Now, we've already agreed to set aside everything we think we know about Jesus. But it might be helpful to identify the kinds of questions people routinely ask, and which, for us, are non-essential questions that we're not here to settle.

We're not trying to settle questions about how many "Marys" showed up at Jesus' tomb, or whether Luke's reference to a "census of Quirinius" is historically accurate. And we certainly aren't attempting to settle every question about Jesus himself, or about his words and deeds. Most assuredly, we're not engaged in the attempt to somehow "prove" or "disprove" anything about the "belief system" that came to be known as "Christianity". And partly because of that, we're not going to attempt to answer questions that are specific to that belief system.

This means we can also take a number of Jesus-related questions off the table, such as these: Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Was he truly the Son of God? Did he walk on water or raise Lazarus from the dead? Did he speak divine truth or merely moral philosophy? Was Jesus really the Gospel Jesus, or is the Gospel Jesus a highly-fictionalized, highly-romanticized representation of the "real Jesus" (assuming there was a "real Jesus")?

And most assuredly, answers to questions about the development of doctrines, the formalization of an "orthodoxy" in the church, and the history of the development of the "Trinity" concept are outside the scope of our quest. And so are questions about the spread of Christianity in the first five centuries, the canonization of the New Testament, and whether Constantine was really a Christian or not.

I consider these kinds of questions as being Third-level (or higher). Such questions, vital as they may be, simply aren't part of what we're after. We've got our sights on the question that lies at the very center of an expansive collection of concentric circles.

Our quest, then, in asking its Primary Question, may be regarded as something of a prefatory study for the Secondary Question of whether the claim of Jesus' resurrection is *true* or not. Determining where things go after that may be left to someone else. And, it would largely depend on how the Primary Question is answered. It may turn out that there's not any "objectively true or false" answer applicable to this Secondary Question.

But the very idea of something being "objectively true or false" leads us, in a roundabout fashion, to another—but related—topic: Believing vs Knowing. These are two ideas that people often treat as if they were the same. We Simple Unknowings can't get away with that, though. As we move ahead, we'll be using these terms quite often. So it's vitally important we share a common understanding of them. We can't, after all, have some thinking one thing while others are thinking something quite different. Having different definitions of terms is often the very beginning of bunny trails we need to avoid.

So, our next move is to make sure we're all on the same page when it comes to "believing" and "knowing". But don't think this somehow gets us off track. This is all part of the quest of the Simple Unknowings: it's going to be unpredictable. As T.J. Waldeck remarked in *On Safari*, "We moved in every direction except north in going north." I have a suspicion we'll find ourselves doing much the same.

Believing and Knowing

“Belief is a great powerful thing... But knowing is better. If you know something, you don't have to believe it”.
—Terry Pratchett, *Small Gods*

Being born and raised in the Lone Star State, I grew up learning the story of the famous Battle of the Alamo. And, of course, Davy Crockett, the former Congressman from Tennessee, the “King of the Wild Frontier”, was there on the walls of the old mission fortress. And I believed the story because it was told by people whom I trusted: Mom and Dad, my grandparents, my elementary-school teachers, and the kid across the street. And besides, John Wayne played Davy Crockett in a movie. How much truer can you get? So, there was that.

It wasn't until I was well past middle-aged that I realized I had no idea whatsoever of how anyone actually knew Crockett was at the old mission. Maybe it was because some Professor on a talk-radio show said something like “Crockett at the Alamo is just a legend”. I don't really remember.

What I *do* remember, though, is that I had no confidence in the story I grew up with.

For all I actually knew, the real story was that Davy had arrived at the Alamo, went AWOL before the battle and headed to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. There, he changed his name to Bernhart Smithwick and opened a dry-goods store, selling flour, salted pork, and various goods and sundries to the local citizenry. The part about “Davy in the battle” could have been nothing more than legend, started because the folks back home in Tennessee stopped hearing from him. Maybe they just assumed he'd made it to Texas and managed to get himself killed in that Alamo massacre they'd read about in the weekly newspaper.

Alas, the imagination soars on gossamer wings to unutterable heights, lifted by winds of ignorance and a paucity of fact.

Ultimately, I decided to look into the matter. If all I could find was just stories, written long after the fact, and nothing like eyewitness reports or any other substantive evidence, then maybe the whole “Crockett at the Alamo” was, disappointingly enough, nothing more than folklore. Maybe Davy really did go AWOL and head to Arkansas, and that business of Davy fighting on the walls of the Alamo was just a lie perpetuated by gullible people who wanted something to believe in. Or, maybe the story was a metaphor from the get-go, and Davy's death at the mission fortress was nothing more than a poetic tale of a “hero” that died, and whose death was part of what “gave rise” to the Republic of Texas. Or something along those lines.

It took about fifteen minutes of searching on the internet to discover that there is more than sufficient evidence to show that Davy was indeed at that battle. There were Texas militia documents signed by Crockett himself, and a letter written by a fellow officer at the Alamo noting that Crockett was in the garrison. And there were eyewitness testimonies of survivors of

the battle and from the town of San Antonio, and eyewitnesses from among soldiers of the Mexican Army, and even official Mexican Army reports that all attest to Crockett having been involved in the Alamo engagement.

Aside from learning that the story of Davy fighting and dying in the battle wasn't folklore or a metaphor of some kind, something else happened in the process of finding this evidence: I no longer merely *believed* that Crockett was at the Alamo—I *knew* he was.

There is a difference between “believing” and “knowing”. The most common definition for “to believe” is “to accept as true”. I had believed (or, “accepted as true”) that Crockett died at the Alamo simply because I was told it was true and I trusted the storytellers. But as a child, I had no real way of verifying whether what they said was actually backed up by facts.

The thing is, a belief about something doesn't alter objective reality. I could believe my dog was in the back yard while, in fact, she was asleep in the guest bedroom, and my belief wouldn't make it true that she was in the back yard.

But “to know” is different. “Knowledge” is most commonly defined as “a justified, true belief”. This means that the “thing believed” (i.e., that Crockett died at the Battle of the Alamo) has to first be objectively true. That is, he actually had to have died there “in real life”. Second, I must have justification—satisfactory evidence—to support this belief. Once I have evidence to justify this objectively true thing (which I believe), then I can say “I know it”.

On the other hand, if I believe something that isn't objectively true to begin with, then I can never truly know it. I can believe the moon is made of green cheese, but I can't know that it is, because it's not.

Now, with all this in mind, let me switch things up a bit. Imagine someone asks me, “How do you know that Crockett died at the Alamo?” It would sound strange to reply, “Because I feel it in my heart”. Such a response wouldn't make sense. I'm being asked for “how I *know*” something. Essentially, I'm being asked for evidence. But a “feeling it in my heart” isn't evidence; it's an overly sentimental way to express an acceptance of the truthfulness of something—in other words, an expression of a belief.

Now, with these observations about “believing” and “knowing” in mind, let's consider the story we're actually concerned with: “Jesus died and was buried, and was raised from the dead”.

For much of the last 2000 years—roughly from **800 CE**, when Charlemagne's coronation by the Pope reinforced Christianity as the dominant religion of Western Europe, to **1700 CE**, as the Enlightenment gave rise to historical and critical scrutiny of traditional religious teachings—Jesus was widely accepted in Christianized, Western cultures as having been an historical person.

Likewise, in those same cultures, the occurrence of Jesus' bodily resurrection was widely accepted as an event that actually happened in history. The historical “factuality” of Jesus'

existence and of his resurrection were, after all, what the dominant Christian institutions taught, and during those centuries, the “Church at Large” played a profoundly influential role in shaping societal and cultural norms.

However, over the last 200-250 years, things have changed. An ever-increasing number of people in Western cultures have come to suspect that Jesus’ resurrection isn’t a firmly established historical fact as they once believed. Consequently, for many, the claim that “Jesus was bodily raised from the dead on a day in history” isn’t seen as a true claim, but rather, an extraordinary claim that requires extraordinary evidence before it can be accepted as true. (I’m being polite here. I suspect it’s more like “most people think the historical, bodily resurrection is a faerie tale”).

Nonetheless, many still believe that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead on a day in history. But ask this question of a random selection of “average” Traditional Christians who affirm Jesus’ bodily resurrection: “How do you know Jesus was raised from the dead?” The answers of some, perhaps many, of them would likely not rely on “historical evidence” of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. Instead, their responses would tend to be experiential, often sounding something like this:

“I know Jesus was raised from the dead because”—
“I’ve experienced Jesus in my life”, or
“He has changed me”, or
“I feel His presence in my heart, and He answers my prayers”.

These kinds of answers might seem, to a non-Christian, to be like answering the question “How do you know Crockett was at the Alamo?” with a response of “Because I feel it in my heart”. The thing being asked for is “historical evidence” for the bodily resurrection that Traditional Christians espouse, but the thing being offered is subjective experience.

There is a reason for this, though. Because the Gospels not only proclaim Jesus’ bodily resurrection but also promise his continued presence, such an experience of the risen Christ demonstrates to the “experiencer” that the promise of his continued presence is true, and therefore, they can reason that the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus must likewise be true.

For many Believers, these kinds of inner experiences are, to the one who experiences them, as real (or as tangible, or as concrete) as any material object that can be observed with the five senses. But such experiences aren’t exclusive to Christians. I know a man who, as a non-Believer, had what he described as an encounter with the risen Christ—an experience he said was “more than real. It was like experiencing reality itself”. He wasn’t claiming to have seen or interacted with a physical, objectively real “risen Jesus”; he was talking about something that happened on a deeply spiritual level. It was this inner experience that led him to become a Believer.

What’s even more interesting, though, is what happened next. After that experience, he went and read the Gospels for the first time in his life. And the Gospels depicted a bodily resurrected

Jesus. So, he concluded that Jesus must have been bodily raised from the dead—with no need for additional evidence beyond the experience itself.

I don't bring up this story to dismiss it, but to highlight just how powerful these inner experiences can be—and how easily they can lead someone to conclude that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, even without engaging in any kind of historical investigation.

But, I've given only a “partial picture”. In truth, there are many Traditional Christian scholars who would argue that these kinds of experiences are only possible because Jesus was, in fact, bodily raised from the dead in an actual historical event. And they're not just guessing—they'll present historical data to support their argument, as would be expected of any scholar. So what we see is that there is a small-ish group of Traditional Christian scholars that do regard the bodily resurrection of Jesus as “historical fact”—based on cold data points—the “currency” of *bona fide* historical inquiry. But, those same scholars are extremely likely to fully support the idea that “the average guy on the street” can know, experientially, that Jesus was raised from the dead.

It's a bit like this: The average person may not understand how a combustion engine works—they just know that when they turn the key, the car starts. But engineers can explain how it works. The engine operates according to physical realities that can be studied and verified, whether or not the driver knows anything about pistons or fuel injection. So it doesn't matter whether every average driver knows about those things. Those drivers can fully believe the engine works because when they turn the key, the car starts. Now, the average driver can certainly learn about all the technical details of how the engine works if they have the time and inclination to do so. But whether they do or not, it doesn't change the reality of the thing. And there are those—the engineers—who do know the reality of the thing.

In the same way, Traditional Christian scholars might suggest it would be a good thing for every “average Traditional Christian” to know the historical data points supporting Jesus' resurrection. But, they'd likely say it's not *necessary* that they all do. This is because they'd equally insist that a person's personal, inner experience of the “risen Christ” is made possible by the underlying historical reality of Jesus' bodily resurrection, whether that person knows all the historical data points or not. You don't need to understand all the mechanics to have the experience—but the experience is real because the mechanics behind the experience are real. At least, that's how it's understood in the Traditional Christian view.

This, though, is where things get tricky. Many people hear the Traditional Christian scholar's historical arguments in favor of the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, and simply aren't convinced by those arguments. They'd insist there was no historical, bodily resurrection behind the experiences of Believers. And this is where the role of “inner experience” becomes complicated.

You see, having inward experiences of “supernatural entities” isn't a phenomenon unique to Christianity. People of many faiths report deeply personal, transformative spiritual experiences. A Hindu might claim to have sensed the presence of Krishna. A Muslim may report feeling an overwhelming sense of tranquility, connection, or even a nearness to Allah during sincere prayer.

Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) speaks of direct encounters with the Divine Light and the Shekhinah (God's immanent presence). Many indigenous traditions involve visions, spirit encounters, and communication with deceased ancestors or gods.

In each of these belief systems, what matters is the belief—the acceptance that what was experienced is true because the experience itself felt real. These experiences are considered valid without the need for empirical or historical evidence of the entity encountered.

And that's the point I'm getting to: Neither does "experiencing the risen Jesus" require empirical or historical evidence of the entity experienced. There's nothing stopping someone from sincerely believing they've sensed the presence of the risen Christ—without ever once even considering whether Jesus' resurrection was a literal, historical event. In fact, a person can have such an experience and conclude that the resurrection, whatever else it may mean, was never anything that took place in time and space as a concrete event in history.

The late Hindu guru Paramahansa Yogananda provides us with a great example of how one can find profound significance in the "resurrected Christ", yet at the same time, assert that Jesus' resurrection wasn't anything that happened on a day in history.

The guru once wrote a devotional in which he declared, 'Christ is risen,' and that 'Jesus is risen in the heart of every flower, every ray of sunshine, every noble thought,' and that 'He is risen in our minds, our hearts, our souls.' [Paramahansa Yogananda; *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*; Self-Realization Fellowship].

Clearly, this Hindu guru held Jesus in the highest regard. His beautiful meditation—rich in feeling, deeply reverent, was clearly meant to express a real connection with Christ.

However, Yogananda was a Hindu, not a Christian. He firmly adhered to the Hindu belief that at death, the body and *spirit* separate permanently, and that this is an ultimate good. In his view, the physical body is an encumbrance, and liberation from it is something to be desired and welcomed. Because of this, the idea of a bodily resurrection was not only unnecessary, it was undesirable and contrary to his entire belief system. Accordingly, Yogananda didn't believe Jesus had been "literally", physically, bodily raised from the dead. What he believed, he expressed like this: "O Christ, thou art *resurrected in Spirit*". (italics mine).

The contrast between the Traditional Christian understanding of resurrection and that of Yogananda underscores the critical importance of understanding *what kind* of resurrection was actually claimed. We'll certainly never figure out "what gave rise to the claim" until we've figured out what the earliest claimants were even talking about.

The Yogananda says that Jesus' resurrection should be understood as a metaphor, or an occurrence of something solely in the "spiritual realm". The *thing claimed* can never be objectively true. The Yogananda's "spiritual resurrection" can never be verified or falsified. It can only be "true" within the parameters of the Yogananda's set of assumptions and internal logic.

But Traditional Christianity doesn't present us with this picture. It uniquely says that Jesus was physically, bodily raised from the dead as a real event in history. Death itself—death that affects *bodies*—was forever stripped of its power. And because of this, Jesus “lived again” and would never experience death again. If this is what was meant by the very earliest resurrection claimants, then it would be either objectively true or false. And if it's true, then the resurrection of Jesus stands in contrast to, if not in contradiction of, all other religious beliefs. But if it is false, then Traditional Christianity's foundation collapses.

This discussion brings us to a crucial point. It's right here that we Simple Unknowings—companions in this quest, and having cleared the starting gate—must grasp the distinction between a *thing claimed* and whether *the thing claimed is true*. And right now, we're not concerned with the “truth” of the thing claimed.

For *our* purpose—which is to (hopefully) be able to provide a decisive answer to our Primary Question, we need to *know*—not merely *believe*—what the earliest resurrection claimants meant when they said, “Jesus was raised from the dead”. Was it a claim of a bodily resurrection (as per Traditional Christianity) or was it a claim of a resurrection as per Yogananda's (or someone else's) conceptualization? We need to know. We don't have the luxury of saying the *claim itself* is a “faith-based either-or”, because either the original claim was of something that happened in history, or it was a claim of something that didn't.

We should, at least in theory, be able to find out what those earliest resurrection claimants meant. After all, we're just asking about something very ordinary. Somebody made a claim about something, and for starters, we're just wanting to know what they meant by what they said.

Now, some people these days take an altogether different approach toward the question of “what kind of resurrection” was being claimed. For them, the *kind* of resurrection isn't a top-level consideration. “What matters most”, they say, “is the ongoing presence of Jesus in the lives of Believers”. Whether his resurrection was bodily, spiritual, symbolic, or something else entirely isn't of importance, in this view. What's important is the inner transformation that comes from trusting in Jesus, proclaiming him as Lord, and experiencing his “resurrection power” in daily life. For those who hold this view, it's perfectly acceptable—even preferable—to leave the question of what actually happened open-ended.

But the one thing we Simple Unknowings cannot do is leave the nature of the resurrection completely undefined. Granted, if we treat it as a vague or flexible symbol, determining that it can mean whatever anyone wants it to mean, and thus, allowing everyone to believe what they want to believe, we might see it as a modern, “democratic” kind of idea. We may feel like we're being fair and neutral. But we're not. We're actually stacking the deck. Because once we say “the terms ‘resurrection’ or ‘raised from the dead’ can mean anything”, then we're actually doing away with the possibility that it might have meant only one thing to those who claimed it.

Our quest demands that we allow for two things: The first is that the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” may not have meant an “historical, bodily resurrection”; the second is that it did.

If we are to proceed without bias, then we must—at least for now—allow for the possibility that something tangible and verifiable happened, and likewise, allow that no such thing ever happened.

But if we think, for a moment, that any of the contents of the claim itself—“Jesus was raised from the dead”—don't matter, then we're quietly choosing our answer before we've even asked the question.

Therefore, our first order of business is to understand what kind of resurrection was being claimed by the earliest resurrection claimants, and who it was a claim about. Because until we know those things, we can't even begin to explain whether the claimants said it because they *believed* it, or because they *knew* it.

Of course, by now it may seem as if we're still wandering. After all, discovering this “first order of business” is just an admission that we truly don't know anything more than our old friend Hobbs did. And, yes, that would be correct. But remember—this is the sort of quest we signed up for. And it's one of those times in which we have to ask a few preliminary questions, as we talked about in the previous chapter. But, don't worry. I remember this part from decades ago. We're still on the right path.

So if you will, allow me one more picture. We've reached a point where it appears our trail ahead curves sharply and drops out of sight. We've already encountered a few twists and turns, but here the path seems to disappear. Still, we Simple Unknowings press on together. And as we round the bend and peer down the incline, before us lies an utterly unexpected but welcome landmark.

It's the Visitor Center.

The Visitor Center

“They say you should always get a second opinion. So now I know two doctors who can’t agree on what’s killing me”.

—origin unknown

Here, in our imagined Visitor Center, we can get a comfortable preview of what lies ahead. There are large photos on the walls, displays in glass cases, and a helpful staff of experts, most with a PhD on their nametags. But don’t expect too much from them. If there was anything more miraculous than a literal, bodily raising from the dead, it would be getting scholars to agree on what “raised from the dead” even means.

Decades ago, this was my first stop in the attempt to find a “factual” answer to the question of “how the earliest Christians understood resurrection”. I came here, to inquire of the Visitor Center’s historians, theologians, linguists, and other scholars. Like most people, I assumed, “surely, here, I’ll get clear directions to where I want to go”. What I didn’t quite understand was that the experts weren’t handing out just one map. They all handed out different maps.

I also didn’t expect that asking questions here about what was meant by “raised from the dead” would feel less like research and more like walking into a family argument that’s been going on for 250 years. Everyone had an opinion. Some were brilliant. But no one agreed. Jesus’ resurrection was, for some, the historical bodily resurrection of Traditional Christianity. For others, the phrase “raised from the dead” was meant metaphorically, or symbolically, or as a reference to something that happened in the “spiritual realm”. In short, it was clear that there wasn’t any one definition for the terms “raised from the dead” or “resurrection” that everyone agreed on.

In this present day, nothing much has changed as far as the multiplicity of views on the nature of the resurrection. But, unlike in the “dark ages” of the mid-1990s, when I originally undertook this quest, there’s been another issue added. These days, especially in the venues of the internet, we’ve seen the rise of this question:

Was there even an historical Jesus in the first place?

In three works I’ve read more recently, each from this current century, and each penned by well-known, qualified historians, we see different views on either (or both) the characterizations of Jesus and on the nature of the resurrection. These works are “The Resurrection of the Son of God” by N.T. Wright, a scholar of no small repute and devout Christian, “How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee” by Dr. Bart Ehrman, an agnostic and one of today’s leading New Testament scholars, and “On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason to Doubt” by Dr. Richard Carrier, an atheist and a prominent proponent of “Jesus Mythicism”.

The central thesis of N.T. Wright is that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person who lived in the 1st century, and died by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, but was also, in the most literal and physical sense, raised from the dead on a day in history. His bodily resurrection left behind an empty tomb, a tangible witness to the world, and the “risen Christ” was seen, by some, as an objectively real, living-again person.

Dr. Bart Ehrman, while likewise acknowledging Jesus as a real person who lived in the 1st century, and who died by crucifixion, posits a rather different conclusion. In his view, the corpse of Jesus likely remained on the cross, left to decay—a common Roman practice. Ehrman argues that there was no resurrection at all—only the belief that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead, and this belief sprang from vivid intra-mental experiences—hallucinations, perhaps—that led His followers to sincerely, if mistakenly, claim that their Lord had risen.

Dr. Richard Carrier, however, ventures into more speculative territory, suggesting that Jesus may never have existed as a real person at all. Rather, the earliest Christians, he contends, were a small-ish cult that worshiped a Celestial Being named “Jesus” who they had come to believe to have been crucified by demons “in Outer Space”. The earthly disciples, according to Carrier, then came to believe, through intra-mental experiences, that the astronautic Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Just to let you know: Carrier’s “Outer Space” is not meant to imply science fiction so much as a kind of heavenly realm as conceived in ancient cosmology.

If you were to ask me, “Which of these three books convinces you that the author's view is the correct one?”, my answer would be short: “None of them”.

At best, one or the other of these books might bolster a belief I already had, provided, of course, that I already had a particular belief regarding Jesus and his resurrection. But suppose I knew nothing about Jesus, except that he was said to have died and been raised from the dead. Then, with that limited knowledge, I decided to read each of these works by these highly educated, highly trained historians. Perhaps they could tell me What Really Happened that caused some 1st-century Jews to claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. But, at the end of my reading, I’d be no closer to knowing What Really Happened than I was before. I would have simply gone from being ignorant on the topic to being confused *by* the topic. How could I know which of these historian’s views were correct if I don’t know what’s incorrect to begin with?

Suppose I were then given a copy of The Gospels and read them. Would that, in itself, persuade me that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead in an historical event? Not at that point, by any means. I’d previously read three works by qualified historians, and two of the three don’t even consider The Gospels to be historically reliable. At best, I could formulate an opinion based on what they’d written, but my opinion on the matter is hardly going to matter at all.

If The Gospels presented us with unambiguous, irrefutable evidence of the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, then the event would stand among the undisputed facts of history, like the

sinking of the Titanic or Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. There wouldn't be occasion for a multiplicity of Alternate Hypotheses penned by authors clever and wise. The matter would be settled. But in reading the works of the historians mentioned above, it would be impossible to conclude that The Gospel accounts are unambiguous or irrefutable when none of them agree with each other regarding the veracity of those accounts.

Concerning Ehrman and Carrier—neither of whom is a professing Christian—some might think their views are a result of their not having engaged in an in-depth study of The Gospels. Quite the opposite is true. Their writings teem with references to those texts, and they demonstrate a keen, almost surgical, familiarity with the Gospel narratives. The problem isn't in their knowledge of the texts, but in the fact that they have quite different ideas about the evidentiary value of The Gospel narratives than do Traditional Christians (like Wright).

To the Traditional Christian, the Gospels are viewed as trustworthy accounts, bearing witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, the Gospels accounts of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and of his visit to the Temple in Jerusalem at the age of 12, and of his "walking on water" episodes are all true reports of historical events. And likewise, the Gospel's depictions of Jesus having been raised from the dead, leaving behind an empty tomb, are true reports of an historical event.

This view of The Gospels, though, is hardly universal. Outside the bounds of Traditional Christianity, the approach to these writings is undertaken with a different set of assumptions. They're not seen as infallible testimonies, but as texts to be scrutinized, questioned, and interpreted through the varying prisms of historical inquiry and critical analysis.

Wright's view, as a scholar (who is also a Traditional Christian), is that the Gospels are fundamentally historical writings, rooted in actual historical events. However, while considering the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miracles as historical, he wouldn't argue that those events can be established as being historical in the same way a well-documented event, like the fall of the Berlin Wall or the D-Day invasion in WW2 can be established. Witnesses to a military invasion would be far more likely to have their testimonies accepted as true than witnesses to someone walking on water. However, in Wright's view, this doesn't mean that the "walking on water" incident didn't happen. It just means it's unlikely that you'd get a great number of people to agree that it did. However, Wright does indeed argue that the bodily resurrection of Jesus, while miraculous, can nonetheless be established historically, and he uses a methodology of "inference to the best explanation" to make his case.

Ehrman believes that the Gospels contain both genuine historical material and fictionalized or exaggerated material. And accounts of anything "miraculous" would be in the "fictionalized or exaggerated" category. However, even some events that aren't "miraculous", like (for example) the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea, are nonetheless highly embellished depictions, if not outright fiction, in Ehrman's view. It might be said that Ehrman views the Gospels as something roughly akin to historical fiction novels which do contain some real characters and real events, but these are interspersed with entirely fictitious elements, and thus, anything of historical fact

must be gleaned carefully from the text. In any case, in Ehrman's view, none of The Gospels can be regarded as historically reliable documents.

Carrier effectively gives no credence to the whole of The Gospels, asserting that those writings were themselves myths that evolved from the original—and already Mythological—Outer-Space Jesus story, turning the Celestial Jesus into a story of an earthbound human Jesus who did miracles and healings, and who eventually died by crucifixion, and then was raised from the dead on Terra Firma.

A Disclaimer: Someone might complain that I've not represented the views of the aforementioned scholars accurately. But if this is the case, the error is in my attempt to be brief, and certainly not in an attempt to misrepresent. I've mentioned the views of these scholars, not to critique their works, but to give a microcosmic sampling of the variety of ideas floating around about Jesus, his resurrection, and The Gospels. These four thinkers represent some of the more commonly encountered views.

Now, let's pull together information from the “experts” mentioned in this and the previous chapter, and see where we're at.

The first thing to note is this: Every one of the aforementioned historians, as well as our Hindu guru Yogananda (mentioned in the previous chapter) is—whether intentionally or not—actually providing their answers to our Primary Question.

They each agree that the resurrection claim itself was actually made back in the early 1st century. That's not an issue. They each offer answers to the preliminary questions of “who Jesus was”, and of “what was meant by 'raised from the dead'”. And, they each offer answers to the preliminary question of what phenomenon occurred—what experience was had by the very earliest resurrection claimants—that led them to make that claim. In short, each is attesting to a particular set of circumstances that “gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead”.

The second thing is this: All of the aforementioned scholars and Yogananda have widely differing views on The Gospels. Of the four individuals, only one considers The Gospels to be historically reliable writings, and even then, acknowledges that a great deal of what is contained in The Gospels cannot be verified by commonly accepted historical methodologies.

The last thing I really want to draw your attention to is this: neither the three historians I mentioned above, nor Yogananda, are even talking about the same thing. Wright is talking about the historical event of a bodily resurrection. Ehrman is talking about a deception that a bodily resurrection had happened when in fact it didn't. Carrier is talking about a mythological drama that played out beyond the far side of the Moon. And Yogananda is talking about an historical Jesus, but a “resurrection” that seems to happen everywhere except to Jesus' corpse.

Among these four individuals, we've encountered four different answers—each offering a different idea of what was being claimed, why it was being claimed, and even who or what the claim was about. They've each responded differently to the preliminary questions about “Jesus”

and “resurrection,” and that divergence has led to radically different answers to our Primary Question.

So far, then, it's been like this: Using a limited sampling of four experts—three historians and a guru—we set out looking for a definitive answer to the question of “what did the earliest resurrection claimants mean by ‘raised from the dead’”. We didn’t get that. What we found is that there are no definitions of those terms that are agreed upon as being the ones used by the earliest resurrection claimants. But in the process, we also added another question—one about Jesus’ existence. Now, we’re not merely asking “who” Jesus was; we’re stuck with finding out whether he existed at all. And of course, our experts are divided. Three of them agree that Jesus was an historical person, the fourth doesn’t think there was a “Jesus” at all.

If we were to go by this small sampling of “experts”, we’d have no certainty about what the original resurrection claimants meant by “raised from the dead,” nor about whether they were even referring to a real person. But perhaps more importantly: The very fact that these experts disagree shows that each of them is offering, not a provable fact, but an interpretation about who Jesus was and what “raised from the dead” meant.

It's sort of like revisiting our earlier question of “Was Davy Crockett really at the Alamo?”—except in this case, we can't nail down whether there was even a Davy Crockett at all, and worse, we can't even be sure there was an Alamo.

The truly odd thing is that we're not even asking about anything extraordinary—not yet. We're simply asking, essentially, what set of circumstances led someone to make a particular claim. Granted, the thing claimed might have been extraordinary. But maybe it wasn't. The Traditional Christian version—a *bona fide*, bodily resurrection—certainly fits the “extraordinary” category. But Dr. Carrier’s version? An imagined, mythological being who “died” and was “raised” somewhere in Outer Space? According to Carrier, that kind of story would’ve been quite ordinary in the 1st-century Mediterranean world. Tales of cosmic gods who died and rose again somewhere outside of Man's earthly realm are found in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and other cultures from that time and place. It was “common fare”.

What we see in our limited sampling of historians and a guru exemplifies the problem we companions on this quest face: If there’s no version of “Jesus,” and no definition of “raised from the dead” that we *know*—not merely *believe*—are the correct versions, then borrowing someone else’s beliefs about those things won’t get us very far.

But the hard, cold truth is that absolute certainty about events from 2,000 years ago is virtually impossible—if, that is, we demand the kind of proof we get from laboratory tests or forensic analysis. But that’s not how ancient history works. Historians don't have video footage or fingerprints. Often, they’re working with fragments. Maybe a pottery shard, a stone inscription, a few sentences on a scrap of papyrus that was a copy of a copy of a copy of something written 2000 years ago. Historians do their best to piece these things together, but much of the work involves inference—reasoned guesswork based on limited evidence.

The only thing we Simple Unknowings know with any appreciable degree of certainty is that the claim “Jesus was raised from the dead” was being made in the 1st century. (We’ll cover the historicity of that claim a little later). So we’re still stuck with the same issues: We have to nail down who that claim was about and what it meant. And as we’ve seen, what with all the options given, it won’t be an easy task.

So what’s our approach?

First, remember: We companions in this quest are “Simple Unknowings” when it comes to Jesus and resurrection. As “true agnostics”, we have nothing we want—or need—Jesus to be. And we have no particular stake in what “raised from the dead” is supposed to mean. But unless we ourselves can find out, on our own, what those things actually were, any answer we come up with to the Primary Question will never be more than a reflection of someone else’s biased notions of what someone said 2,000 years ago.

Therefore, we’ll need to cast about for some way of determining the “base facts” regarding both Jesus and resurrection. And here’s the deal: We might not succeed. We might already have hit the Mother of All Dead-Ends.

Our situation conjures up a bit of a parallel with what I’ve seen in a few Unsolved Crime shows: Someone is murdered, 20 years pass by, and the crime remains unsolved. The trail grows cold, the clues grow faint and every question that can be asked in the investigation has been asked, yet the truth remains elusive. What Really Happened is anyone’s guess, and every guess is a speculation. But having multiple, speculative ideas about What Really Happened is essentially the same as having no idea about it at all. And the multitude of conjectures serves only to emphasize our profound ignorance of whatever it might have been.

Of course, in most of the Unsolved Crime shows, the producer doesn’t want to present the audience with forever-unsolved murders. They pick the cases that are finally unraveled.

In some of these episodes in which the case is eventually solved, we witness what appears to be the final chapter—an impasse where the investigators, having exhausted all leads, find themselves halted by the barren landscape of insufficient evidence. The case, as they say, goes cold. But time, as it often does, weaves its own tale. While the murder case slumbers for twenty long years, a scientist, engaged in work entirely unrelated, stumbles upon a revelation: Individuals can be identified by their DNA. And behold, upon learning that a person might be identified by DNA, the investigators realize they now possess a new thread to tug at—one question, previously unasked, at last forms in their minds: “Can we use DNA Profiling to identify our suspect?” And yet, the DNA—this silent witness—had been present from the very beginning, already included in the body of evidence. The problem was that none of the Investigators knew to ask for it, because they had no idea it could be asked for.

When we consider our Primary Question, though, it’s as if the Investigators (the historians, etc) have hit a dead-end and the matter has been relegated to the “unsolved mystery” file, where it

remains. There has been no serendipitous happenstance of a “scientist working in the shadows” who has unknowingly developed the means to solve the case.

This dead-end hasn't been reached because of a failure of Investigators to posit possible answers to the preliminary questions or to hypothesize possible solutions. As we'll see going forward, virtually every possible answer to our Primary Question has been hypothesized by someone over the years. The problem is that none of these hypothesized answers has proven to be satisfactory to our Investigators. If any of them did, then it would be a matter of “case closed”.

However, this doesn't mean that one of the hypothesized answers isn't the correct one. It may be that one is correct, but it's not one we want to acknowledge. We don't struggle with questions; we struggle with answers we don't want to hear.

However, I really should mention this: My aforementioned “Unsolved Crime” analogy doesn't really fit our current quest perfectly. There is a big difference between the investigation in that analogy and the one we're currently involved in.

In an unsolved murder case, there's no question that a real event occurred. A body has been found. A crime has taken place. The mystery lies in figuring out what happened and who did it. But in our case, we're not investigating an event that is known to have happened. We're investigating why someone first claimed that it happened at all.

That distinction is subtle, but crucial. So here's another analogy to help clarify it: Suppose someone calls the police to report a murder—but no body is found. No crime scene. No trace of a victim. At that point, the first step isn't to solve the murder. The first step is to figure out why the caller said there was one. Did they witness something? Misinterpret something? Make it up entirely?

In the same way, our focus here isn't to determine whether Jesus actually rose from the dead. It's essential to remain focused on our quest, which is to find an answer to our Primary Question.

And when I say it's essential, I don't just mean it's important—I mean it's *the thing*. The central thread. And to be sure, we're not here to devise some new theory to account for it all. As we'll see going forward, we have Hypotheses in abundance. Across the centuries, minds sharp and skeptical have put forth nearly every sort of explanation for the origin of the claim of Jesus' resurrection—historical, psychological, theological, mythological—and yet, the efforts have left us in deadlock, the myriad of Hypothesis colliding in a tight bunch, going nowhere, like bumper cars in a carnival attraction being driven by six-year-olds.

We've inherited this investigation, but that doesn't mean we have to retrace someone else's steps. We'd just be using a map that led us back to this exact same spot. So, what we need to do isn't entirely clear yet. But one thing we *can* do is look closely at what the earlier investigators uncovered—and then figure out a new way forward.

But make no mistake: This quest we've embarked upon has already proven it'll be complicated, knotty, taxing, and exacting. We've seen hints, right here in the Visitor Center, of the difficulties we'll need to unravel as we move ahead. It's only hints, though. Expect a vast and daunting landscape covered in a criss-crossing maze of bunny trails, each one leading to a dark labyrinth from which there is no escape.

Our quest already hangs on a thin thread of hope: that there may yet be some overlooked bit of information, some small insight missed amidst the din—something that gives us one more thread to tug at, one more question to ask. Sometimes, it's the faintest clue—a glint beneath the dust, a pebble out of place—that opens the door. And it may be that such a door—if it should open up for us—will lead us closer, not only to *knowing* what gave rise to the claim of Jesus' resurrection, but also to understanding why that claim has, for so many, refused to die.

The Lay of The Land

“If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging”.

—Will Rogers

Taking the next step, we Simple Unknowings stumble into a Wednesday-night Bible study at the imagined Average Traditional Conservative Evangelical Bible Church of Wherever. The topic for the evening is the resurrection of Jesus. The room is full of congregants poring over the Gospels. And everyone agrees with what Traditional Christianity has taught about Jesus for about the last 2,000 years: Jesus existed as a real (or “historical”) person in the early 1st century; a Jew from Galilee who had family, friends, and followers.

Jesus walked the countryside, performing miracles, healings, and exorcisms. And he was a teacher who taught of righteousness and the Kingdom of God. But at the Passover one year, in Jerusalem, a strange turn of events happened. He was wrongly accused by the Jewish leadership of a crime. And he was executed by crucifixion on orders of Pontius Pilate. His corpse was buried in a borrowed tomb. But then comes the climax—the Central Claim of Traditional Christianity: God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24, Romans 8:11). This physical, bodily “raising” happened in a this-world, this-timespace, historical event. The Risen Jesus, having “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39), vacated his Final Resting Place, leaving behind an Empty Tomb. Then Jesus was seen by, and interacted with, Mary Magdalene, Cephas (Peter), “The Twelve”, and others.

Ask the church's congregants, “What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead?”, and you'd probably see baffled, curious expressions on their faces. They'd be wondering, “Why is this even being asked? Isn't it obvious?”, because to them, it would be quite apparent. “It *really happened*”, one says. “After Jesus died, some of his disciples witnessed the objectively real, bodily resurrected Jesus. And so they said so. They were just reporting what they'd seen”.

As you see, this answer offered by the congregants explains what prompted certain individuals to claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. In short, it's explaining the origin of that claim itself.

I'm going to call the explanation (above) the Traditional Christian Hypothesis for the Origin of the Resurrection Claim. However, for the sake of brevity, I'll shorten it to just the **Traditional Christian Hypothesis**.

Capital “H”: From here on, when I capitalize “Hypothesis” (or its cognates), I'm using the term in reference specifically to a hypothesis about Jesus and his resurrection.

Now, I want you to notice the core points we can glean from the brief discussion (above) of the Traditional Christian Hypothesis:

- Who or what Jesus was
- The nature of the resurrection
- “What happened” that led to the understanding that Jesus was resurrected

In the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, the “who or what” regarding Jesus is that he was an *historical* human being. This means he was an objectively real human being who lived and died in a particular place and time on planet Earth, and was known by others.

The nature of resurrection, in this Hypotheses, is that it was a “literal”, physical, bodily raising of a deceased person which happened in a this-world, this-timespace, historical event.

Lastly, in this Hypothesis, the Hypothesist tells us what "happened" that led to the understanding that Jesus was resurrected. Some of Jesus' followers witnessed, through ordinary eyesight, the objectively real, living-again, resurrected Jesus.

Now, I've pointed out the items above because we'll need this kind of information from every Hypothesis we consider, as we move ahead. And there are lots of them.

You see, according to most everyone outside the Traditional Christian circles and who are familiar with the resurrection claim, the Traditional Christian Hypothesis is wrong. “The resurrection claim *couldn't* have originated from someone seeing a dead man who'd come back to life, because *dead people stay dead*”, an objector might say. Obviously, that claim had to have started in some other way, they would insist.

But if the claim of Jesus' resurrection arose from something *besides* a bodily-resurrected Jesus having been witnessed by others, then what was it?

Over the last two centuries in particular, numerous Hypotheses have been developed to explain what gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. We've seen just a few of these Hypotheses in the previous chapter. But in this chapter, I want to touch on several others. And these others, generally seen as juxtaposed against the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, are commonly referred to as **Alternate Hypotheses**.

The Alternate Hypotheses vary from one another, sometimes flatly contradicting one another, and many are entirely speculative, but it doesn't matter. An Alternate Hypothesis is designed only to demonstrate the Hypothecist's idea of “What gave rise to the claim” of Jesus' resurrection. And invariably, the Hypothecist would insist theirs is the more probable explanation. Also invariably, every Alternate Hypothesis implies that the explanation offered by Traditional Christianity is *not* a probable explanation for what gave rise to the resurrection claim.

I'm going briefly touch on some of the more common Alternate Hypotheses. But it's not my intention, in being brief, to be dismissive of any of these ideas. Nor is it my intention to present anything misleading about any of them. What I'm trying to give is a view of *The Lay of the Land*, so to speak. But don't let its complexity overwhelm you.

The first category of Alternate Hypotheses we'll look at is what I call the **Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses**. These Hypotheses assert that Jesus existed as an historical person, was known by contemporaries, and died by crucifixion. In these respects, they're quite similar to the Traditional Christian Hypothesis. However, in the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses, there was never an historical bodily resurrection. As such, nobody witnessed a bodily risen Jesus. Rather, some other phenomenon led some of Jesus' disciples to claim the historical bodily resurrection of Jesus had occurred, when in truth, it hadn't. Ultimately, the claim that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead was based on a misinterpretation of that phenomenon.

Some of the better-known Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses are the Stolen or Moved Body Hypothesis, the Hallucination/Vision Hypothesis, the Collective Delusion/Group Think Hypothesis, and the Cognitive Dissonance Hypothesis.

While I'm tempted to discuss these individually, the particulars of each, while intriguing, aren't essential to our larger discussion. The bottom line on each of them is this: There was never an historical bodily resurrection at all, but the earliest resurrection claimants believed there had been.

Ersatz Info: I've included an entry titled "Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses" in *Appendix A* which you can read at your leisure, and learn more about these Hypotheses.

However, other Alternate Hypotheses posit something altogether different from an "Ersatz Bodily Resurrection".

One category of such Hypotheses is what I call the **Modal Hypotheses**. Each of these Hypotheses offers its explanation for the origin of the claim of Jesus' resurrection, but none are talking about an historical bodily resurrection. All Modal Hypotheses posit a known, historical Jesus who died by crucifixion, as does the Traditional Christian Hypothesis. Whether he was placed in a tomb, or buried elsewhere, or just left hanging on the cross for birds to pick apart, is optional. In these Hypotheses, whatever happened to Jesus' corpse is of no great concern.

Each Modal Hypothesis results in a claim that "Jesus was raised from the dead", but each one does so by creating another mode of resurrection itself. In these Hypotheses, resurrection is no longer seen as something "physical" that happened to an existent corpse in a this-world, this-timespace, historical event. Rather, it has been re-envisioned as something quite different.

A very popular Modal Resurrection idea is what I call **Spiritual Resurrection**. In this Hypothesis, when Jesus died, it was his *spirit* that was "raised" (i.e., to "the Heavens"), glorified and exalted in some fashion. In this view, Jesus' corpse wasn't affected in the resurrection process at all. It was simply left to decompose wherever it was last left. Jesus' *spirit*, however, having been "raised", was then given a "spiritual body" made of "spiritual stuff". This spiritual body didn't occupy space or have physicality in the ordinary physical world we inhabit. Instead, it existed somewhere

in the “heavenlies” or “spiritual realm”—anywhere, really, so long as it was not in our familiar physical world. As such, it wasn’t observable by any ordinary means and thus wasn’t empirically verifiable.

Keeping in “*spirit*”: From here on, I’ll use the word “*spirit*” (italicized) in a generic way, referring to a person’s “survivable component”. Other common terms include soul, consciousness, essence, “True Self”, Atma, pneuma, and so on. Conceptually, though, they are all referring to a “survivable component”.

A variant of this idea—sometimes called a **Two-Body Resurrection**—adds a kind of flourish. Here, the claim is that Jesus was indeed “bodily resurrected”, only the declaration is achieved by a kind of conceptual sleight-of-hand. In this view, Jesus’ corpse simply decomposed wherever it was last left, but his *spirit*, after departing the corpse, was supposedly endowed with a brand-new body.

This brand-new “resurrection body” was made of “spiritual stuff”, though not “immaterial” in the sense many moderns imagine when they hear the word *spirit*. Rather, it was said to be *subtly* “material”—some form of “spiritual matter” which had a *kind* of “physicality”. But here is the key point: In this Hypothesis, no such second, *spiritual-but-subtly-material body* was ever actually witnessed. This subtly-material resurrection body wasn’t visible with ordinary eyesight; it was perceivable only in “visions, divine revelations, or divinely-inspired dreams” (or, the Skeptic would say, “hallucinations, imaginations, or ordinary dreams”).

Basically, Two-Body Resurrection tries to function as a hybrid. Jesus’ *spirit* is the thing “raised up”, yet the earliest claimants could still speak of a “bodily resurrection” because they believed a quasi-embodied Christ drifted about the Eternal Ether. Still, it’s a variant of Spiritual Resurrection, because at the bottom, the “thing raised up”—the “resurrected” element—was Jesus’ *spirit*. And as is true in all Spiritual Resurrection Hypothesis variants, the act of resurrection left Jesus’ earthbound corpse entirely unaffected.

However, there are also Modal Hypotheses that talk about Jesus’ resurrection in a way that doesn’t involve either Jesus’ body or his *spirit*. In these views, the word “resurrection” is still used, but it’s being used to describe something that happens *in us*: a shift in understanding, a spark of insight, or a sense that something *about* Jesus somehow lives on. But nothing is happening to Jesus here. Everything is happening in the realm of interpretation, perspective, or significance. With that in mind, we can look at three versions of “resurrection” (below) which I lump together under the heading of **Interpretive Resurrection**. (And I’ll be using this term to refer to all three as we move forward).

One version is what I call a **Metaphoric Resurrection**. It treats “resurrection” as a figure of speech—a way of expressing a change of heart or a renewed sense of purpose. Here, the word works like any other metaphor: open-ended, elastic, and shaped by personal experience. Someone might say, “To me, resurrection means Jesus’ cause came back to life”, while another says, “To me, resurrection means his message suddenly came alive for his followers”. In other

words, the “resurrection” isn’t an event in Jesus’ story; it’s a way of talking about something that awakens in *ours*.

Closely related is what I call a **Symbolic Resurrection**. The difference is mostly grammatical. Instead of a personal metaphor—“what it means to me”—this view treats “resurrection” as a shared symbol, the kind of idea a community uses to express enduring truth. Here, “Jesus is risen” functions like shorthand for larger themes: that goodness outlasts cruelty, that love refuses to die, or that hope keeps reasserting itself. In short, the “resurrection” happens in meanings we attribute to it; it wasn't something that happened to Jesus.

A third version is what I call an **Idealist Resurrection**. This view suggests that when early followers said Jesus had been “raised up”, they meant that the ideals he stood for—his teachings, character, and vision—had been elevated and affirmed by God. The “Jesus-ideal” was what rose, not Jesus himself. It’s a way of saying that his convictions outlived him and were lifted into new significance. The “raising” is the rise of meaning, purpose, or moral force, drawn from what we imagine of Jesus’ life. As such, it’s not dependent on anything happening to Jesus after his death.

The “value-add” of the Modal Hypotheses—at least in the eyes of those who propose them—is a boost in acceptability and believability. They let someone affirm that “Jesus was raised from the dead” while sidestepping the embarrassment of having to defend a literal, historical bodily resurrection as described in Traditional Christianity. In this sense, they’re more palatable, more easily digestible, and far easier to pass along than the traditional version.

At Last, I can Explain: Traditional Christians, as we’ve seen, believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. But, is there a non-Traditional brand of Christianity that doesn’t? These days, yes: “Liberal Christianity”. Liberal Christians espouse one or another of the Modal Hypotheses. Liberal Theology began in the 1700s, and its rise in many churches led to the “Fundamentalist-Modernist” schism in the U.S. church in the early 20th century. Over time, the titles of “Traditional” and “Liberal” Christianity replaced “Fundamentalist” and “Modernist”.

Now, as I noted earlier, the Modal Hypotheses assert the existence of an historical Jesus who died by crucifixion. But, they don't agree that Jesus was necessarily anything like the “Gospel Jesus” who walked on water and fed 5000 people on a limited food budget. The “historical Jesus” may have been an influential, “spiritual” teacher. Or, he may have been a social reformer or political revolutionary. (His characterization depends on the whims of the Hypothesis). And, they'd agree Jesus (however characterized) was claimed to have been raised from the dead—but in some fashion other than a “literal”, physical, bodily resurrection. Lastly, they agree that Christianity formed around this historical Jesus.

But over the last few decades or so, things have changed—at least, in pop culture. In that realm, the very existence of an historical Jesus is questioned. Enter **Jesus Mythicism** (aka “Christ Mythicism”). Jesus Mythicism actually dates back to roughly the time of The Enlightenment, but it's gone in and out of style. Right now, it's resurfaced again, and is currently “in vogue” in pop culture.

According to Dr. Carrier, “[T]he basic thesis of every competent mythologist ... has always been that Jesus was originally a god just like any other god (properly speaking, a demigod in pagan terms; an archangel in Jewish terms; in either sense, a deity), who was later historicized”. [ibid Carrier, Richard (2014)].

Thus, the “competent” Jesus Mythologist would consider Jesus to have been understood originally by some 1st-century Jewish “cult” to have been a “Celestial Being” in an otherworldly drama played out in the “Heavenlies”. This non-earthly drama included the Celestial Jesus dying and then being raised from the dead somewhere in “Outer Space”, far and away from Terra Firma. Over time, as the beliefs of this cult spread, the Celestial Jesus of the cult became “euhemerized”. That means that over time, the Celestial Jesus became misunderstood to have been an earthbound, historical person. It was this euhemerized Jesus who was then written about in The Gospels.

But, Jesus Mythology isn’t the “end all” in Hypotheses about a non-historical Jesus. For this writing, I’ve invented five new categories—**Jesus Folklorism**, **Jesus Legendism**, **Limited Scope Hypotheses**, **Never-Dead-Jesus Hypotheses**, and **Pop-Schlock Hypotheses**. These categories represent some very popular ideas currently floating around.

However, I’m not going to describe these categories here. I’m putting them in a category called **Hypotheses We’ll Avoid** – and, that tells you pretty much how we’re going to deal with them.

If Interested: You can read more about **Hypotheses We’ll Avoid** in the *Appendix A* entry by that same name.

Hypotheses We’ll Avoid share a few common traits: They are virtually unsupported by anything in “real life”, and they read more like fiction than history—think of a good vampire novel. They can be entertaining. They might even be considered part of a much broader conversation. But we’re not going to spend time on them. In the end, they either (1) don’t generate explanations for the origin of the resurrection claim that haven’t already been used elsewhere, or (2) they change the subject of inquiry altogether.

Now, you may be wondering, “How did we get here?” That depends on who you ask. Traditional Christianity has always maintained that the miraculous, historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus is what started Christianity. But others would argue that Christianity was started as a belief in one of the Modal Resurrections, or even as a belief in a Mythological or Folklore Jesus, but it changed. Over decades of re-telling, the story became the familiar story told in Traditional Christianity.

However that might be, we’re faced with a hardcore fact. Nobody got serious about investigating the origin of the claim of Jesus’ resurrection until about 200-250 years ago, in the later stages of The Enlightenment. In other words, everybody waited until the claim of Jesus’ resurrection was “ancient history” before anybody decided to figure out **What Really Happened**. But by then, the

Traditional Christian's "historical, bodily resurrection" story was long entrenched as the "Official Story".

So, for the last 200-250 years, there has been an incessant "back-and-forth" in Academia. Our Investigators—the historians, theologians, and other scholars—who have been poring over an already-2000-year-old case—have neither determined that the "Official Story" is correct, nor that any Alternate Hypothesis is correct.

What does the "general public" do? Between Academia's inability to reach a solid Scholarly Consensus on the origin of the resurrection claim and disbelief in the Official Story proffered by Traditional Christianity, things disintegrate. What we witness in the broader populace is a decay of serious inquiry as it crumbles into the murky realm where reason gives way to unanchored conjecture. A great many will altogether dismiss the never-ending wranglings in the Ivory Towers of Academia. But at the same time, they'll see the Official Story of Traditional Christianity as being analogous to the "Official Story" proffered by NASA about the Apollo 11 Moon landing in 1969. It's a story that's believed only by (very naive) "true believers" who simply want to believe it. For everyone else, it's a hoax.

The result: People do what they always do when they've been unable to get satisfactory answers from the experts and authorities: They'll just *make something up*. They'll piece together their own narratives, mixing history, myth, hearsay, and pure speculation into a comfortable blend. A little bit of legend here, a dash of conspiracy there, and—voilà!—a new "truth" emerges.

Hence, we have the rise in popularity of the Hypotheses We'll Avoid. To many in the "public square", these kinds of Hypotheses are as good as anything the (perceived) "failed"—and thus, ignored—Academicians have come up with. And they're better than the Apollo-11-type "hoax" of the "Official Story" of Traditional Christianity. And besides, people do love a good "conspiracy theory".

I suppose I could go on with further discussion of the Alternate Hypotheses, but I won't. I can't claim to know them all, and am sure I don't. After all, they can be created on a whim. And unfortunately, this gives us a chaotic zoo-scape of Alternate Hypotheses, both in Academia and out on the internet, in blogs, vlogs, and social media. All told, there are as many versions of What Really Happened that gave rise to the claim of Jesus' resurrection as there are of What Really Happened in the assassination of JFK. And sometimes, we're talking real "Chariots of the Gods"-level stuff, a veritable playground for the imagination that strongly attracts Conspiracy Theorists, ex-fundamentalist-Christian-now-atheist New Testament professors, adolescent propellerheads, and people who think "The Twilight Zone" was educational TV. (I keep wondering when someone is going to theorize that the Illuminati or Freemasons stole the corpse of Jesus and buried it on Oak Island).

Clearly, we can't expect to solve this by simply picking a favorite expert. The professionals—historians, theologians, scholars of every stripe—have been at it for centuries, and still there's no agreement on what happened, or even what counts as evidence. If they can't sort it out with all their tools and training, then what chance do we have?

We could spend the next five years reading every book, blog, and journal article ever written on the resurrection. We could lose ourselves in arguments about hallucinations, body thefts, symbolic visions, spiritual metaphors, and everything in between. But at the end of it all, we'd probably be right back where we started. Not any closer to the truth, just more tangled in the weeds that grow alongside any well-worn bunny trail.

This is the dilemma for we Simple Unknowings. We're not satisfied with the Sunday School answer, but we're also not fooled by the endless parade of clever theories. And if we're honest, we're not in a position to 'pick the right one' either. Every Hypothesist offers reasons to *believe* their Hypothesis, but *none* of them have offered the kind of evidence that would justify a near-universal response of "Ah, now we *know*".

So, for we Simple Unknowings, what's the next step? We've seen *The Lay of the Land*, and it's not promising. Fortunately, we've not gotten lost in it. But it's in this forbidding landscape that the experts are stuck. The noise is deafening. If we want to move forward, we'll have to do something different. Not smarter, necessarily—just clearer. More direct. More honest.

Whatever comes next, it won't be about chasing theories. It'll be about changing the question.

Setting Aside the Jesus Narratives

“If a thing can be done adequately by means of one, it is superfluous to do it by means of many.”
—Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

Let’s go back to our old friend, Hobbs of Hebron, from the chapter *Heading Out the Door*. As you remember, Hobbs lived in the 1st century, and was shopping for matzah in the marketplace. There, he first hears “Jesus was raised from the dead” over the din of market patrons. And he had no idea what that claim was about, He’d have to answer a few preliminary questions—starting with the obvious: Who or what is this “Jesus”, and what does the speaker mean by “raised from the dead”? But answering these preliminary questions wouldn’t tell Hobbs *why* that speaker decided to make *that particular claim* in the first place.

After all, the speaker could just as easily have claimed that “Jesus went to Paradise”, or “Jesus’ consciousness melded with the Universal consciousness”, or something else a tad easier to accept. But instead, he’s chosen to say that Jesus was raised from the dead. And that’s an incredibly peculiar thing to say. Especially if the speaker wants others to believe his claim. But it’s here that we see another level of complexity. There’s a big difference in asking “Why did they make a claim?” and “Why did they make *that particular* claim?” As we move forward, it will prove necessary to understand why a claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” was chosen over one that would be more readily “believable”.

However, at this point in our quest, we Simple Unknowings are basically in the same boat as Hobbs. Only, Hobbs could potentially have gone up to the speaker and asked him all the questions he wanted. We can't do that. We're asking our questions some 2000 years “after the fact”, and we're asking them of people (our Hypothesists) who weren't there. Obviously, they don't have any firsthand information to offer.

Unfortunately, we have to work with what we've got. And as we saw in the chapter *The Lay of the Land*, we've got an avalanche of Hypotheses about Jesus and his resurrection. And we’ve got the claim itself. Which means, we’ve got a lot to work through.

The big problem with these Hypotheses is that there's not a single one of them that has been determined by “virtually everyone” as being “the right one”.

It raises the question: Can any of those Hypotheses be of any help to us in our quest? After all, right now, we have no idea which the “right one” is. One of them might be, none of them might be, but they can't all be right.

With a bit of reflection, we can see that there actually is a value to the flood of Hypotheses we have: They save us from having to reinvent the entire field of possibilities from scratch. The Hypotheses each give us explanations proposed by generations of thinkers, and each explanation includes certain “*Core Components*”. These are “who or what” Jesus was, what was meant by “raised from the dead”, and what phenomenon put it in the minds of the original resurrection claimants that saying “Jesus was raised from the dead” was a good idea.

For we Simple Unknowings in this quest, the Core Components are absolutely necessary, as they're all part of our Primary Question. So, for us, it's actually a gift to have all those possibilities laid out. But unfortunately, once you look at the full spread of possible Core Components, one thing becomes obvious: there's nothing simple about any of this. Unless, of course, we can find a way to simplify it. But, if we step back and look carefully at those Core Components—both from the Traditional Christian Hypothesis and from the Alternative Hypotheses—we can see a few patterns start to emerge.

First, the “Jesus” that every Hypothesis presents us with is going to be, at the bottom, one of two things. The first option is what I call the **Known Jesus**. This is a real, flesh-and-blood human being who was *known* by others—a person who leaves footprints, gets hungry, and might have neighbors who roll their eyes at him. The second option is “*something unreal*”. Maybe he was a myth. A legend. A theological invention. A character someone believed into existence because it made for a good story, solved a problem, or filled a need. This is what I call the **Other Jesus**—meaning (basically) “any ‘Jesus’ *other than* the ‘Known Jesus’”.

And by the way: I actually *will* be using the terms “Known Jesus” and “Other Jesus”, as defined here, on an “as needed” basis as we move ahead.

Second, in every Hypothesis, the phrase “raised from the dead” either refers to a literal, bodily resurrection that occurred in a this-timespace, this-world, historical event—something that physically affected a corpse—or it means *something else* entirely. That “*something else*” could be a Spiritual or Two-Body Resurrection, involving Jesus’ *spirit* (but not his corpse). Or maybe it’s one of the Interpretive Resurrections—something that has no effect on Jesus at all, but rather, is described as a dramatic shift in perspective among Jesus’ followers. But, whatever the “*something else*” is, it’s not a “literal”, historical bodily resurrection.

What we have, then, are two classes of resurrection: one, the “literal”, historical bodily resurrection, and the other, containing all the “*something else*” versions of resurrection.

Third, the phenomenon that triggered the resurrection idea in the minds of the original resurrection claimants was either the experience of witnessing an objectively-real, corporeally-existent, living-again Jesus with the ordinary faculties of eyesight—or it was *something else*. Maybe it was dreams, hallucinations, heightened emotional states, cognitive dissonance, revelation-like moments (etc), or something like a contagious “religious hysteria”. Or maybe it was illusions—seeing something with the ordinary eyesight, but interpreting it as something it wasn’t. Again, it would appear that what we have are two classes reflecting these groupings of phenomena.

Now, I mention these possible classes primarily because we might find them useful as we move ahead. For the time being, though, they shed light on the bunnytrail-strewned landscape, revealing it as divided into two broad regions:

On one side, we have the Traditional Christian Hypothesis: an historical, Known Jesus, an historical resurrection that physically affected his corpse, and a phenomenon of people witnessing—through ordinary eyesight—an objectively real, living-again Jesus after his death and

burial. (Whether or not that's actually what happened is a separate question. The Traditional Christian says yes. Most everybody else says no.)

On the other side, we have everything else—a wide assortment of mix-and-match combinations. It's a kind of theological buffet: pick one from Column A (the Known Jesus or the Other Jesus), one from Column B (resurrection type), and one from Column C (triggering phenomenon). You can have a Known Jesus, a “symbolic” resurrection, and a belief triggered by hallucination. Or you can have an Other Jesus (i.e., a folklore figure), a metaphoric resurrection, and a belief rooted in dreams. Or a Known Jesus, a “spiritual” resurrection, and a belief sparked by a deliberate deception. The permutations go on and on.

But this is the point at which many would want to dig down a bit deeper. We might have the “raw Hypotheses” and the Core Components as defined by the Hypothesist, but what we don't have is any information about how the Hypothesist arrived at his/her definitions of the Core Components. It would seem natural for someone on an investigative quest to ask, “Don't we need to understand how the Hypothesist arrived at their definitions? If one says Jesus was a folklore figure, shouldn't we know what led to that conclusion? Or if another thinks ‘raised from the dead’ was metaphorical, isn't that context important?”

Fair questions. But let's step back and look at this. In the chapter *The Lay of the Land*, we sorted the main categories: the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses, Modal Resurrection Hypotheses, the Mythological Jesus ideas, and of course, Hypotheses We'll Avoid (which we continue to avoid). But our “sorting” was in rather “general terms”.

In order to go deeper, we'd need to read what the Hypothesist says in his/her writing. And I'm going to call those full-blown written versions the “**Narratives**” (with an upper-case “N”). Now, this isn't some kind of “industry standard term”, so I'll give a working definition.

By Narrative, I mean a writing in which an Hypothesist offers the Who/What/Where/When and Why” that eventually lead to somebody first uttering aloud, to somebody else, that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. So, the Narrative is where the Core Components are each defined, along with information that explains how those definitions were arrived at. And it's in the Narrative that we'll find all the other necessary information to support the Hypothesist's “Five ‘W's”.

A Narrative may be in “story form”, such as The Gospels, or “Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth” (by Reza Aslan). But then again, it may not be. It might be more “academic”, like Wright's, Ehrman's, or Carrier's earlier-mentioned works.

Many (but not necessarily all) Narratives may make use—either positively or negatively—of other Narratives. In the more academic Narratives, the writer may cite some other Narrative either to support or refute some particular point. A very large number of the Narratives—perhaps most?—will reference the Narratives we call The Gospels. This is certainly true in the works I've noted by Wright, Ehrman, Carrier, and is incredibly common in works by other scholars.

This common practice of referencing The Gospels is because these writings are the earliest Narratives we have. Dating back to the 1st century, they hold a somewhat special status; they're the Narratives written most closely to the events depicted.

However, having that special status doesn't mean all historians agree that they're authoritative. In fact, some historians don't regard them as even marginally historically reliable. Many regard them as merely the earliest story-form presentation of the origin of the resurrection claim—*but*—there could have been other “Jesus stories” floating about that we no longer have.

What we'll see, then, is that some historians will use The Gospels to *support* the Traditional Christian Hypothesis they contain, and others will use those same texts to *refute* that Hypothesis. One might say “The Gospels indicate that Jesus was placed in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea”, supporting the idea that Jesus was indeed buried. Another will say “There's no evidence that Joseph of Arimathea even existed, and Romans commonly left crucifixion victims hanging on the cross to decompose”.

This kind of bantering has gone round-and-round for the last 200 years.

The Big Question for we Simple Unknowings is this:

Do we really need the entire *Narratives*?

The Answer: Not really.

Let me explain.

The *claim* that “Jesus was raised from the dead” existed *before* any Narratives leading up to it were written. This is even true in the Traditional Christian paradigm: The claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” *preceded* the writing of the Gospel Narratives. *Every* written Narrative—*all* of them, regardless of when they were written—exist *because* the claim existed first. It doesn't work the other way around.

Additionally, every Hypothesis we're considering has something in common: The claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” wasn't made until *after* Jesus *had died*. This holds true regardless of who or what Jesus was, or what that claim was thought to mean.

We have to understand this from the point of view of those that would become claimants of Jesus' resurrection. For them, once Jesus had died, Jesus was gone. Forever. In their human experience, there was no more “Jesus”. Jesus was out of the story at that point *for them*. Whatever they knew, or thought they knew about whichever “Jesus” the Hypothesist insists the original resurrection claimants were talking about—that particular “Jesus” was as dead as anyone ever was.

It was *after this point* that the resurrection claim was made. None of the Hypotheses we're currently considering suggest that people went around proclaiming, “Jesus was raised from the dead”, while knowing full well that Jesus had never died in the first place.

So the thing I'm wanting to stress is that the claim of Jesus' resurrection was made because of something the *claimants* experienced *after the death* of Jesus. Whatever that experience was is the thing we're after. Ultimately, it was that experience that fueled the decision that “It's a good idea to tell others, Jesus was raised from the dead”.

The death of Jesus represents a major shift in every Narrative. The lion's share of any given Narrative is focused on Jesus—explaining who or what he was, what he said and did, when and where he lived, and how people knew about him. And the Narrative is likely to include details about the religious, social, cultural, and political influences in play. But *once Jesus is dead*—the Narrative pivots. It turns its attention to the future resurrection claimants.

It's here that we Simple Unknowings cannot overlook this very important point: None of the Narratives actually lead *directly* to the resurrection claim at all. They lead *directly* to Jesus' *death*. It's only through that moment—when the “future resurrection claimants” *realized* that *Jesus was dead*—that we even arrive at the claim. So our real focus isn't on the life or death of Jesus at all—but on what happened *afterward*.

If a Narrative is in book form, then the death of Jesus is the moment that separates the chapters of the book from its Epilogue. And what we're interested in is what happens in the Epilogue. Whatever Jesus may have been during his lifetime, that was over. The Epilogue begins with a dead Jesus. It's that way in every Hypothesis Narrative, including The Gospels.

This, then, gives us reason to suspect that the “whole of each Narrative” might not be of any particular value to us at this time. All we need for the time being is the Epilogue.

It's right here, then, that we Simple Unknowings make an executive-level decision: For the time being, we're going to set aside all of the full-blown Narratives—including The Gospels. We're not tossing them in the trash can. We're just setting them aside gently, keeping them close enough to get to if need be. Those Narratives have done their job: they've given each Hypothesist a chance to define their own versions of the Core Components—and to place those components in a world of their choosing. And that's fine. We're not saying The Gospels, or Ehrman's, Carrier's, or any other Narrative is either right or wrong. After all, we're keeping the Core Components that all Hypothesists have come up with. We just don't need to be convinced that any given Narrative is “the right one”. But at the bottom, every Hypothesis reaches the same Epilogue. Jesus is dead, and what happens next has to do with whatever stimulus put it in the minds of the earliest resurrection claimants that “Jesus lives”. And whatever that stimulus was, it's a Core Component we've already gleaned from the various Hypotheses.

“But wait”, says one of the Simple Unknowings. The quest is brought to an immediate standstill. All eyes turn to our fellow explorer. “There's something we haven't talked about yet”, she says.

The Gospel Before The Gospels

We must go back to the source, for a stream is purest at its origin”.
—Augustine of Hippo

Our fellow Simple Unknowing posits a very important question: “We’ve said the claim of Jesus’ resurrection preceded the writing of every Narrative—including The Gospel Narratives. And we’ve said The Gospels are the *earliest* Narratives. So, it looks like the first written records we have of the resurrection come from those books. But how do we know the Gospel writers themselves didn’t just make up the part about Jesus’ resurrection?”

What our fellow Simple Unknowing is expressing is a suspicion about the veracity of The Gospels. But, the reason the question is being asked might be a tad confusing. So, let me explain.

Let’s just say, for the sake of this explanation, that these things are true: There was a real Jesus who gathered a dozen disciples. Cephas (Peter) was one of them. Jesus and the Twelve traveled about, and Jesus taught of the Kingdom of God. He healed the sick, and gave sight to the blind. He delivered the Sermon on the Mount. And in all this, he garnered a notable following. But then, in Jerusalem, Jesus is wrongly accused of a crime and is crucified by Pontius Pilate. And all these things were written down accurately by our Gospel author.

But, let’s say that *after* this point, the account becomes entirely fictitious. By that, I mean that after Jesus died, neither Cephas nor anyone else claimed Jesus was raised from the dead. That part—the part we’re calling The Epilogue—was just tacked on later, as a grand (and outlandish) embellishment to a story that happened decades earlier. In other words, the whole of the “resurrection thing” was just an invention of the author.

Now, I’ve offered the above “possibility” only to demonstrate that what our quest-mate is asking is a seriously good and important question. How *do* we know the events in The Epilogue weren’t just “made up” long after the fact?

The Traditional Christian might respond by saying The Gospels were written by eyewitnesses or companions of eyewitness to the events those books convey. As such, they are historically reliable accounts of events that really happened, not made-up stories culminating in an “invented” resurrection claim.

However, nobody outside of the Traditional Christian circles is likely to agree with that assessment. They’ll argue the “eyewitness or eyewitness companion” idea is based solely on “church tradition”. And, they’re very likely to argue that while The Gospels might have some historical facts right, they’re mixed in with a great many embellishments and errors (which, in this view, includes the resurrection accounts). Ultimately, then, you can never be sure if the part you’re reading is fact or fiction.

Of course, those “outside of the Traditional Christian circles” then need to come up with an explanation for the origin of those *books themselves*—not merely an explanation for the origin of the resurrection claim.

And they do. For example, in the 19th century, Bruno Bauer argued that The Gospels were entirely literary or allegorical fabrications. Modern Jesus Mythicists or Jesus Folklorists might well argue the same kind of thing, because in their view, there was no “real Jesus”. And in recent years, Dr Markus Vinzent has written several books arguing (among other things) that The Gospels were written or finalized around or after Marcion's heresy in the mid-2nd century.

For we Simple Unknowings, though, the issues that circle around The Gospels create a maelstrom we need to avoid. We're in no position to authoritatively answer the questions of who wrote those books or whether those writings are “historically reliable”. All we can do is read the opinions of others on the matter, and those opinions are all over the map. The incalculable number of disagreements about The Gospels represent, for us on this quest, an intertwining and twisting bramble of bunny trails we could easily get lost in forever.

But, let's “shoot straight” here: *Every single Narrative we have is arguable.*

That's partly why we're setting the Narratives aside while keeping only the Epilogues. But still, we have to concede that The Gospels do occupy a very special space: they *are* the earliest Narratives. And that “special status” is precisely why our fellow Simple Unknowing is asking the question “How do we know the Gospel writers themselves didn't just make up the part about Jesus' resurrection?”

This, though, is the very point at which we have to recognize something very important: The question asked by our fellow Simple Unknowing proceeds from a faulty premise. It proceeds from the idea that the earliest proclamation of Jesus' resurrection *must* be found in The Gospels *because* they're our earliest Narratives.

But that has *never* been the case.

Now, it's true that the earliest Narratives we have are The Gospels. But they're not the earliest written record we have of the claim of Jesus' resurrection. That record is found in the letters of the Apostle Paul—at least, according to the vast majority of scholars who deal with such topics.

So, let's consider Paul's letters from an “academic” perspective to see where that lead us.

Over the last 200 years or so, Paul's letters have been subject to intense scrutiny. They've been analyzed by a bevy of experts, given the same treatment as would be given to some newly-found, ancient copy of *The Iliad*. And one of the primary goals of these experts has been to determine the authenticity of each writing, and when it was written.

This group of experts is comprised of scholars from a variety of disciplines. Historians, philologists, archaeologists, scholars of literature, folklore, and oral history, anthropologists, paleographers, linguistic experts in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, those in the field of the Classics, and a Dead Sea scroll scholar here and there are among the group.

Also, among these scholars, there is a broad diversity of belief systems, including atheism, Judaism, agnosticism, and liberal or fundamentalist Christianity (and probably others). And this is of tremendous importance. When it comes to analyzing a given text to find out who wrote it, and when it was written, the scholars are attempting to answer more “technical” questions, not historical or theological questions. They're simply trying to establish something about the *text itself*, and not whether the content of the text is *true*. On this level, it simply doesn't matter whether the scholar involved in this authentication process agrees with anything the text says about “religious matters”.

For seven of the letters attributed to Paul—1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Romans, and Philemon—there is a Scholarly Consensus that is as broad and deep as the Nile that they are *bona fide* letters written by the Apostle Paul. And, this Consensus holds that these seven Pauline letters (commonly called the “Authentic Pauline Epistles” in Academia) were written between (approximately) 48-52 CE (for the earliest of them) and 60-62 CE (for the latest). These documents are considered “historical documents”, and are used freely by historians as such.

A “heads up”: We’ll be referring to the Authentic Pauline Epistles simply as “Paul’s letters” going forward.

But, having noted this broad-and-deep Scholarly Consensus about Paul’s letters, I should point out that this Consensus doesn’t mean that every individual scholar agrees with everything Paul says. For example, when Paul writes “Jesus is Lord”, there will certainly be scholars who don't agree with that because they adhere to a different belief system other than Christianity. However, they'll agree that Paul did indeed make that statement.

To the historian, Paul's letters, as historical documents, show that there were people who were saying such things in the early 1st century about Jesus. It's this kind of historical information that is most important to the historian, and in general, historians feel confident enough in what Paul says to take it at face value: If Paul says that at such-and-such a time he went to visit Cephas, or if he says that on some occasion a disagreement about something arose in the church, then the factuality of such statements is rarely doubted.

These writings of Paul are invaluable to the historian for another very important reason: Occasionally Paul writes things about his current world, and this can give the historian contextual information. For example, Paul writes “In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes” (2 Corinthians 11:32). The clever historian who knows when Aretas was king can use this information to establish the timeframe Paul was talking about.

Using this kind of information from Paul's letters in conjunction with information from other historical sources, a “timeline” can be constructed. For example, historians can tell us the approximate time which Paul himself became a Christian—and that would have been no later than 36 CE. Of course, there had to have been a “Christianity” to convert to, so, that tells us that the church existed before 36 CE.

All in all, I suppose historians tend to consider Paul's writings as an historical treasure trove.

Given the broad-and-deep Scholarly Consensus regarding Paul's letters, I think it entirely safe to say that we can use these documents for our purposes with little concern about getting pushback from the experts for having done so. Therefore, it will be these (and only these) New Testament writings that I'll be using as historical references (although, from time to time, I may make use of other New Testament writings, but only for illustrative purposes).

Scholarly Consensus: For informal information about how a Scholarly Consensus is formed, see the *Appendix A* entry titled “Scholarly Consensus”.

“But wait”, someone says, “in bringing up this 'Scholarly Consensus' business, aren't you just making an 'appeal to authority' fallacy here? Aren't you really just saying 'somebody says so, and therefore it must be true?’”

No, I'm not making any such Appeal to Authority fallacy at all. An Appeal to Authority fallacy occurs when we accept a claim merely because someone tells us that some authority figure supports that claim. What I'm appealing to is the combined expertise of large number of experts from a wide variety of related fields, which is usually considered a wise thing to do. Seeking the input of experts is something we do every day: We'll go to the doctor to get information about our current state of health, not to our next-door neighbor. If we so desire, we'll go to yet another doctor, perhaps one whose specialty is in dealing with whatever ails us, for a second opinion. If we wish to build a shed in our backyard, we'll seek the advice of professionals who have built sheds before, not the opinion of our neighbor who's never lifted a hammer. We seek the expertise of trained professionals in everyday life, and we advise others to do so (for good reason). Acceptance of input from a multiplicity of experts from a variety of disciplines, all of whom work in related fields, is hardly any kind of fallacy. It's good sense.

However—let me offer a Disclaimer: If, at some point in the future, the current Scholarly Consensus crumbles, and the view of experts becomes “ooopppsss! We had it wrong”, and it's announced that Paul's Authentic Epistles have lost their authenticity, then we can all toss this present book in the circular file and call it a day. (But, I'm not holding my breath on that happening).

This is it: This is the only time in this book that I'll lean on Scholarly Consensus. The reason I do so here is that the Scholarly Consensus regarding Paul's letters is so strong, based on the input of so many scholastic disciplines, that the authenticity of these letters is considered “unassailable”.

Now, having said all this, there are two important things I want to draw your attention to about Paul's writings: First, the claim that "Jesus was raised from the dead", made in various forms, is found some fifty times (give or take) in those letters. And second, Paul's letters indicate that this claim was already in circulation before 36 CE. (We'll be discussing this second point in more detail as we move ahead).

At the bottom, then, it's through Paul's letters that we can verify that the claim "Jesus was raised from the dead" was already being preached in the early 1st century. This claim was being repeated in communities, shaping worship, forming congregations, changing lives. It was, in every sense, the earliest version of the Christian message—the original gospel.

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Now, let's talk about that word "gospel" for a moment. The word "gospel" (Greek: *euangelion*) doesn't mean "a type of book". But because we now have books called The Gospels, which are about the life and times of Jesus, many seem to think "gospel" means something like "a biography". But that's not even partly correct.

What the word "gospel" actually means is "good news" or "glad tidings". The gospel was the good news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. When we read Paul's letters and he writes of "my gospel," or say "I am not ashamed of the gospel," or refers to "the gospel I preached ... which I received through a revealing of Jesus Christ," he's not talking about "the life and times of Jesus". He's talking primarily about that "good-news" proclamation: Christ was raised from the dead.

All put together, a picture begins to form: There was a time—years, in fact—when people believed Jesus had been raised from the dead, and spread that belief, and organized their lives around it. In those years, the message was spread orally. That's how it worked. The early church had no reliance whatsoever on books called "The Gospels" that weren't yet written.

Using all the information available to us today, we see it was decades after the resurrection claim was first made before anyone decided to commit anything about it to ink and papyrus. And as it turns out, the earliest verified written account of the origin of that claim isn't found in The Gospels, but rather, is recorded in Paul's letters. It's Paul's letters that serve as our anchor in history. What Paul says is our earliest record of what the earliest church was teaching.

And this is the very reason that setting aside The Gospels, along with all the other Narratives, won't hinder our quest. We've got texts that virtually all New Testament-related scholars agree on as being "historical"—Paul's letters. Going forward, these will be the only New Testament texts we'll use for historical reference. It will be here, in these letters, that we'll find the earliest account of the resurrection claim. We'll find there was a gospel before The Gospels.

The Anatomy of a Claim

“To assert is to give the response of the intellect to the reality presented to it.”—Thomas Aquinas

We Simple Unknowings have actually made a bit more progress. We've identified our historical starting point. But before we move forward, it's vitally important to stay focused on our quest, never losing sight of the very basic question we're trying to answer. We're asking about the origin of a *claim*.

We are already aware of a belief system known as Christianity. And we've already seen that there are many—and often conflicting—ideas about Jesus, resurrection, and Christianity itself. Those ideas have been discussed and debated endlessly.

But before any debates or discussions of these things could exist, somebody had to make the peculiar claim we're investigating. If, some 2000 years ago, some person (or small group of people) came to *believe*—or even to *know*—that a deceased Jesus had been raised from the dead, and yet, they never *told* anyone else about it, then we'd almost certainly not know a thing about Jesus, resurrection, or Christianity.

But, things didn't go that way. Somebody certainly made that claim. And it was made, as all claims are, by people. But it's an odd one. Did people, two thousand years ago, routinely go around saying that someone who had died had been raised from the dead? Was that a “condolence” commonly spoken of the deceased? Is it possible that such claims—when they did arise—were only ever made about mythic or legendary figures—characters no resurrection claimant could possibly have known personally?

These questions aren't really about what happened (or even was *believed* to have happened) to a deceased individual (whether man, myth, or folklore character). They're about what *people* do—they *make claims*. And in our case, we're trying to understand what transpired some 2000 years ago that resulted in one particular claim being made: that Jesus was raised from the dead. That's the subject of our Primary Question.

However, I have to confess: I don't think I've done a great job in formulating the Primary Question. Asking “What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead?” may appear straightforward, but on closer examination, it's riddled with ambiguity.

For instance, when I ask “What *gave rise*”, do I mean “what cultural or political factors helped the idea spread”? Am I referring to a philosophical impulse that made “resurrection” a compelling answer to an existential question? Or am I asking what first sparked the idea in the mind of an individual?

The ambiguity doesn't stop there. As we noted earlier, we haven't even settled who—or what—this Jesus figure was, or what exactly was meant by “raised from the dead”. Unfortunately, these particular ambiguities are going to persist until we tackle those questions head-on.

The truth is, I tried repeatedly to find some way to phrase the Primary Question in a manner that eliminates confusion, but every attempt ends up with its own fuzzy edges. The effort is like

trying to grab hold of a wisp of smoke. So instead of chasing the perfectly precise wording, I'm leaving the question as it is, opting instead to clarify what I mean by it, and in doing so, get us all on the same page.

Given that haven't yet settled (to our satisfaction) who or what this "Jesus" was, nor have we pinned down precisely what was meant by "raised from the dead", it seems we must begin with the (seemingly) simpler first part of our Primary Question: "*What gave rise to the claim*". We'll clear away the brush at the base of the mountain. Maybe then we can see a path to the summit.

Let's start by understanding what it means to make a claim.

To claim something means "to state or assert that something is the case, typically without providing evidence or proof" (Dictionary.com). For example: "He claimed that he came from a wealthy, educated family".

I want to draw your attention to something very important: A claim doesn't necessarily need to be something verifiable (or refutable) on the basis of concrete evidence. It can be offered without such evidence.

A person might think of a claim as being a statement or assertion that *must* be objectively "true or false". Indeed, even the example in our definition—"He claims he is from a wealthy, educated family"—is that kind of claim. But not all claims are the "objectively true or false" kinds of claims. Someone could claim, "I was Napoleon in a previous life", but that can never be verified by concrete evidence as being either true or false.

What we have, then, are two categories: empirical claims and metaphysical claims.

An empirical claim is one in which its truth or falsehood is based on objective evidence. The claim that a particular tree fell in the forest can be verified or refuted by going to see if that tree really fell. But a metaphysical claim requires a subjective interpretation of "true" and "false". Claims about the afterlife fall squarely into the metaphysical. They can only be "true" or "false" *within their own internal system of logic and assumptions*. For example, in Hinduism, reincarnation is true, but having only the two afterlife destinations of heaven or hell (as in the Abrahamic religions) is false.

Without knowing who or what Jesus was, or what it meant to be "raised from the dead", we can't say whether the resurrection claim is empirical or metaphysical. So, let me make a few observations about "claims in general", because these observations will be likewise applicable to the claim of Jesus' resurrection.

A Clarification: Going forward, when I use the word *claim*, I mean something a person says voluntarily—something they actually mean to say. Yes, it's possible that someone might be coerced into making a claim they don't believe. But there's no evidence, and no plausible historical scenario, suggesting this happened with the earliest resurrection claimants. So, for this book, I'll be treating claims as things people say of their own accord.

Now, the kind of claim we're interested in is called an “*interpersonal claim*”—meaning, “a claim made by one person to another (or to others)”. There are also “*intrapersonal claims*”, which are the kinds of claims we make to ourselves—“I can accomplish whatever I put my mind to”. But clearly, the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” falls into the first category: it was a claim made by someone to one or more other people. If it had never been made in this fashion, none of us these days would know anything about it.

Making interpersonal claims is hardly anything “extraordinary”. People make claims about things to other people all the time—quite routine, actually. “Honey, I took out the trash”. “I had a hard time falling asleep last night”. “God answered my prayers”. “I won a million dollars in the lottery last night”. These are all claims—assertions that “*something is the case*”.

Even making a claim about something extraordinary is, in itself, quite ordinary. Someone might say they saw a little green spaceman (extraordinary), but the fact that they said it *isn't*. (That part's ordinary). If making extraordinary claims were itself extraordinary, we wouldn't hear them so often. But we do. People claim to see UFOs, or Bigfoot, or the Loch Ness Monster. Some insist Elvis is still alive. Others swear the Earth is flat. The reason we know about these claims? It's simple. People make them all the time. Because when you get right down to it, making extraordinary claims is—well—perfectly ordinary.

A person can make a claim for any number of reasons. Maybe the thing they are claiming is objectively true. Or, maybe they *believe* it to be objectively true (but it might not be). Maybe they know it's false but say it anyway to deceive, impress, or entertain. Or maybe they believe it based on faulty assumptions, like someone who claims they grew up in a wealthy home, not realizing their Mom and Dad were actually drowning in debt and living on borrowed money. I know a person who routinely makes false claims (generally called “lies”) for no benefit at all, except perhaps to satisfy a compulsive urge to do so. (This list of examples isn't exhaustive; I'm just wanting to point out that claims can be made for all sorts of reasons).

Earlier, we defined a claim as “an assertion that *something is the case*”. But, it's also something else: Every claim is an outward expression of a thought in the mind of the claimant.

For example, a person might claim “I saw Sir Paul McCartney at the truck stop in Chugwater, Wyoming”—an assertion that something is the case. But of course, the *thought* that “I saw Sir Paul in Chugwater” had to be floating around the claimant's mind before they said it. An individual, then, in making a claim to someone else, is engaging in a willful act of expressing a thought, aloud, to another person as a statement or assertion that something is the case (whether it is or isn't).

A lighthearted “aside”: Chugwater, Wyoming is a real place—population 171 at the time of this writing. I just knew you were wondering about that.

But, where do our thoughts come from? Clearly, I can't answer that question as if I were a neuroscientist (because I'm patently not that). However, in our common, human experience, our thoughts are formed as responses to *stimuli*. These stimuli could be either *internal* or *external*, or a peculiar combination of both that is called an *illusory* stimulus. But how we interpret such information is different in each case.

External stimuli include things like sights, sounds, or physical sensations—basically, anything we perceive from the material world. However, our *recognition* of what we've perceived externally is a process that relies on comparing that information, acquired through our senses, with stored memories. This enables us to identify people, places, objects, and more.

Let's say you see a close friend at school. This current image of your friend is compared to images of him already stored in your mind as memories, acquired from having seen him many times before. So, you *recognize* him because the image you've just seen and the ones in your memory “match up”. And here, your recognition is accurate, because the images of him, stored in your brain (as memories), are from recent occasions.

Of course, not every external stimulus leads to recognition. Sometimes we encounter something entirely unfamiliar—like an ancient object in a museum—and find ourselves puzzled. There's no stored memory to match it with, so recognition doesn't occur. We ask, “What on earth is *that*?” At that point, our minds may start reaching inward, searching for associations or analogies to make sense of what we're seeing. And that brings us to the next kind of stimulus: *internal*.

Internal stimuli are produced in the mind. They might be generated from stored memories, emotions, mental associations, or expectations (beliefs or predictions about what is likely to happen in the future). Or they might be spontaneous imaginings such as dreams or daydreams. All these potential stimuli can surface into conscious thought. They are part of our inner architecture—deeply personal, shaped by experience, and often charged with meaning we may not fully understand in the moment.

You might, for example, have a dream in which a close friend is drowning, and in the dream, you're trying to save them. When you wake, your heart is racing, your thoughts disoriented, and—for a few seconds—you may be flooded with the fear that your friend is in danger. That dream, though clearly a product of your own mind, has still generated a real emotional response.

Another example would be the act of re-reading—or even recalling from memory—a passage of scripture and suddenly seeing it in a new light. The words on the page may be external, but the shift in meaning takes place internally. It is the reinterpretation, not the ink, that generates the stimulus. And whether that reinterpretation comes while physically scanning the lines or while turning them over in thought makes no real difference. In either case, the decisive movement is within the mind. What feels like a revelation breaking in from outside is, at root, the reorganization of material already present inside.

This is the curious nature of internal stimuli: they are subjective in origin, but their effects can feel as immediate and visceral as any external event. So, we can see that these kinds of stimuli can be tricky. They can stir up intense experiences that seem to point to something “out there”, but their source is entirely “in here”. But internal stimuli aren't *inherently* misleading. In fact, they can be the source of rich insight, creativity, or even conviction. Unlike external stimuli—which we can, in principle, verify against shared reality—internal stimuli have no objective footprint. They exist only in the mind of the person experiencing them. That doesn't make them false—but it does make them different.

The third kind of stimulus that's of importance to us—*illusory* stimulus—isn't as easily understood as the other two types. This kind of stimulus is produced in a situation where the initial trigger is indeed external and real—something seen, heard, or otherwise perceived through the senses. But the interpretation of that stimulus is shaped by internal factors in a way that leads to a mistaken or unintended conclusion. Think of a magician's trick: the handkerchief pulled from a coat pocket, unfolded in the hands, and voila—a dove appears from its folds. These are all objective, external events. But what the mind perceives—how it stitches those events together into an illusion—is something else entirely. The thought triggered by this illusory stimulus is that the dove was “magically” produced from the handkerchief (but of course, it wasn't). This third category is important for us, going forward, since it can give rise to genuine claims that nevertheless stem from misperceived events.

Let's consider the aforementioned “McCartney in Chugwater” example. Our potential claimant may have seen a person in the truckstop who they *thought* was the same person they'd seen in older, Beatle-era photos or videos of the famed musical artist. It was the “external stimulus” of *seeing* someone, *compared with* information stored in the brain (i.e., recollections of the older photographic images) that then formed into the conscious thought: “That's Paul McCartney over there, buying a bag of Cheetos and a Dr Pepper”. And, of course, it wasn't. Our potential claimant merely *thought* it was. The external stimulus of seeing that person isn't “matched up” with stored images of the “current and real” McCartney acquired through personal interactions with McCartney. Rather, it's matched up (incorrectly) with stored memories of photographic images that were decades old. This results in the formation of the thought that the person seen was the Musical Legend. But it wasn't. It was an illusion—caused by an illusory stimulus—that combination of external stimulus and internal stimulus, leading to a misinterpretation.

Basically, then, a thought can be formed from a variety of stimuli. But, I think it's safe to say that the “thought formed” is, in every case, a matter of interpretation. It's the interpretation that gives our thoughts their meaning (to us) and guides our responses. I see my car in the parking lot, I recognize it, and I walk toward it, because I want to get in the car and go home. *You* see my car—one which you're totally unfamiliar with—and ignore it. It's of no particular importance to you, and of no particular use to you. We interpret the thought triggered by the same external stimulus (seeing a car) entirely differently.

But simply having a thought doesn't mean you have to share it. Going back to Chugwater, the person who thought they truly saw Paul McCartney in the truck stop might well decide not to say anything about it. While they might believe they saw the Famed Singer/Songwriter, they might also turn around and negate their own belief. “Who am I kidding?”, they say to themselves. “I must have been seeing things. I mean, the likelihood of Sir Paul being in the Chugwater truck stop is probably less than the likelihood of getting hit by lightning twice, on a clear day”.

What I'm getting at is this: Turning a *thought* into a *claim* requires that the potential claimant must *decide* (for whatever reason) to express that thought, aloud, to someone else, as an assertion that “*something is the case*”.

Covering my Bases: Saying “I *thought* I saw such-and-such” isn’t the same as claiming to have seen it. It’s a statement about a thought, not about an actual event. That might seem obvious, but it matters here—because when we’re looking at how claims are formed, we need to be clear about what’s being claimed, and what isn’t.

Now, the thing I want you to glean from this discussion so far is this: There are three distinct elements involved in the genesis of any interpersonal claim.

First, there has to be a stimulus that triggers a response in the mind of the one who experienced it. This stimulus could be internal, external, or illusory.

Then, there has to be the formation of what we experience as a *conscious thought* (i.e., “That’s Sir Paul, buying Cheetos and whatnot”). This conscious thought is the *result* of the aforementioned process of having put together the information from the various stimuli and from our own memories. Once put together, it forms the conscious thought.

But even after the thought takes shape, something further is required for that thought to become a claim. The potential claimant has to *decide* to express that thought as an assertion that *something is the case* (even if they know it’s not). If the potential claimant decides not to express a thought to someone else as a claim, then the matter never becomes a claim. It simply remains a private thought.

As we’ve seen, there are all kinds of reasons a person might make a claim. Sometimes it’s because they know something to be true, or because they believe it is, even if it’s not. Other times, know it’s false, but saying it gives them an advantage, like padding a résumé or dodging a consequence. Some make false claims simply to satisfy some inner compulsion. But in every case, a claim pops out of someone’s mouth because the claimant is satisfied they have reason to say it.

The point is, no matter what the reason is—rational, irrational, honest, deceptive, moral, or immoral—something in the mind of the speaker is telling them, “*Yes, this is worth saying*”.

It’s the same with almost everything we consciously say. We say what, *in that moment*, we feel justified in saying—whether it’s a claim, a compliment or an insult, an opinion, or whatever. And sometimes, we regret it instantly: “I shouldn’t have said that”, we think. But that regret reinforces my point. We’re acknowledging that our original sense of justification was flawed. But *we had one*, and *at the time*, it felt sufficient. In feeling regret or in trying to correct ourselves, we’re admitting that the justification which we felt was satisfactory, wasn’t.

The takeaway: Claims—deliberate assertions that *something is the case*—always come with a reason, a justification, even if it’s not a good one. But that justification (or lack of one) is the thing that either allows us to decide to make the claim, or prevents us from doing so.

Crucially, what counts as satisfactory justification is determined by the individual themselves. One person might refrain from speaking a truth because it feels boastful. Another might assert a

falsehood to gain social standing. In either case, it is their own judgment—rational or irrational, honest or deceptive—that sets the bar.

What we see, then, is that every claim is the result of not only a *thought*, but of a decision, and that decision is the product of a personal calculus: “*Do I have a sufficiently satisfactory justification, according to my own judgement, to say this out loud to somebody else, as a statement of something true?*”?

As I’ve noted before, one thing about the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” that we can say with certainty is that someone did indeed make that claim. So, regardless of who or what Jesus was, or what was meant by “raised from the dead”, somebody clearly felt they had *satisfactory justification* for making that claim. And, apparently, their justification was sufficient for them to have done so. There is no reason to think the original claimants ever recanted, saying “we were wrong about that”.

Now—having gone through this discussion of “the anatomy of a claim”—we could restate the Primary Question such that it clearly reflects the elements of a claim:

“What phenomenon prompted the formulation of the specific thought in the mind of a potential resurrection claimant which could be expressed verbally as ‘Jesus was raised from the dead’, and what served as the rationale or justification for that potential claimant’s decision to communicate that thought, in the form of an assertion of something being the case, to others?”?

This new formulation of our Primary Question might be more precise, but, goodness gracious, it’s a rather unwieldy bit of verbiage. That’s the main reason I’ve opted to stick with the shorter version (i.e., “what gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead”) going forward. But, we must understand that, for our purposes, when we’re asking about “What gave rise to the claim”, we’re talking about these aforementioned elements that are common to interpersonal claim-making:

- **Stimulus** (which triggers a thought)
- **Thought** (which, when formulated, leads to a decision)
- **Decision** (“Am I justified in saying this as ‘something that is the case’?”)
- **Claim** (this is the claim itself, presented to someone else)

As we move ahead, we’ll refer to this series of events as the **Claim Formation Paradigm**.

But, there’s one last part to this “claim” business, and it has to do with “repeat-worthiness”.

A claim doesn’t exist until and unless it has moved from the mind of the claimant to the ear of a hearer. But once it’s been shared, it might go no further. A person might claim “I put the trash out this morning” to his next-door neighbor, but it’s unlikely the neighbor will feel compelled to pass it along. The claim just doesn’t matter enough to repeat.

So we have to ask: Why was the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”—whatever it was about—considered significant enough for the *hearers* to repeat it to others, and then, in turn, repeated by those others to still other people (and on and on)? Because clearly, that’s what happened.

We’ll return to this idea of repeat-worthiness later on, but I want to flag it here briefly. For now, we haven’t even nailed down what was actually being claimed. But this issue—why a claim gets passed along—is going to matter a great deal, and we’ll come back to it shortly.

For now, here’s where we’ve gotten to:

Jesus is dead. Now we’re in the “Epilogue” (as it were) of the story. It would have been perfectly reasonable for this Epilogue to have ended with “*Those who loved him remembered him*. The End”.

But every Hypothesis Narrative, by necessity, has to reach “...and therefore, they claimed *Jesus was raised from the dead*”. I say “by necessity” because it’s the origin of that claim that every Hypothesis attempts to explain.

For us, this means our interest distinctly becomes about the *claim itself*, reached in every Narrative. And as with all claims, there was a stimulus that triggered a thought, followed by a decision to express that thought as a claim.

But it was that *stimulus* that was the spark that lit the fire. And the claim—“Jesus was raised from the dead”—is the flame that leapt out from it. That stimulus is the part we’re really after.

Unfortunately, we can’t nail down what that stimulus was without knowing who or what Jesus was, and what was meant by “raised from the dead”. If the resurrected Jesus was a ghost, and “raised from the dead” meant “left the grave to do a haunting”, the stimulus is going to be decidedly different than if the resurrected Jesus was a living person, and “raised from the dead” meant “bodily raised from the dead”.

So let’s do first things first. Let’s see if we can figure out who or what Jesus was.

Leaving the Familiar Shore

“Go chasing two rabbits and you won't catch either one”

—anonymous

Now that we Simple Unknowings know (probably) more about “how claims are formed” than we'll ever find useful (outside the confines of this book), it's time to figure out exactly *what* the peculiar “claim in question”—“Jesus was raised from the dead”—is really about.

The first task: Nail down who (or what) Jesus was. Now, as I mentioned in the chapter *Setting Aside the Jesus Narratives*, there are two distinct camps: those that say there was an historical, Known Jesus, and those that say there was an imagined, Other Jesus.

The Traditional Christian Hypothesis, Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses, and the Modal Resurrection Hypotheses all assert a Known Jesus. The Mythological and Folklore Hypotheses proffer the Other Jesus.

To put it plainly, what we have are two diametrically opposed, mutually exclusive assertions about Jesus. And, these Hypotheses are the aggregate results of the Great Minds that have focused on this matter, especially over the last 200 years or so. It's as if two people both went looking for the same object: One finds it, and the other doesn't. And the one who *didn't* find the object ignores that the other *did*, and instead insists, “it doesn't exist, because I didn't find it”.

I realize that may sound as if I'm caricaturizing the situation, but the experts have been through all this “existence of Jesus” stuff for a couple of centuries, and still, for some, it's not a settled matter.

Among the qualified, modern experts who deal in New Testament-related history, there is a rock-solid Scholarly Consensus that an historical, Known Jesus existed. Now, this isn't a Consensus that the “Gospel Jesus” who walked on water, was born of a virgin, and fed 5000 people on a four-person food budget existed. Rather, it's a Scholarly Consensus only about a minimal set of facts: Jesus was an historical person, was baptized by John the Baptist, had a following, and was crucified by Pontius Pilate. Afterwards, he was claimed to have been raised from the dead. And it's around this historical Jesus that Christianity formed.

But that's only half the story. The other half is that there are a great number of people who don't care what the Scholarly Consensus says. Among that bunch, there are a few “experts” (which you could probably count on one hand), allied with a large swath of the general public (and especially vocal on the internet) that feel certain Jesus was an imagined, Other Jesus—a Mythological Being or a Folklore Character.

In the view of Jesus Mythicism or Jesus Folklorism, there was never a “real Jesus”. What really happened is something (roughly) like this: There was a small cult that believed in a “Jesus”—whether a mythological being or a storied, folklore character. Somehow, they determined that this unknown “Other Jesus” had died at some point, but, ultimately, he'd been raised from the dead. So, that's the story this cult told about their imagined “Jesus”. And as the story was

repeated, spreading further away (both timewise and distance-wise) from its origin, it became misunderstood. The imagined Other Jesus story morphed into one of a “real Jesus”. This “real Jesus” was from Galilee, had a mother named Mary, followers named Peter and John (and others), and he said and did some marvelous things. Eventually, he was executed by Pontius Pilate at Jerusalem. And then, he was raised from the dead.

But, I want to be careful to note that there are many versions of both the Mythicist Jesus and Folklorist Jesus, and many different ideas of how things really went. For example, some would say that Jesus was a mythological being, and that's who the Apostle Paul was actually writing about. But others would say that Paul was writing about the *fake* “real Jesus” that developed from the earlier, mythological stories. So, the “specifics” offered by any given Hypothesis about an imagined, Other Jesus can (and do) vary.

The issue, for we Simple Unknowings, is that we don't know which “Jesus” the claim was made about. We're not willing to go with Scholarly Consensus on this, but neither are we willing to buy into what the Internet Mob says. Our biggest problem is that we weren't there, “back then”, and can't know from personal observation whether Jesus existed or not. And to make the issue more difficult, we want to give every Hypothesis a fair shake.

We can concede easily enough that a claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” could have been made about an imagined, Other Jesus. Tolkien didn't need a real Middle-earth in order to claim there were Hobbits living in the Shire. But, we'd also have to concede the possibility that a resurrection claim could just as well have been made about an historical, Known Jesus.

The thing is, whether a postmortem claim can be made about either an historical Known Jesus or an imagined Other Jesus isn't our immediate issue. The issue is whether there was an historical, Known Jesus or not. Those who insist on either version of Jesus have their reasoning, their logic, and their “facts” (or interpretations of facts) to back up their assertions. But the two versions can't both be right. Either a Known Jesus existed or he didn't, and if he didn't, then the Other Jesus is just “code” for saying “there was no Known Jesus”.

What are we to do? We can't go chasing after both a Known Jesus who existed and an Other Jesus whose existence could never be verified. To attempt to do so would be a bit like trying to play chess and checkers on the same board at the same time. The pieces may share the same squares, but the rules that govern their movements are entirely different. You make a move for one game, and suddenly you've wrecked the logic of the other. So it's when we place side by side a Known Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Galilee and an Other Jesus who lived only in someone's imagination that problems arise. They occupy the same ‘board’ in our discussion, but they don't follow the same rules of reality.

For us, then, trying to pursue both Jesuses at once would only result in a convoluted and confusing mess. We'd be working on two different investigations at the same time. We'd have to split up, some going one way, and some going the other, and to what end? It's not as if we Simple Unknowings could come back together, compare notes, and simply *decide* which Jesus is the right one. Our decision certainly isn't going to ensure that the thing we decided is *true*.

Basically, we're stuck. If we are to give every Hypothesis a fair shot, then we have to find some way to deal with this “two-Jesus paradigm”. But, there may be a way forward.

The first thing to take note of is this: Every Hypothesist has to deal with Paul's letters. It's because those letters are the earliest records anyone has about a Jesus who was crucified and then claimed to have been resurrected. It's in Paul's letters—not in the Gospels or Acts—that we first hear of both Jesus and his resurrection. Of course, each Hypothesist has their own way of handling these texts: some see Paul as describing a historical person, others as pointing to a more mythical or symbolic figure, and still others as too ambiguous to settle the matter.

It's these differing ways of dealing with Paul's writings that bring us directly to our question. It can be put quite simply, though the consequences of answering it are anything but simple: Was Christianity formed around a Known Jesus—a flesh-and-blood man who lived in the early 1st century, was crucified, and some of whose family and followers soon after claimed he had been raised from the dead? Or was it formed around an imagined Other Jesus—a figure understood as a heavenly being or as a tale from the folklore cupboard—by people who could only believe, yet never know, whether he had ever existed at all? Or, for that matter, was Christianity formed around a doubly-imagined Other Jesus—an imagined Jesus that was later re-imagined as being an historical, Known Jesus?

The Traditional Christian has it easiest. The Gospels tell the “straight story”. Jesus was a real-life, Known Jesus who died by crucifixion and was bodily raised from the dead, and the risen Jesus was witnessed by a number of people. They were simply reporting what they'd witnessed with their own eyes.

However, we Simple Unknowings on this quest need to remember: We're not using either the Gospels or Acts. We're proceeding as if those books hadn't been written yet, or as if we've not been sent copies; all we have is Paul's letters. So, information originating in either The Gospels or Acts is not on the table for us.

What that means for us is quite clear: What we Simple Unknowings need to know is what *Paul* said—and what he meant—about Jesus. But this may not be as easy as it might seem. We can certainly do the “easy part” and read through the Pauline letters to see what he has to say. But if we do, will we really be hearing what Paul himself was saying, or will we be mostly hearing echoes of the culture that raised us?

You see, those of us brought up in a modern, Western culture must recognize that our perspectives can hardly be neutral, even if we're claiming to be truly agnostic. In American society, for example, we're raised seeing Christmas celebrated every year, with nativity scenes set out in town squares and carols sung on the radio. At Easter, movies like *Ben Hur* or *The Robe* still make their rounds on television, and sometimes a Passion play might be staged nearby. Even apart from holidays, Jesus has been present in our culture. Phrases like “Good Samaritan” or “prodigal son” appear in headlines, and paintings of the Last Supper hang in a restaurants. All of this settles into us quietly, shaping what we think we know before we've ever read a single line from Paul.

We also take for granted certain values that were far from obvious in the ancient world, and that have been deeply shaped by the Christian tradition: ideals such as universal human rights, the sanctity of life, and the worth of the individual. Our social and legal structures—universities, courts, and systems of law—were built on foundations laid in Christian soil. The tradition of

social welfare, the inspiration for much of Western art, literature, and music, and even the spirit of scientific inquiry, are all legacies of that influence. And all have been carried forward into our modern secular societies whether we acknowledge the source or not.

In reading Paul's letters, most of us from modern Western cultures may well approach those writings with assumptions shaped by centuries of Christian storytelling, and ideas about miracles, doctrines, and theological motifs. Consequently, some may find Paul's letters to be comfortably familiar. But on the other hand, others will read with assumptions shaped by skepticism or aversion to the Christianity that was formative of the culture. When this happens, even ordinary claims may be dismissed or distorted. Either way, it's all too easy for our assumptions to color what Paul actually wrote, and for our own suppositions to be imposed upon Jesus. Either way, it's all too easy for our assumptions to color what Paul actually wrote, and for our own suppositions to be imposed upon Jesus. Naively, we may turn him into whatever version of Jesus we ourselves want to see.

Any way you cut the cake, if you're from a Western culture, you've been influenced by Christianity. You may react either positively or negatively to it—but you cannot truly be neutral. The very fact of “how you see things” has been shaped either by an acceptance of Christian influence or by a rejection of it.

So, let's take away that influence. Let's set aside the assumptions we've inherited—assumptions that have grown out of ideas long since crystallized into the stories and doctrines that dominate our imagination today—and read Paul's letters afresh.

To approach Paul without the weight of centuries of Christian influence, we have to imagine ourselves stepping outside of the world we know altogether. From this vantage—stripped of familiar scaffolding, free of both devotion and aversion—we may be able to understand what Paul's letters conveyed to those who first encountered them.

That's the next move we make in our quest. We'll cut the moorings that tie us to our “cultural dock” and take an imaginary voyage away from the “world we know”.

A World Without Christianity

“Indicate precisely what you mean to say..”.

—Lyrics from “When I’m 64” by Lennon/McCartney

I once read a comment on a blog that went something like this: “If you read Paul looking for a historical Jesus, you’ll find one. But if you read him looking for a mythological or folklore Jesus, you’ll find that instead”.

The blogger was talking about ambiguities in Paul’s writings. But ambiguities are slippery creatures. With enough determination, a person can make even the plainest sentence turn uncertain. President Bill Clinton once proved the point when he explained, straight-faced, that “it all depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is”. The words were ordinary enough; the interpretation, spectacularly elastic.

The same sort of thing happens when people read Paul’s letters. What they discover often says less about Paul than about themselves—and about what they secretly hope (or fear) to find.

But what if, instead of searching for what we hope to find, we set out to discover what Paul actually said? What if we were to step away from familiar maps and well-traveled routes—those drawn by centuries of interpreters—and venture into the unknown, looking for the terrain itself rather than the legends that have grown up around it?

An adventurer, having made the bold decision to set sail on a great exploration to find an unknown land—a land he believes must be there (or at least fervently hopes will be)—has no alternative but to sail in uncharted waters. What he’s hoping to find can’t be in some place already mapped out; it lies beyond the borders of what is already known.

That’s exactly what we Simple Unknowings, the adventurous bunch we are, will do. At least, as sort of a “thought experiment”. Let’s leave this present world behind. Imagine we’ve sailed away from the familiar shore, into uncharted waters, and now we’ve arrived in a strange, new world. This is a world in which the belief system we call Christianity never “got off the ground” in the 1st century, never having bloomed into that peculiar, persistent thing it became in the world we left behind. We’ve reached *A World Without Christianity*.

This world is “another place, another time”. It’s a place that looks sort of like our own, yet it’s quite different. This world is one in which the fledgling Christian faith fizzled or was stamped out by the weight of hostile forces, long before we arrived on the scene. Not a whisper of Christianity remained. No Gospels. No New Testament. No Church. No writings by Church Fathers, no mentions of Jesus in the writings of Josephus or Tacitus. No preachers, priests, or evangelists. For that matter, we don’t even know what the terms “Christ”, “gospel”, “church”, or “apostle” mean. For us, in this imagined World Without Christianity, those terms would be as foreign as would be the knowledge of a 1st-century peasant from the region of Syria Palaestina named “Jesus”.

But, let's say that fifty years ago (in this World Without Christianity), a trove of seven ancient documents was discovered by archaeologists somewhere in modern-day Turkey. Surprisingly, each one has been preserved in excellent condition. And each of these texts claim to have been penned by someone named "Paul".

These documents were sent through the decades-long process of being examined by paleographers, philologists, experts in ancient literature (including Greek and Hebrew), and others with related skills. The documents receive the same treatment given by these professionals to any newly discovered ancient texts. In the end, the professionals all agree that these writings were created in the mid-1st century. And, they establish that each of these writings was done by the same person who identified himself as "Paul". Thus, these seven writings are referred to as the "Pauline Letters".

Historians study the Pauline Letters for decades. They discern Paul is writing of a religious belief which centers around someone named Jesus. And the cult which holds these religious beliefs was comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

In these Letters, Paul sometimes refers to Jesus simply by that name, and sometimes as "Jesus Christ" or "Christ Jesus", and quite often as simply "Christ". Linguists inform us that "Christ" is the Greek translation for the Hebrew word "Messiah", and that term is found quite easily in both ancient and modern Jewish documents. At times, Paul describes Jesus as being the "Son of God" and "Lord". And whoever this "Jesus" was, Paul repeats numerous times that he had been crucified.

Our historians have also discovered that these documents are the *only* documents making any mention whatsoever of this "raised-from-the-dead Jesus". There are no *later* documents to corroborate the Pauline Letters, no mentions of this Jesus by any ancient historians or anyone else. Paul's Letters are the sum-total knowledge available about this Jesus and the religious belief system formed around him. If there's to be any other information found about this Jesus, it has to come from documents written *before* the Pauline Letters (if any are available).

So, who was this "Jesus" that Paul talks about? Is Paul talking about a human being who was a contemporary of his? Or maybe a "Jesus" who lived long before Paul (a sort of "folklore Jesus")? Or, is he talking about a mythological being akin to a demigod like Heracles, or a god like Dionysus?

In Romans 5:15, Paul (writing in Greek) says that the "grace of God" came through "one 'anthropo', Jesus Christ". That word "anthropo" is the Greek word for "human" or "person" (whether male or female). Apparently, Paul regards Jesus as a human.

In Romans 1:3, Paul says that Jesus was "genomenou out of [the] seed of David, according to the flesh", and in Galatians 4:4, we find Jesus was "genomenon out through a woman", and in the same verse, that he was "genomenon under the Law". Those underlined Greek words are all forms of the Greek word "genomai", which means (basically) "become" or "come to be". In English, these passages would be translated as "born"—i.e., "born of a woman". But it's not a

mistaken English translation. We see the same thing in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Tanach) in the Book of Ezra 10:3, in which the Greek translators translated the Hebrew word for “born” to the Greek word “*genomai*” (“become” or “come to be”). For Greek speakers, saying “came to be (or became) out of woman” is a natural way (but not the only way) to say “born”. So, Paul is saying that Jesus was a human being, born a genetic descendant of David, born of a woman, and born a Jew (“under the Law”).

In addition to telling us that Jesus had a Mom, Paul also lets us know that Jesus had a sibling. In the Book of Galatians 1:18, Paul writes that he went to Jerusalem for a 15-day visit with Cephas (aka Peter). During this visit, Paul notes that aside from Cephas, “I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:19). We can glean from this that Jesus had a brother named James, and Paul had met him personally during his visit with Cephas.

Our experts note that Paul uses the term “brother” or “brothers” repeatedly when addressing or referring to others in this cult. However, this reference in Galatians 1:19 is the only instance where Paul refers to someone specifically as “*the brother of the Lord*”, and it’s in reference to James. In other references, Paul will write something like “I urge you, brothers”, or will refer to “*our* brother so-and-so” (and so on). But this particular designation, “James, *the brother of the Lord*”, (or “the Lord’s brother”) appears only in this passage. There are no other occurrences in the Pauline Letters where Paul refers to any other individual as “the brother of the Lord” with this level of specificity.

James, the brother of the Lord: See the entry in *Appendix A* titled “James, the brother of the Lord” for information from historians, linguistics experts, and philologists regarding this phrase found in Galatians 1:19.

One other thing the experts note is that Paul, James, and Cephas all knew each other. And with James being a sibling of Jesus, both necessarily fall into the category of “contemporary” with Cephas and Paul, even if Jesus and James were born decades apart. So, it appears that Paul understood Jesus as a contemporary.

In 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, there is an account of a fateful night when Jesus was subject to “*paradidomi*”, a Greek word which basically means “having been given over to someone”. On this night, Jesus shares a meal with others (although we aren’t told who they were), breaks bread, and cryptically says, “This is my body, broken for you”. He pours wine and declares, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood”. These statements attributed to Jesus may be shrouded in mystery, yet it appears that, to Paul, Jesus was a man of body and blood.

A very short overview of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul writes that “Messiah” (or, “Christ”) died, was buried, and was “raised on the third day ... and was seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve”.

These and other passages make it appear that Paul viewed Jesus as a “human Messiah”. One of the most noteworthy (for our purposes) being Romans 9:5. In this passage, he writes of the

“Israelites”, and says, “To them belong the patriarchs, and *from their race, according to the flesh*, is the Christ” [Messiah].

One other important and related thing to note is that Paul says it was “the Messiah” that died. This seems to indicate that Jesus may have been viewed as the Messiah *before* his death.

And in numerous places in Paul's writings, it's made clear that Jesus' death was the result of crucifixion. For our experts, this isn't mere trivia. They know crucifixion was a common form of Roman execution. So, given the timeframe in which these letters were written, along with locations, customs, laws, and other information Paul mentions, it can be ascertained they were during a period of Roman domination in the region.

Timeframe of Jesus' crucifixion: For an informal discussion on when Jesus was crucified, determined from Paul's letters, see the *Appendix A* entry titled “Crucifixion of Jesus—Timeframe”.

Now, I've already mentioned that our experts have noted Paul's account of Jesus' death and resurrection. But they also point out that Paul mentions Jesus' resurrection many, many times, and that the resurrected Jesus presently existed in some fashion. But our experts also note something else about Jesus: He also existed *before* he was “born of a woman,” and that in this pre-birth state, he stood in some unique relation to God.

This may be more of an oddity rather than a profound statement, though. The idea that all people pre-exist their birth is, in itself, not unheard-of in Judaism, although it's not mainstream. It can be found both in Rabbinical Judaism (i.e., The Talmud—Niddah 30b) and in Chassidism, particularly in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. “For them [i.e., Rabbis] each and every soul which shall be from Adam until the end of the world, was formed during the six days of Creation and was in paradise”. (Sifre, Deut. 306 [ed. Friedmann, p. 132])

Put together, though, the beliefs that Jesus pre-existed his birth and was later “raised from the dead” do seem to raise the question of whether the early church regarded Jesus as “divine” or “semi-divine” (in something like a demigod sense). One could even suggest that Jesus existed as a “god” first, then as a half-god/half-human man, and then as a god again. This would be like a kind of demigod, or a “dying and rising” god, either of which might be found in Greek mythology.

But Jewish literature offers other personified figures—Melchizedek, Michael the Archangel—who existed with God yet were not considered “divine” in the same sense that God is divine. Their “measure of divinity” was derived from God; it wasn't innately their own. Philo presents us with “the Word” (Logos), which he describes as the “firstborn of God,” an intermediary between God and the natural world whose divinity is likewise derivative, not innate. And 1 Enoch gives us the “Son of Man”, a figure who embodies divine qualities and functions without being either a “god” or “demigod”.

The problem is that Paul isn't entirely clear about what he means in regard to the pre-existent Jesus. Because of this uncertainty, it could be argued that Jesus was understood as a Greek-style mythological demigod, while others could argue that Jesus, though possessing a uniquely elevated status before God, still fits comfortably within the strict monotheism of Judaism.

At this stage, all we Simple Unknowings can do is acknowledge these two views. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge that these views aren't descriptions of Jesus' historical biography so much as statements of what his earliest devotees believed about him.

And unfortunately, all told, there isn't a great deal of "biographical" information about Jesus in the Pauline Letters. Paul doesn't tell us when and where Jesus was born—or died. A couple of times, he seems to allude to things Jesus might have said, but with no other sources that record quotes of Jesus, it's impossible to confirm. The "life and times" of Paul's Jesus are, in exceedingly large part, a great mystery to us.

Now, it's important to note that what our historians have learned about Jesus comes from their initial "plain reading" of the Pauline Letters. But I need to explain what I mean by the term "plain reading".

You see, there's not actually such a thing as an "*entirely* plain reading". Reading is, by its very nature, something that demands interpretation. We have to interpret the letters we're looking at (whether Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and so on), then we have to interpret the groupings of those letters that form words. And then, because some words have multiple meanings, we have to interpret those words in the context of what's being written. But, "what's being written" is, itself, being written in the much bigger context of the culture in which it was written, with all its presuppositions and assumptions.

So, let me offer a working definition of what I mean by "plain reading" in our context. (We'll be using this definition going forward).

When I speak of a plain reading, what I mean is a reading that begins with the ordinary, base meanings of words—their straightforward sense—before importing cultural interpretive frameworks or theological assumptions. For instance, the base meaning of the verb "to see" is "to perceive with the eyesight". When a child is learning to speak, this is the meaning of "to see" that the child will first be taught: "Peek-a-boo, I see you". So, by "plain reading", what I mean is first reading a text with the idea in mind of using the base meanings—the primary meaning that would have been taught to a child.

Now, sometimes, this doesn't work out. If a sentence says "Bob saw Mildred", the plain reading would be that Bob perceived Mildred with his eyesight. But, if the sentence says "Bob saw that he was wrong", we recognize that this is an idiomatic use of the verb "to see". After all, Bob can't "perceive, with his eyesight, that he was wrong". In such cases, we have to expand the context, attempting to understand the idiom in its broader cultural setting.

But outside of such exceptions, a plain reading begins by taking the language as it stands. It asks, first, what the “base meaning”—the most “direct meaning”—these words would have to those to whom they were written. Only after that do we deal with the exceptions. But even in dealing with the exceptions, the idea is to do so without forcing a particular interpretation.

In the world I'm describing—A World Without Christianity—we feel no need to either prove or disprove anything about Christianity (because it's of no importance to us). In that world, the picture that emerges in a plain reading of the Pauline Letters is something simple. There was a real person named Jesus who was believed, by some, to be the Messiah, and he died by crucifixion. But another thing we see is this: *After his death*, some began to make extraordinary claims *about* Jesus—expressions of what they had *come to believe about* him (and which we “moderns” might consider fantastical posthumous exaggerations and speculations).

This picture makes sense. It's reasonable to believe that there was an historical Jesus: many Jewish men bore that name in 1st-century Syria Palaestina. If Jesus had a following who considered him the Messiah—or who believed he would prove to be the Messiah by fulfilling the expected “Messianic tasks”—then it is likewise reasonable to believe that some of those followers made extraordinary, even outlandish, claims about him after he died. (Here, I'm thinking specifically of the claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead).

The thing is, making extraordinary claims about the deceased is hardly unusual. Even “moderns” living in our current “real world” do this sort of thing: “Elvis lives”. “Tupac Shakur faked his own death”. “Jimmy Hoffa was abducted by extraterrestrial aliens”. Enough said.

Now, remember: *For us*, in this imagined World Without Christianity, nothing whatsoever hinges on the beliefs about someone named Jesus held for a short time by some 1st-century, long-disappeared cult. It's not even important whether Paul is correct in his facts about Jesus. After all, nobody is basing anything of their own lives or worldview on anything in the Pauline Letters. For us, it is sufficient to accept that *Paul himself* believed Jesus to have been an historical person who died by crucifixion. There's no point in going any further with it. After all, for the scholar, the real value of the Pauline Letters is that they offer information about life and culture in the 1st century, and provide insights into “cultic beliefs in ancient Judaism” that were previously unknown. For most of the general public, though, the Pauline Letters aren't much more than a bit of “ancient trivia”, if they know about them at all.

Still, in this World Without Christianity—whether we're scholars of antiquity, enthusiasts of ancient religions, or merely neutral observers—we *do* have grounds to consider Jesus as a figure of history. These grounds are presented within the Pauline Letters themselves.

Indeed, we don't possess an abundance of detail. Paul never once claims to have met the earthly Jesus in the flesh, nor does he suggest he ever laid eyes on Him from afar. It would appear that everything Paul knew of the historical Jesus came to him second-hand, passed on by others.

However, Paul's lack of personal acquaintance with Jesus is nothing we need stumble over. First, what Paul had learned of Jesus, and passed along to others, concerns a real, living man of his

time—not some other-worldly figure born of a Siren or Nymph, nor a hero locked in battle with the Cyclops or the Minotaur.

Secondly, that Paul's knowledge was mediated through others in no way renders it false. This, after all, is precisely how Criminal Investigators gather testimony when piecing together the truth of a crime. They collect accounts from witnesses who were directly involved. But, they also collect information from people who themselves weren't directly involved; second-hand information can be useful if it lends support to first-hand testimony. Naturally, detectives would seek corroboration for all their information, just as we might wish for such corroboration regarding the historical Jesus. But here, in this hypothetical World Without Christianity, we're not striving to prove (or disprove) the existence of an historical Jesus. Nothing for us hinges on his "proven" existence. It is enough, for our purposes, to accept that *Paul himself* believed Jesus was both historical and a contemporary, and let the matter rest there.

The picture of Jesus that Paul presents us with is no source of discontentment for us. We had no expectations that "when we find a picture of Jesus, it should look the way we imagine him to be", because we didn't imagine a "Jesus" in the first place. So, we have neither reason nor need to re-think the plain reading of the story for the purpose of re-creating that picture into something we'd expect. That picture is just fine, as is.

Someone might complain, though, that in simply accepting that Paul wrote of an historical Jesus, it may seem that we've forsaken any attempt at "critical thinking". After all, the Greek demigod Heracles was consistently written of as a "human being", but he was only half-human, the other half being "divine". And, Heracles, like Jesus, even had a brother (Iphicles). On top of that, Heracles was "raised" to demigod status on Mount Olympus. So, maybe Jesus was a demigod. Or, for that matter, maybe he was a full-blown god who never set foot on Terra Firma. And if the latter were the case, then Paul's assertions of things like a Davidic genealogy and the fact that he was "born of a woman" are meant to be understood allegorically.

Or, maybe this "Jesus" that Paul writes about existed a hundred or more years before Paul was born. After all, Paul never does specify when Jesus was born or when he died. So, despite the specificity of Paul's reference to James as "*the* brother" of Jesus, maybe he really means that James was a "spiritual brother" of Jesus, not a familial one.

But we've *already* looked at the Pauline Letters critically. We asked the question "Who was this Jesus that Paul was talking about?" and neither the experts nor we were trying to somehow fit Paul's Jesus into some particular category. We've all been willing to let Paul's Jesus be whomever or whatever Paul says. None of us has any "ulterior motives", no reasons to try to "force" an identity onto Jesus. So, if we had found, in The Pauline Letters, that Jesus was a Celestial Being that lived somewhere on the far side of Saturn (because Paul had said so), or that he was a Folklore Character that had been talked about for centuries (again, because Paul said so), then well and good; that would be the "Jesus" that Paul is talking about. But we didn't find that. We found that, according to Paul, Jesus was a human being with a Mom and brother named James

who was personally known by Paul, and that *after* Jesus died, some people (including Paul) made some extraordinary claims about him.

However, maybe Paul's Letters should be re-read with the idea in mind that maybe he was talking about a Mythological or Folklore character. But we have to ask: Would an assertion that "Jesus was a Celestial Being who never set foot on earth" answer some great, pressing question for us? No. We don't have any great, pressing questions. Would asserting that Jesus was a Folklore Character that neither Paul nor anyone else ever knew personally, somehow "tie all the loose ends together", and provide the answer to some great mystery? No. Because as far as we're concerned, there are no "loose ends" to be concerned with, no "great mystery" to be solved. Those of us who have taken the time to read the Pauline Letters aren't concerned in the slightest whether there's any "truth" to the religious beliefs Paul espoused. Therefore, we have no necessity of somehow "proving" that Paul's Jesus really did exist, but neither do we have reason to "cloud the picture" with baseless ideas that Paul's Jesus *didn't* exist. Consequently, for us in this World Without Christianity, the question of whether Jesus was an historical person has been satisfactorily answered.

Now, *if* (and *only if*) some grounds for a re-formulation of the picture were discovered, then it would certainly make sense to do so. But, our *imagination*s cannot be considered justifiable grounds for doing so; we'd (at least) need *something besides* the whims of our own minds to even consider that Paul's Jesus wasn't what Paul seems to indicate. And if we did that, it'd be like we're just *inventing* bunny trails to get lost on. And goodness knows, we don't need to be doing that.

Given that in this World Without Christianity we have no *post*-Pauline mentions of a Jesus who was said to have been raised from the dead, the grounds for re-formulating Paul's picture of Jesus would have to be from some source *before* Paul's writings. So, if there were pre-Pauline documents mentioning a Mythical Being named Jesus, or that recounted tales of a Jewish Folk Hero by that name, then we might have grounds for at least *considering* that the "Jesus" whom Paul was talking about may have been *inspired* by one of those earlier figures. This would serve as grounds for questioning whether Paul was talking about an historical Jesus, and would serve as justification for exploring those options.

However, the problem is that there are no such pre-Pauline writings. None. Not one. Without such writings serving as grounds for revisions in the picture, there is no point in revising the picture. We are dealing with an historical Jesus—or, at least, with a "Jesus" that Paul intended his readers to take as such. And this is the only "Jesus" we have the option to deal with, unless, of course, we're content to conjure a new Jesus out of thin air.

Here, though, we need to remember: This imagined World Without Christianity isn't the real one; it's an artifice—an experiment. The whole point of this experiment was to look at Paul's letters without looking for any particular "Jesus" at all. We set aside every expectation—no Known Jesus, no Mythological Jesus, no Folklore Jesus—and simply asked what Paul was writing about. And the "Jesus" who emerges from a plain reading appears to be an historical person. In other words, that's the Jesus we find when we're not looking for any particular kind at all.

However, trying to draw firm conclusions from our experiment about how to resolve the Known Jesus versus Other Jesus question would understandably invite objection. To treat it as anything more than a thought experiment would be to overreach. Nonetheless, as a kind of controlled experiment, it gives us something useful to work with. We've learned that Paul does write about the pre-existent Christ, though not at great length. And he writes a considerable amount about the post-resurrection Christ. But, in between, the "Jesus" he presents us with sounds like an earthbound human being—someone born to a mother, having a brother and having a genealogy. And he sounds like someone known to at least some of Paul's contemporaries. But we've also learned that what Paul never says, and what no pre-Pauline writing says, is that "Jesus was a celestial being who never set foot on earth," or that "Jesus lived centuries before our time". We can acknowledge that Paul never says when or where Jesus was born or died. But that hardly seems reason to think Jesus was from the far side of Jupiter, or that he lived in the Galilean version of Sherwood Forest 500 years earlier.

These things having been said, I suppose we've gone as far as we can in this World Without Christianity. It's time we get back to reality as we know it. We Simple Unknowings can be satisfied that we've done the best we can do in this other-worldly "thought experiment". But awaiting us in the "real world" is an ongoing debate; our thought experiment hasn't settled the issue. The best we can do is return to the "real world", taking what we've learned. But there, we'll have to find some way to deal with that debate that is sure to greet us at the docks.

Finding a Jesus to Start With

“However it may prove, one must tread the path that need chooses”.
—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Clicking our heels together three times, we’re magically transported back to the “here and now”—a *World With Christianity*—a world having a history shaped by some 2000 years of the influence of the ancient belief system.

In this world, we’re surrounded by information about Jesus. Since the time of Paul, countless writings have been produced about him, ranging from the canonical Gospels to other “Gospels” that many of us have never heard of, like the Gospels of Thomas or Peter. Add to that thousands of academic books and papers by historians, theologians, and other scholars. Throw in popular books such as Schonfield’s *The Passover Plot*; countless films, television productions, sermons, videos, and social media discussions. Given this abundance of information and opinion, virtually every adult in a Western society is likely to have developed assumptions about Jesus and his resurrection, along with attitudes—positive or negative—toward Christianity.

In our present *World With Christianity*, some people believe an historical, Known Jesus existed. And some believe Jesus was the non-existent Other Jesus (both described in the chapter *Leaving the Familiar Shore*).

We Simple Unknowings can certainly acknowledge the split. But the historical, Known Jesus and the imagined Other Jesus are mutually exclusive ideas; it must be one or the other. A Jesus about whom others said was “raised from the dead” can’t have both existed and not existed.

This leaves us Simple Unknowings with only two choices: Either decide for ourselves which “Jesus” is the right one—or—we can consider both. But we know we can’t consider them both at the same time, as we saw in *Leaving the Familiar Shore*.

Of course, if we simply decided that either the Known Jesus or the Other Jesus was the Jesus about whom the original resurrection claim was made, there is no way to know whether we made the right decision. Any one of us might be convinced by compelling and persuasive arguments offered in either case, and on both sides, there are certainly those who can offer such arguments. But, then, it’s all too easy for a good con artist to convince someone to choose “Box A” over “Box B”, convincing them that “Box A” is the one with the treasure when it wasn’t.

In short, we can’t “simply decide” whether Jesus was the historical, Known Jesus or the imagined Other Jesus, because our decision would have no effect whatsoever on what really happened some 2000 years ago. And, we’re not historians. We can’t mount a case for one Jesus over the other any better than the professionals, and it’s clear enough that many people argue “the professionals have it wrong”. We simply cannot step into that whirlwind of wildly zigzagging and intertwined bunny trails.

So, what are we to do? We’ll consider both Jesuses—but one at a time. The issue for us, then, becomes procedural. Which “Jesus” do we start with? And why?

Fortunately, we already have all the information we need to decide which Jesus to begin with. Whether it has been obvious or not, we acquired that information in the previous chapters. Now, it is time to put it to use. We'll need to step through this carefully, because the reasoning isn't terribly intuitive. In the end, though, we'll see which version of Jesus we need to proceed with.

But before we start, let me offer a gentle reminder of who we are and what we're doing in this quest. Keeping this perspective will prove quite necessary at this point.

We're the Simple Unknowings, the agnostics, the modern-day "Hobbs of Hebron" (mentioned in the 2nd chapter, *Heading Out the Door*) who heard someone say "Jesus was raised from the dead". Like Hobbs, we've got no idea of who or what it was about, or what it meant, or why the fellow who said it decided to say it. Unfortunately, unlike Hobbs, who could have moseyed across the marketplace to that fellow and asked what it was about, we don't have that luxury. Instead, we waited two thousand years before deciding to ask about it. That original claimant is long gone. But that claim has been repeated since the 1st century. And now, we're asking about it.

What's been handed to us are dusty boxes taken from storage, containing all the Hypotheses that others have come up with over the centuries which seek to answer the question of "What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead". We're rummaging through each Hypothesis, and to each Hypothesis, we're saying, "OK. Fine. This is what this Hypothesis says". That doesn't mean we believe it; it just means we're taking it into equal consideration.

Now, having said that, let's go back to the chapter *Setting Aside the Jesus Narratives*. In that chapter, we saw that every full-blown Hypothesis, with all its "evidences" and "reasonings" (and so on), produces a particular Narrative. Most of the Narrative is about Jesus (as envisioned by the Hypothesist). It's here that we'll find who or what Jesus was, and where he lived, what he did and said, and so on—according to the various Hypothesists. But the portion of the Narrative that deals with Jesus himself ends, in every case, with Jesus' death.

Another thing we saw was that the resurrection claim was made *after* Jesus' death—in what I called the Epilogue. It's in the Epilogue—the "dark time" after Jesus is dead—that something happens to, or is experienced by, those who would become the original resurrection claimants, and which served as a stimulus for the thought that "Jesus is alive" (in some respect).

So right now, we're looking intently and exclusively at the situation that exists in every one of the Epilogues. Whether Jesus had once existed as a known human being, or, simply as a thought in the minds of some small group of people—a Mythological Being or Folklore Character—he has, at this point in the story, exited the tale. Jesus' death was the end of the existence of a living being named "Jesus"—whether real or imagined. It's the fact of Jesus' death, and the permanence of that death, that gives any significance to his resurrection.

Without this finality, there is no resurrection claim worth making. So whether we're talking about a Known Jesus or an Other Jesus, we begin at the same place: There is no Jesus here. There was one, once. Not anymore. He is dead. He is gone. And yet, right here—at this absence—something happened. Something stirred in the original resurrection claimants, putting the

thought in their minds that led to the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. And that’s what our inquiry is truly about. This is where we begin.

Which means we begin not with Jesus, but with the claimants.

To briefly recap (drawing on the chapter *The Lay of the Land*), the Hypothesisists tell us that the earliest resurrection claimants understood Jesus in one of two ways. He was either the historical Known Jesus or the imagined Other Jesus. And they understood “raised from the dead” to mean either a “literal”, physical, bodily resurrection, or something spiritual, or metaphoric, or symbolic. And lastly, the Hypothesisists propose that some sort of phenomenon planted the idea of “Jesus alive again” in their minds. Here, the menu of options is long: hallucinations, cognitive dissonance, vivid dreams, inner impressions mistaken for revelations, encounters with a Jesus-lookalike, or even seeing with ordinary eyesight a Jesus bodily raised from the dead (to name a few).

That phenomenon—whichever it was—served as a stimulus that triggered a thought, and the original resurrection claimants expressed that thought as an “assertion that something is the case” (or, in other words, as a claim). The thought was simple: “Jesus is alive again (in some sense)”. And that thought took shape as a claim that the deceased Jesus was “raised from the dead”. This, as we saw in the chapter *The Anatomy of a Claim*, is how claims come into being.

So now we can put the pieces together: the various possible stimuli, the various interpretations of “raised from the dead”, and the two figures—Known Jesus and Other Jesus.

We’ll start with the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, using it as an example. This Hypothesis asserts a Known Jesus who died by crucifixion. After a short time, some of Jesus’ followers—contemporaries who knew him—began to claim that he’d been raised from the dead because they’d witnessed, via ordinary eyesight, an objectively real, living-again Jesus, recognizing the risen Jesus as being the same Jesus they’d known before his death.

So, we see the Claim Formation Paradigm as we discussed in *The Anatomy of a Claim*. First, there is some kind of stimulus (which can be external, internal, or illusory) which triggers a thought (like, “wow, that’s Paul McCartney, right here in the truckstop”), which then might be expressed, to others, as an assertion of “something that is the case”—a claim, like “I saw Beatle Paul at the Chugwater truckstop”.

In the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, some of Jesus’ followers experienced an external stimulus: an objectively real, living-again Jesus, which was witnessed with the ordinary faculties of eyesight, and who they recognized as being the Jesus they’d known in his lifetime. This experience triggered a thought like “Jesus is alive again”, and which could be expressed to others as a claim: “Jesus was raised from the dead”—an assertion that “*something is the case*”.

However, the Traditional Christian Hypothesis is in a category of its own. It’s the only Hypothesis in which the stimulus for the thought that became a claim was *external*. According to this Hypothesis, people really did see an objectively existing, living-again Jesus via their ordinary sense of eyesight, in the physical world. It wasn’t a matter of “misinterpreting something as a ‘sign’” or making a misidentification. It was the external nature of the stimulus—a “risen Jesus” whom they recognized, just as you or I might see a friend and recognize her as the same person

we've known all along—that makes the Traditional Christian Hypothesis unique among the options we're considering.

Of course, before telling anyone else that “Jesus was raised from the dead”, there had to be a decision made: “Is it really worth it to me to say this to somebody else?” But, according to the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, the answer to that question must have been “yes”.

Having seen how the Claim Formation Paradigm process operates in the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, and what makes it distinctive, we can now examine how this same process unfolds across the other Hypotheses—whether they posit a Known Jesus or an Other Jesus. Each offers a version of what triggered the claim, and by stepping through them, we can see both the differences and the underlying common logic.

Let's continue with the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses. These Hypotheses assert a Known Jesus, and they likewise assert that the very earliest resurrection claimants did indeed claim an historical, bodily resurrection—but those claimants were wrong. In an Ersatz Bodily Resurrection, the stimulus for the thought that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead didn't come from actually witnessing, with the common eyesight, a bodily-raised-from-the-dead Jesus (because that bodily resurrection never happened). Rather, that stimulus came from something else entirely.

Perhaps it was an *internal* stimulus—an emotional overload, or an hallucination (perhaps a bereavement hallucination), a vivid dream, the workings of cognitive dissonance, or even a kind of “religious ecstasy” that arose from the desire to believe Jesus was still alive in some fashion. Or, perhaps it was an *illusory* stimulus—a misinterpreted happenstance, like a thunderclap, a shadow, or a stranger on a road. Perhaps even a “Jesus-look-alike”. These are things that exist externally and objectively, but when interpreted subjectively—internally—they could be taken as “signs” or “evidence” that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead. What we see, then, is that all of these stimuli are either *internal* (i.e., subjective) experiences or *illusory* experiences.

The “Modal Resurrection Hypotheses” likewise assert a Known Jesus who was known by contemporaries. But in this category of Hypotheses, the terms “resurrection” and “raised from the dead” don't refer to a “literal”, physical, bodily resurrection. Rather, those terms have been defined to refer to something that happened in the “spiritual realm” (or in “the heavens”, or in the “Eternal Ether”, etc), like Jesus' *spirit* being “raised up and exalted”. Or perhaps “raised from the dead” was only meant as a metaphor, or as something symbolic. But, again, the claim of resurrection began as a stimulus that triggered a thought, and this thought was expressed as a statement that “*something is the case*”.

The interesting thing is that in the Modal Resurrection Hypotheses, the stimuli that triggered the thought which became the resurrection claim are precisely the same kinds of things that serve as stimuli in the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses. They're either *internal* or *illusory* stimuli. The only difference is that instead of those stimuli triggering a thought about a “bodily-resurrected Jesus”, they trigger the thought of a Jesus who had been “raised from the dead—in a manner of speaking”.

Now, let's consider the Hypotheses which posit an imagined Other Jesus: Jesus Mythicism and Jesus Folklorism. In these Other-Jesus Hypotheses, Jesus exists only in the minds of whichever

individuals believe he did. All that can be said is that the resurrection claimants (in these cases) believed this Other Jesus existed “somewhere” and “at some time”, and somehow, they came to believe this Other Jesus had died, and later, had in some fashion been raised from the dead. (Of course, they couldn't know these things, because there was nothing objectively true about them to begin with).

As with all claims, the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” in each of the Other-Jesus Hypotheses begins with a stimulus which triggers a thought (i.e., “Jesus is alive in some sense”), which is then expressed as an assertion that “*something is the case*” (i.e., “Jesus was raised from the dead”).

But I want to draw our focus on this point: The only possible stimuli that could have led to the resurrection claim of an Other Jesus are a *subset* of precisely the same kinds of options we’ve already covered when discussing an historical, Known Jesus in the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection and Modal Resurrection Hypotheses—*internal* or *illusory*. (I say it's a subset because ideas such as a “Jesus lookalike” or a “Jesus twin” wouldn't apply, because nobody had ever seen the imagined Other Jesus in the first place, and thus nobody could have recognized him).

In short, in the Other-Jesus Hypotheses, the stimulus had to have been limited to things like hallucinations, dreams, thoughts that were believed to be “revelations” (and were really just imaginations), or even seeing something unusual or unexpected taken as a “sign” that the Other Jesus had been raised from the dead.

It’s right here that a question can be raised regarding the Other-Jesus Hypotheses: Does bringing in a non-existent Other Jesus give us anything new, anything extra, or of “value-add” that helps us in our current quest? If the phenomenon that “gave rise” to the resurrection claim of the Other Jesus is simply a subset of stimuli that serves that purpose regarding a Known Jesus (in the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection and Modal Resurrection Hypotheses), then the answer is a flat “no”.

This is profoundly important. As I've stressed before, in asking “What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead?”, we're not asking about Jesus, or whether he was indeed raised from the dead. We're asking about the people who made the claim. We're asking what phenomenon occurred that ultimately led to them making it. We can be assured they made that claim for some reason; there was going to be some stimulus that triggered that thought. So, we're asking about that stimulus. But, saying “an historical, Known Jesus never existed” doesn't tell us a thing about the stimulus that we don't already know.

An imagined Other Jesus might be an interesting character to consider, but for our purposes—hopefully being able to answer our Primary Question (“What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead?”)—dragging in an Other Jesus doesn't provide us with any new and worthwhile information whatsoever. All the kinds of stimuli that might lead someone to believe or proclaim a resurrection of an Other Jesus are already available to us in the Known-Jesus Hypotheses. Adding speculative versions of a Jesus who didn't exist doesn't change the “stimuli options”. It just changes the label on the file folder.

But it's more than that. The Other-Jesus Hypotheses (Jesus Mythicism and Jesus Folklorism) face an additional challenge: They have to explain how a non-existent Other Jesus became an historical, Known Jesus, because it's the Known Jesus who has persisted over the last 2000 years

or so. So when, why, and how did this “Other-Jesus story” become a story about an historical Jesus who lived in a particular place and time, had family, friends, and followers, was condemned by a specific High Priest, and was executed by a specific Roman governor? And how did the resurrection claim shift from being one about a non-existent Other Jesus to being a claim made by people who personally knew him?

Now, don't get me wrong: I'm not saying there couldn't have been a sufficient “when, why, and how” to explain the “morphing” of an imagined Other Jesus to an historical, Known Jesus. I'm just saying that's an added level of considerable explanation that has to be made and shown to be the “most probable option”. But this is an issue that simply doesn't apply to a claim about a Known Jesus. Those who assert a Known Jesus are saying “the claim was originally of a Known Jesus, and it's stayed that way for the last 2000 years”.

Things don't end there, though. The Mythicist and Folklorist have to perform increasingly elaborate workarounds to dismiss or neutralize early extra-biblical references to a Known Jesus that exist outside of and apart from Paul's letters. Two examples of such references commonly cited are found in the writings of the 1st-century Jewish historian Josephus and in the writings of the 2nd-century Roman historian Tacitus. Josephus, in his writings called “Antiquities of the Jews”, mentions Jesus, noting others called him “the Christ”, and that Jesus was “condemned to the cross” by Pontius Pilate. In another passage, he also mentions James, specifying him as “the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ”. Tacitus, writing in “Annals”, mentions that “Christus” (Christ) was executed by Pontius Pilate.

These references have to be explained away by the Other-Jesus Hypotheses. For the Known-Jesus Hypotheses, no such effort is needed; these references can be accepted on an “as is” basis. So, this too becomes yet another layer of things that need explaining (or explaining away) for the Other-Jesus Hypotheses.

However, again, I want to be careful here: I'm not saying there can't be an explanation—or even an explaining-away—that's worth considering when it comes to these mentions of Jesus by early historians. I'm simply pointing out that this is yet another added burden for those proposing an Other Jesus—one that doesn't apply to Known Jesus Hypotheses.

Now, let's bring in what we learned in the chapter *A World Without Christianity*, about Paul's Jesus: a human being with a mother, a Jew who had a brother personally known to Paul, and who died by crucifixion and was buried. And remember, in that chapter we noted that—without any Christianity to defend or disprove, and with neither Paul himself nor any pre-Pauline writings presenting us with a “Jesus” that was clearly a mythological or folklore figure—we have little reason to think Paul imagined anything other than a real person.

For the proponent of an imagined Other Jesus, Paul's letters create a challenge. They must somehow reinterpret—or explain away—the portrait of Jesus as a living man: a Jew in Roman Palestine, with family connections, publicly executed under the Roman authority of the time. By contrast, the proponent of a historical, Known Jesus need not strain at all; these details can be taken as they stand.

However, here again, I'd acknowledge that it's not that there *can't* be an explanation (or explaining-away) worth consideration. It's that having to do so with Paul's references is just one

more layer of explanation required of the Other Jesus proponent—and not necessary for the Known Jesus proponent.

But here we reach the biggest issue of all. If we were to begin with the presumption of an imagined Other Jesus—one who never actually existed—we would, from the outset, be ruling out all of the Known Jesus Hypotheses. We'd be labeling as "Unnecessary" the consideration of whether it was a real, historical person who was claimed to have been raised from the dead.

Let me explain. If we begin with the Other-Jesus Hypothesis—if we assume from the get-go that Jesus never existed and was only ever imagined—then we will always find a suitable explanation for the resurrection claim. *Always*. Because once we frame Jesus as an imaginary figure, the claim that he "was raised from the dead" can only be equally imaginary. And people find imaginary things said about imaginary characters entirely acceptable—as long as they stay in their imagined, "other-worldly" realm.

The resurrection of an imagined Other Jesus can be explained just like countless other claims about non-historical figures. In mythology, gods such as Dionysus or Osiris were said to live, die, and rise again, their stories shaped by ritual, dream, and imagination. In folklore, King Arthur became more than a warrior of old; he was said not merely to have lived, but would return in Britain's hour of need—"They said Arthur never truly died—only sleeps, waiting in Avalon, until the day Britain needs him most. Then he will ride out again". Whether by myth, folklore, or sheer invention, the extraordinary always finds a way to attach itself to characters whose lives are otherwise beyond our reach.

And the thing is, we "moderns" take this sort of thing in stride. Zombies in movies are "raised from the dead" by voodoo magic, and we don't bat an eye. Spock dies in one Star Trek film and is "raised from the dead" in the next, and nobody chokes on it. When Obi-Wan Kenobi is struck down by Darth Vader and then becomes "One with the Force"—a clear transformation from biological life to some kind of (presumably) "eternal life" (incidentally, leaving no corpse behind)—we cheer. Even when a "raised-from-the-dead" story is told about a real historical figure, we go along with it, as long as it stays in the realm of fiction or myth. In Seth Grahame-Smith's *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, Lincoln is assassinated just as history remembers—but then he's quietly "resurrected" by a vampire ally and goes on living as one of the undead.

The point is this: If we start with the premise that Jesus was imaginary, then internal or illusory stimuli will *always* be sufficient to explain the claim as long as the story remains in the realm of fiction or myth. And of course it has to, if Jesus was himself imaginary. In this Other-Jesus paradigm, we have to accept that even the original resurrection claimants were talking about something that, as far as they were concerned, happened either long ago, or far away, or both. Even they would have understood the whole thing about the Other Jesus to have been an abstract belief—an "accepting, as true" of a concept or idea that exists independently of physical objects or historical events. And in that "long-ago and far-away other place and time" that the Other Jesus "existed", it could be "true" that he was "raised from the dead"—*in that paradigm*. It's the same way we accept it as "true" that Spock or Obi-Wan were (in different manners) "raised from the dead". This is precisely the contention of the Other-Jesus Hypotheses. And, as such, they are guaranteed to provide an "acceptable" explanation for the resurrection claim—because it's always understood as a non-historical claim about a non-historical Jesus.

Thus, no one working within the Other-Jesus paradigm is ever going to reach the point where they exclaim, “None of these explanations for an imaginary resurrection of an imaginary Jesus seems to work. Perhaps we must consider a Known Jesus”. That moment never comes, because in a world of pure imagination, explanations answer only to imagination. They never collide with the hard edges of reality. With anything and everything said about an imaginary Jesus being speculative, the speculations can be made *ad infinitum*. As such, there is never a point at which it is necessary to consider the historical, Known Jesus at all; he’s been tacitly written out of the script before the story even begins. The question of whether a Known Jesus ever existed is dismissed before it’s even asked.

The Known Jesus option, by contrast, doesn’t prevent us from investigating the Other-Jesus option. Rather, it allows us to first ask whether people will make a resurrection claim about a real person that they and others knew personally. If we follow the Known Jesus line of inquiry and it leads nowhere—if we never find any missing bit of information, something overlooked, or discover some un-asked question—things that might lead us to a more decisive answer to our question of “What gave rise to the claim that a *Known* Jesus was raised from the dead”—then fine. We can step back and say, “That’s that. We gave it a fair hearing”. At that point, it makes perfect sense to consider that maybe there was never a Known Jesus at all. I’d say it was even quite natural to do so.

But if we reach that point, we’ll not have moved the needle one bit. We’d only have followed a convoluted bunny trail that circled back to the very beginning, ending up right alongside Hobbs of Hebron once again. But in following that circuitous path, we would have already asked all the questions, assuming Jesus to have been real, without ever finding a definitive explanation for what put the idea in the mind of that fellow in the marketplace to proclaim a real “Jesus was raised from the dead”. At that stage, we can only acknowledge that the Jesus Mythologist or Jesus Folklorist might be right; maybe this Jesus never lived at all—a name attached to a later myth, a symbol, a story.

Then there would be little left for us to pursue in this quest, except perhaps as a hobby. Or as an academic exercise—the kind of thing scholars do when tracing word etymologies or studying how one culture borrowed a god from another. And we could “toy” with ideas about an imagined Other Jesus ‘til Kingdom Come. After all, if the only conclusion we can reach is that there’s no definitive explanation for the claim that an historical, Known Jesus was raised from the dead, then any explanation for a fictitious Other Jesus might work just fine.

The Bottom Line: If we put together all the difficulties we’re presented with, should we begin with the Other-Jesus Hypotheses, those difficulties far outweigh any advantage of those Hypotheses. Or maybe it’s better to say they negate any possible advantage (and it’s unclear what the advantage is, anyway).

But, if we begin with the Known-Jesus Hypotheses, not only will we have all the possible explanations that apply to the Other-Jesus Hypotheses (i.e., hallucinations, cognitive dissonance, dreams, imaginations, “revelations”, etc), but we’ll also have considered the additional explanations for the resurrection of a Known Jesus. In short, if we begin with the Known Jesus, we’ll cover all the “stimulus options”. And, if we can’t find something that convinces that “the far-most-probable reason anybody thought a dead, Known Jesus was raised from the dead (in

whatever manner) was 'this or that stimulus', then the Other-Jesus Hypotheses suddenly look like valid options to consider.

That's why we'll proceed first with the Known Jesus. Not because we have incontrovertible evidence—there's no driver's license, birth certificate, or DNA analysis—but because nothing is lost in terms of explanatory range by working with him. By contrast, if we proceeded with the Other-Jesus Hypotheses, we'd be jettisoning two thousand years of the oft-repeated claim that a Known Jesus was raised from the dead, and 200-250 years of modern scholarship, only to conclude that "there was no 'real Jesus'"—and for what? To keep a reduced set—a partial list—of internal or illusory-stimulus explanations of how the resurrection claim arose, all pointing to a conclusion we already know—"people make up fictitious things about fictitious characters"? That's not much of a trade.

The Conundrum

*“You keep on using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means”
—Inigo Montoya, a character in “The Princess Bride” by William Goldman*

We Simple Unknowings have decided—on something of a procedural basis—to first work with the historical, Known Jesus. But now, we need to figure out, if possible, what was meant by “raised from the dead”. This second step—wading through the thicket of ideas about what “raised from the dead” was supposed to mean—is a daunting task. But this is what lies before us.

Back in the chapter *Believing and Knowing*, I noted that “We’ll certainly never figure out what gave rise to the claim until we’ve figured out what was being claimed in the first place”. A claim of “I saw a bat” might be made because the claimant saw a flying mammal, or because they saw a piece of sports equipment. It’s ambiguous. And, according to our Hypothesisists, so is the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”.

But we’ve already got the picture. In *The Lay of the Land*, we sorted through the many understandings of the phrase. And of course, each is tied to one category or another of Hypotheses. But, since we’ve set aside the non-existent Other-Jesus Hypotheses for the time being, and are proceeding with the historical, Known Jesus, we’re left with only three categories: the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses, and the Modal Resurrection Hypotheses.

And these three agree on some important points:

- There really was an historical Jesus who taught about the Kingdom of God.
- Jesus had family, friends, and followers.
- Jesus was eventually crucified, and died.
- Jesus was, shortly after, said (by some) to have been “raised from the dead”.

Just Jesus: Having set aside the imagined “Other Jesus” of Mythicism or Folklorism, we’ll refer to the “Known Jesus” simply as “Jesus” until/unless further notified.

What it really boils down to is this: After his death, Jesus was said to have been (pick an option)—

1. **Literally, bodily raised from the dead**, in a resurrection process that resulted in a whole person (body+*spirit*) who would live eternally. As such, there would be no corpse left in its final resting place. And the resultant objectively real, observable, living-again Jesus was witnessed by the original claimants with ordinary eyesight. Or,

2. **Literally, bodily raised from the dead, except—it didn't really happen.** The claim was of a bodily resurrection, just as in Option 1, but it was a mistake. In these versions, Jesus died and his corpse remained in the grave (unbeknownst to the claimants). The “sightings” of the “risen Jesus” arose from *internal* or *illusory* stimulus: perhaps an hallucination (thought to be either a vision or even “the real thing”), a dream, or a “Jesus lookalike”—and the list doesn't end there. Or,
3. **Raised from the dead in some other sense.** Here, the phrase may have referred to something happening in the ‘spiritual realm’ or perhaps it simply served as a metaphor or symbol of something else. In these types of “resurrections”, the stimulus was either internal or illusory, but never an objective, external one.

At the bottom, the phrase “raised from the dead” is problematic. If it meant an historical bodily resurrection, then the claim was either true or false. Bring in the Modal Resurrection Hypotheses, and we have numerous, and quite different, meanings, none of which can ever be considered “objectively true” (and can never be falsified).

Of course, we Simple Unknowings have learned there's no point in dragging in all the detailed explanations made by the various Hypothesists in their Narratives. Each one would, of course, present their “evidence” (or opinions) as to why their version of “resurrection” is the right one. And we'd be wading through all of it, knowing beforehand that there's no agreement either among scholars or the “general public” about which Hypothesis is the right one. So, it would be pointless for us to decide which Hypothesist has it right. After all, how would we know? All we Simple Unknowings could do would be to make that decision based on some preference, but *we don't have one*. We're “true agnostics”. Some might call us “clueless”. I'd say, “we're learning”.

Besides, it's the Hypothesists themselves who have failed to persuade everyone that “raised from the dead” meant one thing or the other. What they've managed to do is bring us to this desolate landscape where Hypotheses go to die. But that's where we find ourselves nonetheless.

We Simple Unknowings can only acknowledge the issue. But at the bottom, we're going to have to figure out a way to deal with the multiplicity of ideas about what four words—“raised from the dead”—meant.

So, let's clear the boards. Sometimes, the best way forward is to go back to the beginning. Of course, I don't mean the beginning of the universe—or even the beginning of this book. And I certainly don't mean going back to the beginning of every Hypothesis. What I mean is returning to the closest point we can reach to the origin of the claim itself. And that would be the letters of Paul.

More specifically, I would suggest it's found in the first few verses of 1 Corinthians 15—a chapter in one of Paul's letters that every serious Hypothesist has to deal with in one way or another. The chapter begins like this:

“Now I make known to you, brothers and sisters, the gospel which I preached to you, which you also received” (vs 1). It continues (in v3), saying “For I *handed down to you* as of first importance *what I also received*, that Christ died ... and that He was buried ... and that He was raised on the third day ... and that He was seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve”.

Verses above, edited: I've edited the verses above for the sake of brevity. My intent for now is to comment on Paul's approach in *presenting* some information, not on the information itself. Therefore, I'm just using the core elements of this gospel at this time.

Now, before taking another step, there are a few things I need to comment on.

As we saw in *A World Without Christianity*, when Paul says “Christ”, he's referring to Jesus. Even in this same chapter (1 Corinthians 15), Paul refers to Jesus as “Jesus Christ” and “Christ Jesus” (15:57, 15:31). One needs to understand that “Jesus” is a person's name, and “Christ” (or “Messiah”, in Hebrew) is a title. And, Paul regarded Jesus as the Messiah. So while “Jesus” and “Messiah” aren't synonymous, they are indeed both pointing to the same person.

Another thing to note is that when Paul says “Christ... was raised” (1 Corinthians 15:3), he's using “raised” as a shorthand for “raised from the dead”. In this same chapter, we can also find the “longhand” version (1 Corinthians 15:12, 15:20). Both versions are common in Paul's letters.

Lastly, we need to pause on that word “*received*”, as in “the gospel which I preached to you, which you also *received*” (1 Corinthians 15:1). In this chapter, it's going to prove crucial. In Greek, the word is *paralambano*—literally, “to take with oneself”. It implies an active “*taking ownership of*”. This differs from the way we often use “receive” in English. We “receive” junk email every day and delete it without a second thought. We “receive” a video on social media that's of no interest and scroll past. But *paralambano* suggests something quite different—something handed or spoken that one takes up, accepts as their own, and carries forward.

That's important, because when Paul says the Corinthians “received” the gospel, he's describing something beyond mere hearing. After all, he's already said he preached it to them, which means they heard it. But then he adds, “which you *also* received”, as if to say there was a second step involved. They didn't just *hear* his message; they *took it with themselves*. They accepted it as something now their own. That's what *paralambano* expresses. In short, to “receive” the gospel in Paul's sense isn't simply to hear it; it's to make it *theirs*.

Paul says this gospel is of *first importance*. But does that tell us it's what the earliest church was preaching? I mean, Paul is writing this letter in the early-to-mid 50s CE, but Jesus had to have been crucified some 20 years earlier (give or take), because the earliest church was in existence in the early to mid-30s CE. So, how do we know that the earliest church was actually preaching this same thing? What if this was just something Paul had conjured up on his own? What if Paul had his own idea about what happened to Jesus—some idea that nobody else had?

All good questions. We'll delve into what Paul says about his gospel, but first, we'll need a little background. This information is "historical", but I want to keep it brief. To this end, I won't be providing references in this chapter. This may make it appear that I'm simply "assuming" things. But, I'm not. I provide supporting information in *Appendix A* (see the note immediately below). But, basically, the majority of what I present in this "background" is non-controversial. For the few parts that are, I'll note the controversy.

Paul's Timeline: For a more closer chronological presentation of Paul's history, derived from only Paul's letters and from non-biblical sources, I'd encourage you to read the entry in *Appendix A* titled "Paul's Timeline".

So let's begin.

Paul wasn't "born a Christian". He was born a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, and belonged to the sect of the Pharisees. It was during his lifetime that Jesus appeared—teaching, preaching, and eventually being crucified. Afterward, the "church" (in Greek, the *ekklesia*, meaning "the gathering, or the community") formed, and within just a few years—probably one to three—Paul himself became a Believer in the risen Christ.

Incidentally: In the earliest days of the church, those who believed in the "risen Christ" were not called "Christians". That term was a later development. But, going forward, I'm going to use the term "Christians" or "Believers" rather than "believers in the risen Christ".

Before that, though, Paul had been opposed to the church. He'd been a persecutor of the group, which, at that time, existed as a movement within Judaism. The church was rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, centered on the synagogue, and was composed overwhelmingly of Jews (though not exclusively). By the time of Paul's persecution, a small number of Gentiles had begun to associate with the movement. Some of them were "God-fearers", some were full Jewish proselytes, and some were neither. Over time, the church's composition would gradually diversify, becoming largely Gentile. But during the critical period of Paul's persecution, Jews almost certainly remained the large majority, and the "Jesus movement" was still viewed largely as a disruptive sect within Judaism.

Unfortunately, Paul doesn't tell us much about the persecution of the church. He doesn't say what other Jews were participating in it, and he doesn't say who authorized him to be a Jewish "persecutor" of other Jews (those in the church). But he does say that he was "persecuting the church of God beyond measure and trying to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13). And the "church of God" was made up of people who held particular beliefs about Jesus.

Paul's sparse mention of this persecution brings up two questions, quite naturally.

1. How did Paul identify those he was to persecute?

If Jewish Christians and “regular” Jews (as it were) were intermingling at the Synagogues, how would you tell them apart? It’s not as if Christians of that time could be spotted by the leather-bound New Testaments they carried or by gold crosses worn around their necks.

2. And what, exactly, was he persecuting them for?

The answer to the first question is straightforward: the only way Paul could have identified the Christians was by what they believed—and proclaimed—about Jesus.

Some might object to this conclusion. For example, some modern commentators opine that the earliest followers of Jesus set themselves apart by neglecting Jewish dietary laws. It was this breach that made them recognizable. But this contention is highly debatable. Someone eating something they shouldn’t eat is hardly a reliable means of identifying them specifically as a *Christian*. After all, one didn’t need to hold any particular beliefs about Jesus to disregard the dietary laws. A Jew who ignored those laws—indeed, any of the laws—would simply be considered a sinner or a lawbreaker, not necessarily a Christian. Ultimately, Paul’s *identification* of these “dietary lawbreakers” (if that was indeed the case) as “Christians” had to have been made based on what they believed and professed about Jesus. Otherwise, they were simply non-compliant Jews.

But Paul himself gives us an important clue that the identification of Christians had to do with what they professed about Jesus. Paul tells us that after he became a Christian, others remarked about him, saying, “he who once persecuted us is now preaching *the faith* he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:23). Paul had been persecuting people identifiable by a particular *faith*—a set of convictions about Jesus that distinguished them from other Jews. Thus, the “faith he tried to destroy” wasn’t merely the community that held it. It was also the unique message around which that community had coalesced. To have recognized and opposed those Believers, Paul must have known the content of their proclamation. It was that distinctive belief about Jesus that set them apart as Christians.

But this is almost a trivial point. We do the same thing today when we identify people by what they believe. A Flat Earther is known by what he or she says about the shape of the Earth. A Moon-landing skeptic is defined by what he or she claims about Apollo 11. Yet they, along with everyone else, both believe the Earth and the Space Program are real—they simply hold distinctive views about them. To recognize either group, you have to know the *particular claim* that sets them apart. It was no different for Paul: many could easily have believed there had been a Jew named Jesus, and even that Jesus had been crucified. But the claim that he had been *raised from the dead* was what marked the Christians out from everyone else.

The Term “the Faith”: For a more in-depth explanation of the term ‘the faith’ as Paul uses it in this context, see the entry titled “Faith, The—Galatians 1:23” in *Appendix A*.

And that, in turn, points toward the answer to the second question—*exactly what was Paul trying to destroy this 'faith' for?*

Paul never actually spells it out. He doesn't say, "I went after them because they claimed 'Jesus is Lord' or 'Jesus is the Messiah'". He doesn't mention dietary violations or any other specific offense. The only clue he gives us is the same clue he gives regarding how he identified those whom he intended to persecute: "He who once persecuted us is now preaching *the faith* he once tried to destroy" (Galatians 1:23).

That "faith" may well have been expressed in short confessional statements like "Jesus is Lord" or "Jesus is the Messiah". But those sayings would be meaningless unless the message Paul later called "of *first importance*" had already been accepted by the church as *true*. That message: Christ died, was buried, was raised, and was seen by Cephas and the Twelve. If Jesus had not been "raised", thus still "alive" in (at least) *some* fashion, there would've been no reason for the church to say of him, in the present tense, "Jesus *is* the Messiah". They'd have said, "Jesus *was* the Messiah". And there would be no reason at all for them to have said "Jesus is Lord", because as we saw in the 2nd chapter, *Heading Out the Door*, even Paul himself ties that directly to Jesus' resurrection (Romans 14:9).

So the picture that emerges is fairly simple: If it wasn't first believed that Christ had been raised, there wouldn't have been any proclamations of "Jesus is Lord" or "Jesus is the Messiah" for Paul to oppose.

Through a strange plot twist, "*Paul the Persecutor*" eventually came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. He became one who proclaimed Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Unfortunately, though, Paul never offers a detailed account of what happened that prompted that change. But it wasn't simply that he'd *heard* the basic "gospel message". Clearly, when he was trying to "destroy [that] faith", he'd already *heard* it, but he didn't "*receive*" it—didn't "*take it as his own*".

I suppose we all know what it is to *hear* something, yet not *receive* it (in the *paralambano* sense). A doctor can tell me "you've got cancer", but I may need a second (or a third) opinion before I'll accept I've got the disease.

So to *receive* something may require something else beyond merely hearing it. In Paul's case, he'd heard the gospel. It's how he identified those whom he persecuted. But obviously, he hadn't *received* the gospel—"taken it for his own" (that Greek word *paralambano* again). This receiving happened only *after* he'd experienced a "revealing" of Christ (Galatians 1:12). (See note below). He also claims in two of his letters to have *seen* the risen Christ, and we'll have to explore whether this "seeing" was the same as the Galatians "revealing" experience. But in any case, while he lets us know these things happened, he doesn't say where, when, or how.

Revealing Revelations: In most English translations of Galatians, it appears that Paul wrote of having a "*revelation of Jesus Christ*" or even "*a revelation from Jesus Christ*". But, I'm using the term "*a revealing of*", because I think it most accurately depicts what

the original Greek language conveyed. I'd encourage you to read the *Appendix A* entry titled "Apokalypsis" for further information.

Paul reports that a few years after this transformative change, he went to Jerusalem and stayed with Cephas (Peter) for 15 days. And incidentally, it was during this visitation that he also met "James, the Lord's brother".

After Paul's visit with Cephas ended, Paul went on with his life, preaching the gospel in various places. But he notes that fourteen years after his first visit with Cephas, he returned to Jerusalem to visit the "Pillars" of the church—Cephas, James, and John. He says he shared the gospel he was preaching with them, to ensure that he "had not run in vain". In other words, he wanted to make certain that what he was preaching was consistent with what they also were preaching. And, the Pillars confirmed it was. Paul was saying the same thing they'd been saying.

This background brings us to 1 Corinthians 15. Corinth was one of the churches Paul himself had taught. And in this letter—written after he'd conferred with the "Pillars"—he reminds the Corinthian church of the gospel they'd already received (or "taken with themselves"): "Now I make known to you ... the gospel which I *preached* to you, which you also received" (1 Corinthians 15:1). Paul isn't introducing a new idea. Rather, he's repeating the same gospel he himself had received and had already preached in person to the Corinthians. This is the same gospel that Cephas, James, and John had also affirmed as being what they'd preached decades earlier. This gospel—"Christ died ... was buried, was raised ... and was seen by Cephas and The Twelve"—isn't a new formulation but traditional material. It's an early confession handed down within the movement itself, which Paul had received and was now passing on to others.

But, there's something quite striking that I want you to notice in 1 Corinthians 15;1-5: Paul doesn't just remind the Corinthians that he once shared the "Creed" with them; he reaffirms that message by repeating its very content—this time, *in writing*.

It's almost as if Paul couldn't quite repeat the gospel enough.

And that brings us to something of tremendous importance: Paul's repetition of this "gospel in a nutshell" follows a definite pattern. He uses the terms "*receiving*" and "*handing down*"—language drawn from the well-established practice of formal oral transmission by which teachings and traditions were preserved and passed along in both Jewish and Greek cultures.

In both cultures, to say "I have received this teaching and now hand it on to you" was to claim one's place in a recognized chain of transmission. Paul was part of a line of teachers and hearers committed to the continuity and reliability of the teaching, ensuring that the teaching has been preserved accurately and is now being passed on with the same fidelity. This deliberate act highlights the speaker's role in upholding the integrity of the tradition, whether it be religious, philosophical, or legal. And it affirms that the content they are delivering isn't of their own invention but part of a well-established body of knowledge that originated from trusted sources.

This process was far removed from the idea of a “telephone game”, where each retelling mangles the message a little more. The whole purpose of the “received and handed down” tradition was to keep the message intact, not let it drift. It was a practice in ancient Jewish rabbinic culture and in Greek culture which arose out of necessity: In an age without printing presses and with only limited literacy, important dictates—whether legal, religious, or otherwise—had to be transmitted in this way. It was, in both worlds, a mark of fidelity and integrity.

Thus, in using this formal method, Paul presents himself as a faithful transmitter of the message he declares “of *first importance*”. He isn’t its innovator but its recipient. His “handing down” represents a deliberate effort to preserve the form of the gospel itself. The statement “Christ died..., was buried..., was raised..., and was seen...” is not only theological—it is formulaic. And Paul fully expects it to be remembered, repeated, and preserved *in just this way*.

Received, Handed Down: For scholarly references supporting the “receiving and handing down” methodology, see the *Appendix A* entry titled “Received and Handed Down”.

And it has been. We even have it in writing.

But that very continuity makes what follows all the more puzzling.

The Traditional Christian and the Ersatz Bodily Resurrectionist both agree that the resurrection claim was of an historical, Bodily Resurrection. The difference is that the Traditional Christian believes it actually happened, but the Ersatz Bodily Resurrectionist doesn't. Either way, the claim itself was the same.

The Modal Resurrectionists argue that somewhere along the way, the meaning of “raised” (or “raised from the dead”) veered off course. Originally, they say, it referred to something that happened spiritually, or perhaps it was meant metaphorically or symbolically (depending on which Hypothesist you're reading). Over time, however, it was misunderstood, and the phrase came to refer instead to a literal, historical, bodily resurrection—the form of the story we now find in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. Of course, we've known that since *The Lay of the Land*. And we Simple Unknowings have to at least allow that the Modal Resurrectionists might be right: Such detours in meaning aren't unheard of.

Some phrases behave themselves admirably. “*Status quo*”, for instance, has meant precisely the same thing since Cicero began to make an art form of the Latin language: *the existing state of things*. You can drop it in a Roman edict or a 21st-century op-ed, and everyone will understand it. It's steady, dull, and perfectly reliable.

But others are troublemakers. Some phrases put on a fresh suit and pretend to be respectable while living an entirely different life. Take “making love”. Once upon a time, it meant polite conversation, a bit of wooing, a compliment or two—something your grandmother could safely

overhear. Today, it means something that would make her leave the room. The words stayed the same; the meaning eloped.

“Sure”, we might agree, “but this is the baffling part. How on earth did Paul and the early church go to such painstaking effort to preserve the wording of the gospel—‘Christ died..., was buried..., was raised..., and was seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve’, yet fail to keep the *meaning* of ‘raised’ itself intact? Wasn’t that meaning ‘*of first importance*’ (for goodness sake)”?

That's The Conundrum.

As it happens, Paul spends the rest of 1 Corinthians 15 explaining exactly what he means by “raised from the dead”. He offers illustrations, analogies, and clarifications—all aimed at preserving not only the wording of the gospel, but its meaning. And for we Simple Unknowings, that is a most welcome thing, because nothing we have covered so far gives us any clear indication of what Paul—or the early church—meant by “raised from the dead”.

And so, the next step in the quest of the Simple Unknowings is simply to follow him there. But, if history is any guide, we may find that Paul’s words have already been conscripted by nearly every Hypothesist we’ve met.

One Phrase, Many Meanings

“The meanings of words are not in the words; they are in us”
—S. I. Hayakawa

Let’s reconsider our dear Hobbs of Hebron (whom we encountered in *Heading Out the Door*). Hobbs heard, in the marketplace, an elocutionist claiming “Jesus was raised from the dead”. He had no idea what it meant. But there was another fellow there, shopping for souvenirs—Jacques from the south of France. He’d heard it as well and likewise didn’t understand it. They both heard the claim spoken in Aramaic. And Hobbs spoke Aramaic, but Jacques didn’t. But it didn’t matter. Neither of them understood what the speaker was talking about.

That’s because the sentence “Jesus was raised from the dead”, in itself, is meaningless.

I know. That statement is a bit jarring. But in truth, all our sentences are that way. The words we say or write are just phonic or visual representations—symbols we use to signify something we’re trying to communicate to someone else. But this only works if the “hearer” or “reader” understands those symbols in the same way we do. I can make perfectly good “English-language” noises (or “words”) to someone who only speaks Swahili, and I won’t be understood. To that person, the sounds I’m making are just gibberish. Yet even two people speaking the same language can miss each other entirely—especially if they’re from different regions. Take, for example, the sentence “Last night I was really pissed”. An American might take that to mean “angry”. A Brit would assume it meant “drunk”.

A Bit of Humor: As George Bernard Shaw once said, “America and Britain are two cultures separated by a common language”.

What I’m getting at is this: Without some common understanding, a word can mean whatever anyone likes. And that’s exactly how words sometimes stop meaning anything at all. You can find plenty of examples in Old English. Take *yclept*, for instance—it used to mean “called” or “named”. But try to use it nowadays, and hardly anyone would have the faintest idea what you’re talking about.

When the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” began to proliferate in the early 1st century, it was first repeated among Aramaic-speaking people who knew who Jesus was. By the time Paul was writing his letters, things had changed. The message had spread to Greek-speaking cultures, among people who had no idea of who Jesus was. And they were hearing a claim in Greek, translated from Aramaic. Even if it had a “set meaning” in Aramaic, it could (potentially) have gotten “lost in translation” altogether.

Avoiding a bunny trail: Most Judean Jews were fully bi-lingual, speaking both Hebrew and Aramaic. However, it seems likely that Galilean Jews largely spoke only Aramaic. (Scholars are divided on this). The reason I said earlier that the gospel first proliferated

among Aramaic-speaking people is that I recognize that there were Jews who spoke only Aramaic, and those who spoke both Hebrew and Aramaic. In short, in Judea and Galilee, they were all Aramaic speakers, but some also spoke Hebrew.

So, when the claim began to spread cross-culturally, some explaining would have to go with it. Greek-culture “hearers” of this claim would have to know two things: Who this “Jesus” was, and what was meant by “raised from the dead”.

But the issue becomes far more complex if the original resurrection *claimants* didn't all have the same understanding, in their *own* language, of the claim being made. And, as some Hypothesisists would have it, that's the way it was. There was no set meaning to “raised from the dead”.

In the previous chapter, I referred to 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 as the “gospel in a nutshell”. As we move ahead, I’ll sometimes refer to this passage as the “Corinthian Creed”—not because it necessarily originated in Corinth, nor because it was first formulated in this letter, but simply because this is where we first encounter it in Paul’s writings.

Now, in that earlier chapter, I relied on an abbreviated form of the Corinthian Creed. But here, we’ll need to use the whole thing:

“For I handed down to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then The Twelve”.

To See or Not to See: In some Bible translations, 1 Corinthians 15:5 says the risen Christ “was *seen by*”, others say he “*appeared to*”. In *Appendix A* I’ve provided an entry titled “*Ophthe*” (the Greek word used in this passage) to discuss the translation issues, and to explain why I’ve used “seen”, and not “appeared”.

This is the only place in Paul's writings where we get information about the *series of events* relating to Jesus' death and resurrection. Some say Paul, in this passage, is reciting an early church Creed which was already in use by the early church Paul persecuted. But others disagree, saying this formalized Creed was a later development. But, either way, the *core elements* of the Creed—that Christ died, was buried, was raised, and was seen—had to have been in circulation at the time Paul was persecuting the church (as we discussed in the previous chapter).

Paul then adds in verses 6–8: “(6) After that he was seen by more than five hundred at once... (7) then by James... then by all the apostles... (8) and last of all... by me also”.

Some believe vs 6 and 7 were part of the original Creed, but most don't. But, either way, Paul is giving us a sequence in vs 3–8. The risen Christ was seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve, and *after that* (in vs 6–8), by the 500, then by James, then lastly, by Paul himself.

For our purposes, I'm going to proceed as if the Creed included only verses 3–5. This is because the Creed had to have contained at least those verses for the sentence structure to have made

any sense at all. And nothing else I'll be presenting in this chapter about the Creed requires more than that baseline.

In any case, whether the formalized Creed itself was an early or later development is irrelevant. The Creed simply puts the core elements into a form that is easy to remember. And those core elements would certainly have been elements of “the faith” already declared by the church Paul persecuted.

If we were to write out that Creed in the form it may have been recited among Christians, it might have looked like this:

*Christ died for our sins
according to the scriptures
and was buried
and was raised on the third day
according to the scriptures
and was seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve*

Avoiding a Bunny Trail: The meaning of “according to the Scriptures” is debated. In the Old Testament (which Paul would have considered as scripture), it’s never plainly stated that the Messiah would die and rise again on the third day. So, some say Paul was referring to a variety of scriptures as “proof texts”, others say he was referring to the entire story of Israel and its sacrificial system as pointing toward Christ. But however he meant it, it shows that, in Paul’s mind, the whole thing somehow fit within “the Scriptures”, even if the exact fit is anybody’s guess.

Now, when modern people read these verses, they bring with them their own suppositions and understandings, based on their own background knowledge and worldview. We all do that with virtually anything we read. An American reading “Bob came from Lancaster” might think “Lancaster, Pennsylvania”, but someone from England might think “Lancaster, Lancashire County”.

But let’s say “raised from the dead” was purposefully ambiguous and meant to be open to interpretation. A 1st-century Greek Platonist then reads Paul’s statement that “Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again” (Romans 6:9). The Platonist might never imagine that a *bodily* resurrection had occurred. He might be more likely to think that this “Christ” person was like an ancient Greek hero who had died, his “soul” raised to Olympus, becoming more powerful in death than in life.

If the resurrection claim was indeed meant to be interpreted any way an individual chose, then the Platonist's idea is totally acceptable. Just as would be Yogananda's understanding—a Spiritual Resurrection—as we saw back in *Believing and Knowing*. And so would be every expression of “what resurrection means to me” which was ever conjured up by the Interpretive Resurrectionists.

We see this same kind of thing happen in modern cultures—and, in modern churches—albeit for different reasons. If the “traditional” idea of an historical, bodily resurrection is unacceptable, then it’s tempting (for some) to attempt to interpret the phrase to match whatever they think is “sensible”.

The Traditional Christian—who will invariably be a Theist who believes in a miracle-working God—will, of course, agree with the “traditional” idea of an historical, bodily resurrection, resulting in an Empty Tomb. They’ll assert that “the Corinthian Creed means what it appears to mean in a plain reading:

- Jesus died (bodily, of course),
- was buried (bodily, of course),
- was raised (bodily)
- and was seen (bodily)—as with the ordinary faculties of eyesight.

Of course, this means that the Christ who “died and was buried” was the same Christ who was “raised and seen”. And the reference to Jesus' resurrection “on the third day” indicates that the “rising up” happened on the third chronological day after Jesus' death.

The Ersatz Bodily Resurrectionists would agree that the earliest resurrection claimants *believed* these things. They just don't agree that the “rising” or “seeing” really happened as the Traditional Christian says. And because of that, the Traditional Christian's view simply isn't true.

Modal Resurrectionists are not at all consistent in interpreting “raised from the dead”. But then, they're not a cohesive group centered around any one theological concept. Some are Theists (believing God can do miracles, but just didn't do that particular miracle). But some are Deists or Pantheists—beliefs that allow for a God (albeit with differing characteristics), but not one who does miracles. And some are Atheists. At the bottom, what we see is that not all Modal Resurrectionists reject miracles altogether, but they universally reject the miracle of Jesus having been historically, bodily raised from the dead.

In both Spiritual Resurrection and its stepchild, Two-Body Resurrection, the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” means Jesus' *spirit* (or soul, consciousness, essence, katra, or whatever “survivable component” humans are supposed to have) was the “thing raised”. For them, then, the Creed *must* mean—

- Jesus died (bodily)
- was buried (bodily)
- was raised (spiritually)
- and was seen (metaphorically)—such as in visions, divine revelations, and divinely-induced dreams. (The Skeptic might substitute “hallucinations”, “imagination”, and “ordinary dreams”).

Interpretive Resurrectionists would have views which don't imply anything at all about Jesus (either his “person” or his *spirit*) being “the thing raised”. Rather, “raised from the dead” is more akin to a literary idea: a metaphor for something else, or a statement that is symbolic in some respect. So, to them, it looks like this:

- Jesus died (bodily),
- was buried (bodily),
- was raised (meant metaphorically, symbolically, or ideologically),
- and was seen (metaphorically).

As we've seen, the Modal Resurrectionists might have different, nuanced views on the specifics of whom or what had been resurrected, and in what manner. But they seem to all agree on one thing: the line from the Corinthian Creed that says Christ “was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures” should be “flipped”. It should be understood as “*according to the Scriptures*, Christ was raised on the third day”. That is, it's from the Hebrew Scriptures that we learn when the resurrection happened. But in this view, the “third day” isn't chronological, but eschatological.

Chronological / Eschatological: A chronological view of “on the third day” means that the resurrection happened on the third “calendar day” after the crucifixion. An eschatological view simply asserts that the “Spiritual Resurrection” (in this context) happened *when someone first realized* it, and at that point, it began a brand-new epoch that redirects human history toward a more just and equitable world.

And, likewise, they'd all agree that “Christ died and was buried” simply signifies that Jesus had a natural life which came to an end. What was “raised and seen” are things separate from what “died and was buried”, and have to do with something that happened in the realm of the afterlife, or even in the realm of imagination. But not in the “here and now”.

So, you can see what's going on here: The various types of Resurrectionists are imposing upon the Corinthian Creed their own meaning of “raised” (and of other parts of the Creed). And, they're doing so *according to a belief they already hold*. So whatever that prior belief is, it will determine what “raised” or “raised from the dead” must mean. And that underlying belief—whether “God does (or doesn't) do miracles”, or “there is a God but no afterlife”, or “there is no God”—may be something a person simply picks up along the way. Maybe it's learned from parents. Or maybe from teachers, friends, cultural currents, memes, or videos that scroll past on social media (and so on).

We Simple Unknowings, though, haven't done any such “picking up” of underlying beliefs. We're true agnostics. But, we certainly can't go by what our Hypothesisists say, either. I mean, if we were to choose what “raised from the dead” meant, as per one Hypothesisist or another, we'd be unwittingly committing ourselves to some *a priori* determination of “how the whole of the

Cosmos has worked for all eternity”. And we can't do that without abandoning our status as the Fellowship of Simple Unknowings.

This creates an obvious problem for us. It's quite clear that there was an original “somebody” (or “somebodies”) back in the 1st century who claimed, “Jesus was raised from the dead”. And whoever that individual (or small-ish group) was, they meant *something* by that claim. The problem is that we Simple Unknowings don't know what it was. And, we don't have the option of simply deciding what it was.

But there is one thing that is quite clear: The ideas of an historical, Bodily Resurrection (whether true or not) and the Modal Resurrections are mutually exclusive. But not strictly because of “the thing raised up”. It isn't simply a matter of, on one hand, a “person” (body+*spirit*) being raised, and on the other hand, a *spirit*—or even nothing at all of Jesus himself (as in the Interpretive Resurrections)—being raised.

You see, one could argue that out of the small-ish group of original resurrection claimants, some might have meant one thing and some another. For example, some in that group could have meant a Bodily resurrection (à la Traditional Christianity), while others could have meant a “Two-Body Resurrection”—thus claiming a bodily resurrection by theological sleight-of-hand while holding that only Jesus' *spirit* was actually raised.

So, while the group agreed on saying “it was a bodily resurrection”, they might also have been aware that they didn't exactly mean the same thing.

But it's far too easy to imagine that such a mixture would eventually lead to serious issues within the group. Not only because the different kinds of resurrection lead down different paths, but also because there is a mutual exclusivity between them that is more subtle—and more striking—than “the thing raised”. And it's an undeniable mutual exclusivity.

To put it plainly, it has to do with Jesus' *corpse*. Either the resurrection process affected Jesus' corpse such that it was no longer decomposing somewhere, or it didn't affect his corpse at all, leaving it as worm food. But it had to be one or the other. Either Jesus' corpse was still “a-mouldrin' in the grave”, or it wasn't. So, at the bottom, the claim “Jesus was raised from the dead” *cannot* mean both. That would be like insisting a door is both open and closed—an impossible posture for any door and an even more impossible posture for a claim.

Now, we Simple Unknowings can imagine an early diversity of meanings if we like. The imagination is free, after all, and the evidence is sparse. But imaginative possibilities aside, we must eventually return to what we actually have in front of us. And what we have—preserved through scribe and scroll—is Paul.

Paul's writings are the only thing we have in evidence. And whatever Paul was saying was a conviction shared by the Pillars—Cephas, James, and John. They were all on the same page. If there were differing views of “resurrection”, they were views that arose *outside* that particular group of resurrection claimants. But *inside* that group, we have to consider that everyone (Paul included) was talking about one brand of resurrection or another. And the only way to inch closer to what he meant is to pay careful attention to what he himself actually wrote.

Of course, a Skeptic might say, “In my view, Paul contradicts himself at times. So you can’t be sure he always meant the same kind of resurrection”. Fair enough. Paul certainly isn’t a systematic theologian with footnotes, charts, and a glossary. But if we let that idea run wild, we end up with something absurd. At that point, when Paul says “after fourteen years, I went up to Jerusalem”, we’d have to hold open the possibility that he meant “after fourteen years, I didn’t go anywhere at all”.

We Simple Unknowings don’t have the luxury of that kind of interpretive free-for-all. We have to assume that when Paul uses the same word, about the same event, in the same cluster of arguments, he means something within the same neighborhood of meaning—unless the text itself forces us to think otherwise.

And in Paul’s case, nothing in his letters forces us to conclude he sometimes imagined a resurrection that left Jesus’ corpse quietly in the grave, and sometimes imagined a resurrection that didn’t. We Simple Unknowings may not know with complete confidence which idea Paul is actually trying to express—but it has to be one or the other. And the only way to get closer is to pay careful attention to what Paul himself actually wrote.

And that, after all, is what we Simple Unknowings are after right now. We want to know what the original claimants meant, not what later Hypothesisists think they meant. If we’re to inch any closer to that meaning, we’ll have to stick with Paul’s letters. Fortunately for us, Paul not only used the phrase “raised from the dead”, but also expended considerable effort trying to explain just what he meant by it.

Narrowing the Field

"Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion"
—Francis Bacon

In 1 Corinthians 15:12, Paul brings up an issue in the form of a question: "Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead"?

The first time I read that (eons ago), I was confused. I was laboring under the impression that the resurrection of Jesus was the only resurrection there was (or would be). I thought Jesus was raised from the dead because he had some "special standing" with God, but that ordinary Christians, when they died, just "went to Heaven". Of course, this meant their *spirits* would go to Heaven, but their corpse would left to decompose in the grave, as one would expect.

Consequently, when I first read that passage, I thought Paul was rather arrogantly saying, "If we preach that Jesus was raised from the dead, who are you to say he wasn't raised from the dead?" To me, it was the sort of pronouncement that leaves you thinking maybe you're just supposed to nod politely and not ask any questions.

But I learned quickly what Paul's real concern was. He wasn't concerned about some of the Corinthians not believing that Jesus had been raised from the dead. That wasn't an issue. The Corinthians all shared that belief. Paul's concern was about them not believing in their own future resurrection. For me, this was a bit surprising to learn: Christians were someday to be resurrected themselves.

You see, for Paul, Jesus' resurrection wasn't an isolated event. Rather, it marked the beginning of an all-encompassing Cosmic renewal. This renewal was a time in which "the creation itself" (i.e., the whole of the cosmos) "will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). "And then comes The End" (my capitalization). Paul writes that "The last enemy that will be abolished is death" (1 Corinthians 15:24-26), indicating that the Cosmic renewal would be so overwhelmingly thorough that even the natural and inevitable process of death itself would be done away with. At the climax of this Cosmic renewal, Christ will "put an end to all rule and all authority and power", so that "God may be all in all". What Paul is indicating is that the ultimate scope of God's redemptive work encompasses the entire created order, where all opposing forces are overcome, and all things are made subject to God (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

In this scheme, Christ's resurrection wasn't a one-off thing, but the first of many to come. As he put it, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). And Jesus' resurrection was the guarantee that others would likewise be raised from the dead: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22).

The raising from the dead of others besides Christ would happen when Christ returns. “We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

In 1 Corinthians 15:51, we see the same thought echoed: “Behold, I am telling you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we [ed.: the living] will be changed”.

Avoiding Sleep Confusion: To (hopefully) avoid more confusion than necessary, let me point out that “sleep” is often used in the bible as a euphemism for death. Psalm 13:3 says “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death”, and in Acts 13:36, which says “For David, after he had served ... by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers”.

What we see, then, is that Paul declares Jesus' resurrection as the surety that “we too” will be raised up. And it's because Jesus' resurrection was part and parcel of the same Cosmic remake that would eventually involve all Believers, whether dead or alive.

So, from 1 Corinthians 15:12 onward, Paul's primary goal is to assure the Corinthians that they, too, will be raised—just as Jesus was. And, in the effort, he also explains “in what manner” Jesus was raised. But it's here that the disagreements truly begin.

Paul says numerous times in his writings that Jesus (or Christ) was “raised” (or “raised from the dead”). In fact, he'll sometimes use both terms in one letter, or even in one chapter (as we see in 1 Corinthians 15). In Greek (Paul's writing language), the word we translate as “raise” or “raised” is *egeiro*. In its literal, base sense, *egeiro* means “to rise”. But, nowhere in any of Paul's letters is there ever a descriptor added to it for the sake of clarification in regard to resurrection. That is, we'll never see something like “*bodily* raised” or “*spiritually* raised”.

And, to further complicate things, the word *egeiro* can be used in numerous ways. It can be used in its “literal” sense, as in “rising from a chair”, or it can also be used in a metaphoric sense, as in “one nation will rise up against another”. One very common usage is “to rouse” or “to awaken”; a person might “rise up (awake, or be roused) from a deep sleep”. We do the same kind of thing in English: “Early to bed, early to rise”, expressing the idea of going to sleep and waking up early.

Basically, the specific meaning of *egeiro*, since it is often used metaphorically, can only be determined in context. If an ancient document said “Spartacus and the slaves rose up against their Roman captors”, it should probably be understood as a “revolt”. Thinking it meant a bunch

of sleeping slaves woke up and got out of bed contrary to their captors' instructions is a bit of a stretch.

The Corinthian Creed was formulated as if *egeiro* were something already in common usage (in regard to resurrection), thus needing no explanation. Apparently, the formulator simply assumed *egeiro*'s meaning would be understood. And whatever *egeiro* meant to the original Resurrection Claimants, that understanding had to precede Paul's writings. He himself had learned, from the very church he persecuted, that Jesus had been "raised" (*egeiro*-ed). But unfortunately, there aren't any pre-Pauline writings from the Christian community that explain what they meant by that word.

It would appear, then, that we need to ask "where did Cephas and The Twelve and the earliest church acquire their predetermined meaning of 'raised'?" Clearly, they meant *something*, and chose the term "raised" to express what they meant. And, they used the term without embellishment or explanation. This does seem to indicate that others hearing that Jesus had been "raised" would understand what was meant by the term—no explanation required. So, in the 1st century, was there a "standard meaning" for the term "raised" when used in regard to the dead?

According to scholars such as N.T. Wright, Mike Licona, and Bart Ehrman, "raised" would indeed have been commonly understood in a 1st-century, Judean Jewish context (when speaking of the dead) as a reference to a corpse that had been revived in some fashion, brought back to life.

But according to other scholars, such as historian J. D. Crossan, theologian Marcus Borg, and Bishop Shelby Spong, "raised" (again, in reference to the dead) didn't necessarily have a set, commonly understood meaning among Jews, and that there's nothing in the term itself that limits its usage to the "raising" of a corpse.

In any case, the word *egeiro* is just one point of disagreement. There are quite a few others, and all piled together, they become the monumental struggle one encounters in trying to reach the (seemingly) unreachable star of understanding what Paul meant. But those disagreements aren't limited to interpretations of individual words. They can spill the banks of that pool, flowing out across the realm of idiomatic expressions as well.

For example, Paul says something in 1 Corinthians 15:50-52 which has to do both with what happens to the dead when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), and with those who are still living at that time. "Now I say this, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I am telling you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we [ed., the living] will be changed".

The real point of contention is this: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God". The Modal Resurrectionist will say, "See there? That means that corpses don't get 'raised', because

they're flesh and blood, and won't inherit the kingdom. And that therefore indicates that Jesus' corpse didn't get raised up”.

The Traditional Christian, or even the Ersatz Bodily Resurrectionist (provided either had done a tiny bit of study) might reply, “Paul isn't referring to body parts when he says 'flesh and blood'. Just look in the venerated Jewish Encyclopedia, and you'll see that 'flesh and blood' is simply an ancient Semitic idiom that is 'rooted in the conception of man as a weak, dependent, and mortal creature'. It even points out that the idiom is often translated (in Jewish writings) as simply 'mortal'. Paul uses the same idiom in Galatians 1:16, where he says that after becoming a Believer, he ‘did not immediately consult with flesh and blood’—meaning, he didn't consult with ‘mere mortals’”.

We Simple Unknowings can certainly do a “scripture search” ourselves, and we'd find other examples of how 1st-century, Greek-language writers understood this idiom. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the author writes, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... spiritual forces of wickedness”. This indicates our struggle is not against “mere mortals”, but against something far more sinister. And in the Gospel of Matthew, Simon Barjona (aka Cephas/Peter) tells Jesus that he believes Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus replies, saying “flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven”. It wasn't “mere mortals” that did the revealing, but rather God.

It appears, then, that when Paul writes “flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom”, he's simply saying “mere mortals” will not inherit the kingdom. And that's why he also writes “we shall be changed”. And then, he actually uses the word “mortal” in the next sentence: “For ... this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53). So, “mere mortals” don't get “raised”. But mortals that have been changed to being immortal do.

Flesh and Blood: For a few references to scholarly views on “flesh and blood” as a common semetic idiom, see the entry titled “Flesh and Blood” in *Appendix A*.

We Simple Unknowings might agree there's a case to be made regarding Paul's use of a common idiom. But the Modal Resurrectionist would disagree, saying, “It's all easily explainable. Paul wasn't using 'flesh and blood' as an idiom in this case. *This time*, he meant it 'literally', referring to body parts”.

* *Sigh* *. It goes round and round. And we Simple Unknowings may well be stymied. We should be.

But things get worse. The Two-Body Resurrectionist might chime in, saying, “Yeh, and when Paul says we shall be changed, what he means is that our bodies will be exchanged for new bodies made of spiritual (but still, 'subtly material') stuff, and the old body—made of flesh and blood—will be left in the grave”.

On the surface, that might seem to make sense—at least for the dead. After all, if someone has already “slept”, perhaps their old body could theoretically remain in the grave (maybe already decomposed down to disconnected molecules) while their *spirit*—taken as a separable, continuing entity—receives a new “spiritual, but subtly material” body. Thus, the claim would be of a bodily-resurrected Jesus.

But immediately we run into a problem.

First, remember: when Paul is talking about “The End” (1 Corinthians 15:24), he isn’t talking only about the dead being raised. He says quite plainly, “we will not all sleep” (or “die”), “but we will all be changed... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed”.

Here’s where the Two-Body view hits its very odd snag. If *changed* means *exchanged*, then at The End, the living must somehow have their *spirits* expunged from their still-living bodies in order to receive the new bodies. Yet—Paul insists they will not die in the process. But if the old, now-*spiritless* body doesn't die, then in what state does it end up? Does it collapse into some kind of still-breathing-but-empty mass of tissue? Does it stagger around as part of a population of discarded flesh-and-blood bodies wandering about without occupants? The picture starts to look less like resurrection and more like an episode of The Walking Dead.

Now, I don't know how the Two-Body Resurrectionist would respond to this issue. In fact, I've not been able to find any comprehensive addressing of this issue presented by a Two-Body Resurrectionist. But I haven't read everything in the world. So, I can only assume that there will be some response conjured up to make the Two-Body Resurrection idea work. (Or, at least “sort of” work, as far as the Two-Body Resurrectionist is concerned).

But goodness. It's frustrating. What Paul tries hard to explain is fundamental to understanding the nature of resurrection. It has to do with whether “raised” signified that a “body+*spirit*”—a person—would be “the thing raised”, or whether *something else* got “raised—in a manner of speaking”. But everything he says that might be easily understood in a “plain reading” can be countered by someone claiming “exception”. At that point, the “rule” goes out the window, and with it, our ability to understand what Paul is saying.

Now, I could go on and on with example after example from 1 Corinthians 15 of the kinds of discussions (and disagreements) over Paul's explanation of resurrection. Sometimes, they're about individual words, like “raise” or “change”. Sometimes, about idioms. But sometimes they're about analogies, like Paul's analogy of a seed being sown, growing into a full-blown plant. And sometimes, the disagreements are about descriptive terms Paul uses, like “spiritual body” and “earthly body”.

But, what about that word “seen”, as in “seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve”? If we could nail down how that was meant, then we might be able to figure out what was meant by *egeiro* (or, “raised”).

Let me explain: If the Corinth Creed used “seen” to mean “observed with the ordinary faculties of eyesight”, then we’d know that the “thing seen” was something “observable”, like other physical objects around us. Therefore, it would refer to something with common physicality and existed in this natural realm, this timespace we occupy. Thus, we might conclude it was talking about an historical, Bodily Resurrection.

On the other hand, if “seen” was being used metaphorically—as in “seen with the mind’s eye”—then things are different. In this case, “the thing seen” didn’t need any physicality about it at all. Thus, we might conclude that maybe Jesus’ *spirit*—or maybe just our memories of him—were “the thing raised”.

So, what does “seen” mean in the original Greek of the Corinth Creed? In Greek, the word is *ophthe*, and it’s a form of the Greek verb “to see”. As in English, the Greek word has a “literal” (or “base”) meaning, which is “to perceive with eyes” (Oxford Languages). But, as in English, the Greek word can be used metaphorically: “I saw I was wrong” doesn’t mean anything was seen with the eyes; it means “I understood (or realized) I was wrong”. Likewise, the classic interview question of “Where do you see yourself in five years?” isn’t asking about anything you can perceive with your eyesight. It’s asking (basically) “What progress do you envision making over the next five years”? Most any metaphoric use of “to see” in English is the same in Greek.

You saw, he appeared: *Ophthe*, in 1 Corinthians 15:5, is translated as “seen” in some bible translations, and as “appeared” in others. In *Appendix A*, I’ve provided an entry titled *Ophthe* to discuss the translation issues, and to explain why I’ve used “seen”, and not “appeared”.

I think we can already see how this goes. Some will take *ophthe* in a literal sense, and others will take it metaphorically. It’s the same sort of thing we ran into with *egeiro* (“raised”). And once again, we Simple Unknowings find ourselves in the lurch. We’re left being asked—implicitly, at least—to decide which Hypothesist has captured the “real” meaning. But we’ve been through that wringer already. We know full well that whatever Paul meant in the first place isn’t going to change just because we cast our vote for one interpretation or another.

At first glance, it looks like we’ve hit a dead end. We’ve not found a clue we can rely on to help us figure out what was meant by “raised from the dead”. And that’s despite having an entire chapter from Paul in which he offers his longest sustained reflection on the very topic of resurrection. All we have are the same old options. We can follow one interpreter’s reading or another’s. Or, we can simply make up something for ourselves. Either way, we’re back to preference. And preference, as we Simple Unknowings have learned, is a notoriously poor guide to what actually happened.

We seem to have landed in a maze of bunny trails. And we haven’t gotten anywhere at all. And what’s worse, it doesn’t seem like we’re going to, either. But never fear. We’re not done yet. The thing we missed, from the get-go, was that we neither asked nor answered the right preliminary question.

Of course, this is quite understandable for we Simple Unknowings. Given all the “hoopla” generated by a multitude of Hypothesists over the centuries, it can take considerable effort to figure out which question needs to be asked first.

Consequently, we delved right into a bunch of details—various, individual items—things like *ophthe* and *egeiro*. We’ve talked about idioms and whether there will be Zombies walking around after Christ returns. And it’s still but a few of the points in 1 Corinthians 15 that get argued back and forth, never getting settled. But doing so has brought us to the point of realizing we might need to be asking about something else first.

So before we get any more tangled up in details, we’re going to stop and ask a very basic question:

What is Paul’s purpose in writing this chapter? What’s his *theme*?

The issue that Paul is dealing with is reflected in the first sentence of this present chapter: “Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:12)

That question is the reason Paul wrote his chapter. Answering that question is what 1 Corinthians 15 is about.

Near the beginning of this present chapter, I said, “[Paul] wasn’t concerned about some of the Corinthians not believing that Jesus had been raised from the dead. That wasn’t an issue. The Corinthians all shared that belief. Paul’s concern was about them not believing in their own future resurrections”.

Evidently, some of the Corinthians didn’t believe Christians would be resurrected at The End. Maybe some of them believed something like what I had once assumed myself: that Jesus’ resurrection was the only resurrection there ever was—or ever would be. But whatever their reasoning on the matter was, they were obviously of a different mind than Paul. But Paul doesn’t respond to this issue by writing a chapter which we might later title “*All About Resurrection*”, but rather one which might be more appropriately titled “*What Happens When You Die*”.

Paul doesn’t begin his chapter by posing the question first. Instead, he begins by reminding the Corinthians of what I’ve called the “gospel in a nutshell”. He presents them with the Creed—the core beliefs of Christianity, which they had already “received”.

And that’s the key. Paul is treating the old formula—“Christ died ... was buried ... was raised ... and was seen”—as the basis for explaining our future beyond death.

It’s on this basis that Paul answers the question he then poses rhetorically in 1 Corinthians 15:12 — “How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” And his answer is that resurrection will happen *to us* when we die, because resurrection is what happened *to Jesus*

when he died. Jesus' resurrection had set in motion a new chain of events that would affect all of us: "For since by a man death came, by a Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22). And Jesus' resurrection was both the first of many to come, and the assurance that his was not the last. Once the thing was set in motion, there was no stopping it.

But there's one thing that cannot be overlooked: Paul's language is relentlessly agent-patient in structure: God raised Jesus from the dead. (1 Corinthians 15:15, Romans 6:4, Romans 8:11, Romans 4:24, Galatians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:10). Jesus is the one acted upon. God is the one acting. And this is what I mean when I say that, for Paul, Jesus' resurrection was something done *to Jesus*.

I'm not attempting to do some "interpretive trickery" in saying this. We all understand this agent-patient structure, even if we haven't heard that terminology before. If I say, "The baker baked the bread", it is impossible to interpret that as "the bread decided to feel like it was baked" or "I decided to imagine the bread was baked". The baker is an external force acting upon the dough. And in the same way, God was the external force acting on Jesus.

This same external cause (God) will act upon Believers: "Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power" (1 Corinthians 6:14).

Paul's point is both clear and sweeping: What happened *to Jesus* will happen *to all Believers*.

Whatever resurrection was, Paul can't be talking about it as only an internal (or self-induced) change in perspective, a moment of spiritual insight, or an abstract hope in the minds of those grieving a dead Jesus. Not when he says God was the one who did the raising. That puts the source of Jesus' resurrection outside the minds of the "resurrection believer". Paul is saying Jesus really died, and he was really raised—by God. And, likewise, if we really die, we'll really get raised—just as Jesus did—by God.

What I'm getting at is that the claim that "Jesus was raised from the dead" cannot have been merely a poetic way of saying, "Jesus lives on in our memories", or "his cause survived his crucifixion", or "hope was reborn in the hearts of his followers". None of those claims describes anything that happened to Jesus at all. They describe only an inward change in the speaker: a shift from despair to meaning, from loss to resolve.

But Paul isn't talking about a change of perspective. He is talking about something that happened *to Jesus*—something with an external cause, something God did. "God raised him from the dead" isn't a report about how people coped with Jesus' death, or how they came to reinterpret it. It is a claim about Jesus himself, and about an act performed upon him after death.

It's here, at last, that we Simple Unknowings begin to gain our footing. The question before us is what was meant by "raised from the dead". And given the many meanings that phrase has been

assigned over the centuries, it's quite possible we can make as much progress by setting aside ideas that clearly cannot fit as we do by sorting through those that might.

What we've got before us is a grand opportunity to make a little progress. We weren't permanently caught in an endless maze of bunny trails: There was a way out. We just had to ask the right question. And the answer not only gets us out of the maze, it also will allow us to do some much-needed clearing out of Hypotheses that just won't work.

You see, it's now quite clear that the Interpretive Resurrection ideas we surveyed earlier in *The Lay of the Land*—the Metaphoric, Symbolic, and Idealist Resurrection ideas—don't fit. But it's not because they're philosophically impossible, theologically objectionable, or emotionally unsatisfying. It's because none of them are about a "resurrection" that happened *to Jesus*. They're all talking about something that Paul *isn't* talking about. They're talking about a "change in the point of view" of the resurrection claimants themselves, not a change with an external cause that happened *to Jesus*. But, that's what Paul is talking about. He gives us no other options.

Once that is seen, it's clear that the Interpretive Resurrection ideas don't really need us to set them aside. They fall away on their own. All that's required of us is to let them do so.

So, where does all this leave us?

At this point in our inquiry, we've managed to clear the ground of a great deal of underbrush. Working with Paul's own question, his own language, and his own logic, we've seen that the Interpretive Resurrection ideas simply do not address the issue he was trying to answer. Whatever Paul meant by "raised from the dead", it referred to something that happened *to Jesus*—and, in turn, would one day happen *to others* in a like manner.

That still leaves us with two broad possibilities on the table. Either Paul was speaking of a Spiritual Resurrection—some kind of postmortem transformation that didn't involve the corpse—or he was speaking of a Bodily Resurrection, in which death itself was reversed in a more concrete way. Those two options may take different forms, and they may be defended or rejected for different reasons. But they are the only live options remaining once Interpretive Resurrection is set aside.

And at this point, a perfectly reasonable question presses itself upon us—one that doesn't come from hostility or skepticism, but from simple intellectual honesty. Even if Paul meant a Bodily Resurrection, how are we supposed to take such a claim seriously at all? Before weighing Spiritual versus Bodily resurrection, shouldn't we first ask a more basic question: Are miracles even possible?

It would appear that, until that question is faced, the Bodily Resurrection option can never really be evaluated. It will always be dismissed before it is examined, not because it has been shown to be false, but because it has been ruled out in advance. And so, before we can fairly assess what kind of resurrection Paul was talking about—or whether any resurrection actually occurred—we need to pause and address that prior concern.

For many, even considering the idea of miracles seems to be a bunny trail. But only if we had concluded beforehand that “miracles can’t happen”, or “miracles are the least probable of all events” could this path be labeled a bunny trail. However, we Simple Unknowings—as the true agnostics we are—have no predetermined biases either in favor of miracles or against them. For us, then, this path can’t be a bunny trail. For us, it’s a necessary part of our quest.

Beyond Miracles

"[I]t is one big mistake and a mistake of a special kind. It is, namely, a category mistake"
—Gilbert Ryle

We Simple Unknowings have gone along somewhat glibly so far, accepting that among our collection of Hypotheses there is one—the Traditional Christian Hypothesis—which says that Jesus actually was literally, physically, bodily raised from the dead. We've even used the word "miraculous" to describe that "raising". And we've accepted that Hypothesis in exactly the same way we've accepted the others: as one Hypothesist's proposed explanation for the origin of the resurrection claim. That has never meant we were committed to believing it. Right now, we're not committed to believing any of them.

We've treated all the Hypotheses more or less as *suggestions*. One fellow says "raised from the dead" meant that Jesus' *spirit* (not his corpse) was the thing raised, and we nod and say, "OK—there's that". We look at another Hypothesis and say, "Over here, this other fellow says the original resurrection claimants experienced hallucinations," and we reply, "Alright—that's this fellow's idea".

When we arrive at the Traditional Christian Hypothesis, we notice that it says something quite specific: "Raised from the dead" meant that Jesus' *corpse* was "raised" in a transformative process that resulted in a living-again, risen Jesus—a being that was observable in this physical world. As such, Jesus' corpse was no longer decomposing somewhere. And again, we said, "OK. Whatever. A Hypothesist can present whatever explanation they want for the origin of the resurrection claim".

It was all perfectly fine to allow that the Traditional Christian Hypothesis apparently hinges on a miracle. After all, we Simple Unknowings don't know whether miracles do or don't happen, or have ever happened. We don't even know if there is (or isn't) a God who does them. And we certainly don't know, one way or the other, whether a miracle-working God did the *particular* miracle of raising Jesus from the dead through a transformative resurrection process. We're "true agnostics". And for that reason, our mindset has been "What do we care, anyway"? There's no reason for us to *care* whether Jesus was raised from the dead in any fashion if we don't know if it's *true* or not. And right now, we don't even know what the original resurrection claimants *meant*.

But then, out of the blue, someone points out that there's no need to consider the Traditional Christian Hypothesis *unless* it could first be proven that miracles happen. They may even mutter something like "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence", or mention "miracles are the least probable of events". And what happens? The wheels come off. We've hit a brick wall. The glibness ends here. If we are to consider that Hypothesis at all, it seems we must first establish the possibility of miracles. Otherwise, we need to just take the Traditional Christian Hypothesis off the table. At least, that's what somebody told us.

However, in the previous chapter, we learned something the hard way: Sometimes, finding the right preliminary question isn't all that easy. In that chapter, we had to back up and realize we'd

gotten caught up in a bunch of details in 1 Corinthians 15, but we had never asked the first thing we should have asked: “*What is Paul’s purpose in writing this chapter*”? Sure, we learned some interesting things about disagreements over details before that point. But it was in asking the right preliminary question that we made some useful headway. We came to realize that the Interpretive Resurrection ideas basically excluded themselves from fitting anywhere in what Paul was talking about. And that brought us to this spot, having only Spiritual Resurrection and Bodily Resurrection to contend with.

So here, we may need to give some serious thought to what we’re asking. Is “*Can you prove miracles happen?*” truly one of the Preliminary Questions? Is it one of those questions that, if left unanswered, will derail our quest, grinding it to a halt?

Let me begin addressing this question by inventing a little scenario for the sake of example. Now, don’t take this scenario as my “formal suggestion” regarding the Traditional Christian Hypothesis. It’s certainly not that. I’m only wanting to use this imagined scenario to make a point, before going any further. But remember: We’re not asking whether the Traditional Christian Hypothesis is true, nor whether it’s more plausible than its alternatives. We are doing something far more basic: We’re asking what kind of explanation it actually is.

The Scenario: A couple of days after Jesus is crucified and buried, Cephas (Peter) is found in his room by another of Jesus’ disciples. Cephas is pacing the room, stopping, starting again, obviously shaken. Unknown to the other disciple, Cephas had seen Jesus, alive again, right here in this room a mere 10 minutes earlier. The other disciple can’t help but notice Cephas’s extreme agitation and asks, “What’s wrong”? Cephas, wide-eyed and halting, finally stammers out in a hoarse-but-loud whisper, “Jesus was raised from the dead”. The other disciple can see that Cephas isn’t joking, but *surely*, he can’t be *serious*. So after a moment’s pause, he asks Cephas, “What do you mean? What are you talking about”? And Cephas blurts out, “I mean, he’s *alive again*. He’s *not dead*. Don’t you get it? He’s not in his grave any longer!” The other disciple is taken aback, thinking Cephas has lost his mind. But this is his friend, so he proceeds cautiously, asking, “OK, so... ummm... how would you explain that”? Cephas, frustrated, responds, “I don’t *have* an explanation for it. I only know what I *saw*”.

What I’m suggesting in this scenario is that, in principle, Cephas could well have claimed Jesus was bodily raised from the dead (as per Traditional Christianity) without having any idea of *how* the thing he was claiming could have happened. He’d stammered out what he’d *seen*, knowing full well it sounded as insane to the hearer as it did to him. And this wouldn’t have been the first time in history that a person had experienced a shock and found themselves unable to process it. When something is both “real” and utterly “unreal” at the same time, a massive amount of confusion erupts. It is precisely the lack of an explanation that produces the confusion.

Many (if not most) of us are actually quite familiar with this pattern. On September 11, 2001, millions of people—some in person, most through television screens—watched as airplanes struck the World Trade Center. Those who witnessed it could say what they had seen: planes hitting buildings, fire, collapse, chaos. But none of them could explain it—not in the moment, and not for some time afterward. The ghastly reality of the event was grasped immediately; comprehending it came later. And explaining it? That came even later.

It's this kind of thing, though, that is at the very heart of the Traditional Christian Hypothesis: The resurrection claim was made on a basis of what was *seen*, not on a basis of its explanation.

This, then, brings me to my point: What's being missed in the demand that miracles must first be proven possible is that the Traditional Christian Hypothesis is not, at its core, a "miracle explanation" at all. It is, as are all the Alternate Hypotheses, an Hypothesis about how a claim arose. And, as all claims do, it arose from a stimulus.

The explanation that Jesus' Bodily Resurrection (as per Traditional Christianity) was a *miracle* would be made *after* someone first said, "Jesus was raised from the dead".

But when it comes to inexplicable events, this is how it always—but *always*—works. Somebody has a horrific car accident that smashes the car to smithereens, yet the driver walks away unharmed. Nobody can explain it. And that is precisely when the word "miracle" shows up. In the absence of a better explanation, someone will inevitably say, "It's a miracle", attributing the inexplicable event to God.

But there is also something nobody ever says in this kind of situation: "The driver is alive because the accident *didn't really happen*". An event may be inexplicable—and still entirely *real*. The absence of an explanation never leads us to deny that the event itself occurred; it only marks the limits of our understanding.

At the bottom, though, we Simple Unknowings aren't concerned with what anyone said "after the fact". We're only trying to find a convincing reason for the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. We're basically asking about the *stimulus* that gave them that idea.

For us, then, a question about whether miracles really happen is not a Primary Question at all. At its best, it's second-order.

But let's drill down into this a bit further, with the *stimulus* in mind. The Traditional Christian Hypothesis is based on a plain reading of the "gospel in a nutshell" we've talked about. But, one needs to understand: That brief gospel—that Jesus died, was buried, was raised, and was seen by Cephas and The Twelve—is a retrospective summary. It's not the order in which any of this would have been experienced by the original claimants. As a summary, it already assumes a conclusion. But as an experience, events could not have unfolded that way.

The way things would have been *experienced* by Cephas (et al) would have been this: Jesus died, was buried, was seen, and was then proclaimed raised from the dead.

The reason I say that is because nobody had their eyes on the deceased Jesus at the moment of resurrection itself. At least, our primary source, Paul, never says anyone did. No one observed the transition from dead to alive. Whatever happened, it happened without being seen by anyone. And that means the determination that "Jesus was raised from the dead" could not have been a direct observation of the resurrection event itself. It had to have been a deduction, based on witnessing the once-deceased, but now-living-again Jesus.

A Tidbit of Trivia: If we were using the whole of the New Testament as source material, we'd find there is no account in any of those documents saying anyone saw the resurrection itself.

What was observed, or witnessed, functioned as a *stimulus*. That stimulus triggered a thought in the minds of Cephas and the others: “Jesus is alive again”. There is nothing “magical” about this. We see a cat in a window, and we think “there's a cat in a window”. We express that as a claim that “I saw a cat in the window”.

The thought that “Jesus is alive again” could then be expressed to someone else as a claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. After all, Jesus had died, and to see him alive again would require that he'd somehow been brought back to a state of living.

But even then, one more step was required: While that claim *could* be made, *should* it be made? Such a claim would be likely to cause more raised eyebrows than a man insisting he'd seen Paul McCartney in a Wyoming truck stop. So, a decision had to be made: Is this something we should actually say, aloud, to others?

This is precisely the Stimulus -> Thought -> Decision -> Claim sequence we've already examined in *The Anatomy of a Claim*, calling it our **Claim Formation Paradigm**. The resurrection claim didn't appear fully formed. It emerged through this process, and only after that process did it enter circulation.

Notice what still hasn't entered the picture. At no point in this sequence does anyone need to know *how* the *stimulus itself*—the phenomenon of a living-again Jesus (in the Traditional Christian Hypothesis)—actually occurred.

But this is the same across all Hypotheses. We don't have to first answer how (for example) hallucinations are formed in the brain before we consider an Alternate Hypothesis that depends on one. And, that's good, because even neuroscientists don't know how the brain creates an hallucination. Nor do we have to explain how an illusion that somehow triggered the thought that “Jesus is alive again” (in whatever respect) was actually produced. And this, too, is good, because every Hypothesis that depends on an illusion depends on speculation; even the Hypothesist can't tell us, except speculatively, how the proposed illusion was produced.

How the *stimulus* originated in any of the Hypotheses—whether miraculous, psychological, social, misperceived, or something else entirely—is, in every case, a second-order question. So, we're not relying on some kind of “special pleading” in regard to the Traditional Christian Hypothesis. In every Hypothesis, asking *how* that stimulus itself occurred is to ask for an *explanation* for the stimulus. It's not a question about claim formation.

What we Simple Unknowings need is to be consistent. We accept an Alternate Hypothesis that requires hallucinations without requiring first that neuroscientists can actually prove how hallucinations form in the brain. Likewise, we accept one that requires an illusion without knowing exactly how that illusion was produced.

So for we Simple Unknowings, it would be both inconsistent and strangely unfair to burden ourselves with the necessity of first proving a miracle explanation just to keep the Traditional Christian Hypothesis on the table.

Every Hypothesis in our ceiling-high stack is about the origin of a claim. And as I mentioned way back in *The Lay of the Land*, “each one attempts to explain ‘what gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead’”. In other words, every Hypothesis attempts to answer our Primary Question. All we Simple Unknowings are after is a *convincing* answer to that question. But asking whether the “thing claimed” was *true* is another matter altogether. And likewise, so is the origin of the stimulus for that claim.

This is why the demand that miracles must first be proven possible isn’t just unfair—it’s historically incoherent. It asks us to adjudicate an explanation before we’ve examined the experience that called for explanation in the first place. It asks us to explain an explanation.

That’s backwards.

For that reason alone, the Traditional Christian Hypothesis can’t be dismissed simply because the question of miracles remains unresolved. In our particular quest, the matter doesn’t rise or fall on whether miracles can be proven possible. It stands or falls on whether the *thing actually claimed*—in this case, a literal, physical, bodily resurrection—provides the most convincing answer to our Primary Question.

But here, we have to stop for a moment and look at what we’ve been doing. Someone not involved in the quest of the Fellowship of the Simple Unknowings asked a question—one based on the idea that “you can’t prove a miracle”. And, we dutifully responded to it. We followed that question where it led, and we explained why it doesn’t disqualify the Traditional Christian Hypothesis. “Proving miracles” was never *our* question to begin with.

In other words, we’ve allowed ourselves to be pulled onto a bit of a bunny trail. The more basic thing we should have asked first is this: Does Paul even talk about Jesus’ resurrection as a miracle at all?

A careful reading of Paul’s letters shows that he never explicitly says things like “the resurrection of Jesus was a miracle” or “resurrection is the greatest miracle”. But that fact, by itself, doesn’t carry much weight. It is, after all, an argument from silence.

However, it’s quite clear that a “*divine interaction*” explanation for Jesus’ resurrection was indeed reached at some point. We see it many times in Paul’s letters—sometimes expressed quite plainly, sometimes indirectly. Statements like ‘God raised Jesus from the dead’ or the exhortation to ‘believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead’ appear throughout Paul’s writings. Paul clearly wants us to know the explanation he endorses: ‘God did it’.

For many people, this may strongly imply that the raising of Jesus was a miracle, because what they mean by “miracle” is nothing more than “anything God does”. But it’s worth noticing what that way of speaking actually commits us to. If everything God does is a miracle, then having warm weather in summer and the reversal of death belong to the same category. But we don’t encounter them that way. Warm weather is expected. It follows from the regular structure of the

world—a structure one can certainly consider God’s doing. The reversal of death, however, is hardly a common feature of that structure. When we collapse this distinction, we end up blurring two ideas that deserve to be kept separate—the providential workings of God on the one hand, and events that strike us as genuinely extraordinary on the other.

Here, we need to pause and settle on a working definition of “miracle”. We’ve been using the word repeatedly throughout this book, but we’ve never stopped to say what we mean by it. And if we continue using the same word while each of us means different things by it, we can’t expect to get very far. So, we Simple Unknowings do what we are inclined to do: we look it up in a dictionary.

Dictionary.com tells us this: A miracle is “an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause”.

This definition reflects a distinctly modern way of thinking—one that mirrors how many modern Theists imagine the relationship between God and the world. On this view, Nature (which includes our “physical world”) is a system of causes and effects that ordinarily runs according to its own internal logic. God oversees this system, but from time to time intervenes in it on an “as needed” basis. These occasional interventions are what we moderns typically call miracles. But it’s this stark division between the Natural and the Supernatural that gives rise to the assertion that miracles are “violations of the natural order”: Nature has a way it’s supposed to run “on its own”, and the tinkering of a Supernatural God in that “natural order” are a “violation” of that order.

Ancient Jews, though, didn’t see a distinctive division between “Natural” and “Supernatural”. There’s not even a word in Biblical Hebrew that corresponds to the system we call “Nature”. In this older paradigm, God’s presence is a “fixture” in His Creation, although God Himself is also “over and above” His Creation. Thus, the thing we call “natural order” isn’t something that Nature somehow produces “on its own”: rather, the normative, “common” order of the Cosmos exists only because God *wills* it, and that order itself is, in fact, sustained by God’s continual interaction with it.

In this paradigm, though, God may sometimes interact with His Creation in an “uncommon” way, such as parting the waters of the sea, or making the sun stand still. It was these “uncommon” interactions, set against the background of God’s usual way of ordering the world, that the ancient Jews considered to be “miracles”. In any case, in this paradigm having no sharp distinction between Natural and Supernatural, it’s impossible to say that a miracle would violate the natural order (as we “moderns” might think), because the natural order itself exists only because God sustains that order.

God and Geography: In saying “over and above” Creation, I don’t mean to imply any “geographic location” for God. Even the ancient Jews understood God couldn’t be “contained” in any physical, dimensional space. As Solomon prayed, “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27).

Either way, though—whether one draws a sharp distinction between Natural and Supernatural, or whether that distinction is far more “blurred” and God continually interacts with His creation—we still end up with a “miracle” as being “an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers” and which is “ascribed to” God.

Clearly, the historical Bodily resurrection asserted by Traditional Christianity seems to fit comfortably in the “miracle” category by either definition. It was an “extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural power”—something decidedly “*uncommon*”—and which was attributed to God (see Romans 4:24, Romans 8:11, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 6:14, 2 Corinthians 4:14, Galatians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, among others).

But we need to look more closely. A miracle, as it's commonly defined, is something that God does within an already-established, orderly Nature. Even the ancient Jews who didn't see a sharp distinction between Natural and Supernatural, nonetheless understood there was an order to the way things worked. A miracle was an uncommon and extraordinary event, explicable only as a special act of God. Yet it remained an event that took place within this ordered Cosmos.

And here we encounter a decisive difference. Miracles occur within the framework of an existing order. Resurrection, by contrast, isn't merely an unusual event within that framework. Rather, it is a transformation of the framework itself.

Let's take a moment to recall what we saw in the previous chapter. There, we saw that Paul never treats Jesus' resurrection as a self-contained event. It belongs to a much larger process—nothing less than the re-constitution of the Cosmos itself. As such, Jesus' resurrection was not, by any means, the mere resuscitation of a dead person, but rather, a *transformation* by the same power that will transform the current Cosmos into a New Heaven and New Earth. And Jesus' resurrection isn't an isolated answer to a singular death, but part of God's far more expansive and inclusive project of setting the world right. The power that will transform the Cosmos is the same power behind the transformative resurrection that all will experience at the Last Day.

Jesus' resurrection, then, isn't the conclusion of the story. It's the opening chapter. In it, the power destined to remake the whole of creation has already breached the boundaries of what Paul calls “this present age”. Something has entered the world in the raising of Jesus that doesn't properly belong to it—yet refuses to remain confined by it.

The power that raised Jesus pervades the whole of the world, transforming hearts and minds in preparation for eternal life in God's coming Kingdom. And when Christ returns in triumph, the earth shall give up its dead, and the living shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye. The perishable will be clothed with imperishability, and the mortal with immortality. All things will be brought under God's governance—every injustice of this present life shall be answered, and death itself shall be abolished. The power that first burst forth in the resurrection of Jesus will, at last, give birth to a glorious and eternal New Creation.

Paul's vision isn't one of life merely repaired or resumed, but of an order altogether transformed—and made to last eternally. It is, quite simply, the world made new. And it's here that we begin to see why the word “miracle” isn't really big enough to describe “resurrection”. A miracle, *to us*,

is something extraordinary. *To God*, however, it is a modest, temporary—almost incidental—display of the Creator’s power when measured against the power unleashed in resurrection.

What begins in the resurrection of Jesus isn’t a clever suspension of the rules that define an existing paradigm. Rather, it’s the very re-making of the paradigm itself.

This is where the allegorical “little light” might come on. We saw earlier that our investigation never required us to resolve the objection that “miracles cannot be proven”, because we weren’t attempting to explain how the stimulus for the resurrection claim was produced. We were simply asking what stimulus, according to whichever Hypothesist, gave rise to the *claim itself*.

But here we can see something further: Resurrection, as Paul understands it, doesn’t properly belong to the category of miracles anyway.

As such, the question we began with—“*Can you prove miracles happen?*”—turns out to be irrelevant at this point. The real question about Jesus’ resurrection is far more like the question of whether anyone can “prove” how the Universe began. They’re both questions lie beyond our ability to settle. And here’s the deal: We Simple Unknowings—the true agnostics we are—are in no position to say that the creation of the Universe *wasn’t* due to natural causes. But neither are we in any position to say it wasn’t due to *supernatural* causes—or even to something else altogether. And neither, then, are we in any position to declare impossible either the means of re-making the Universe, nor the idea that it may happen. And that re-making is the very thing resurrection is a part of.

To put it another way: The fact that nobody can “empirically substantiate” *how* the Universe got here doesn’t prohibit us from living in it. So the fact that nobody can empirically substantiate how the *re-making* of the Universe might occur shouldn’t prohibit us from at least considering that it *could* happen. When talking either about the creation of the Universe or it’s re-making, we’re decidedly operating in the unknown.

The only decision we Simple Unknowings can reasonably arrive at is to leave both the Traditional Christian Hypothesis and the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses on the table—at least for now.

This gives us a clear constraint as we move forward. Any account of resurrection—whether described as “Spiritual” or “Bodily”—has to conform to what Paul actually says resurrection is. If it doesn’t, then it isn’t Paul’s resurrection, whatever its other merits might be. The same standard applies in both directions. So, it’s vitally important that we don’t lose sight of this: Paul is our earliest source. Anyone who says “Well, I think that *before* Paul, there were people saying ‘*this, that, and the other*’ about Jesus’ resurrection” is just making it up.

What lies ahead, then, is a closer examination of two possibilities: Spiritual Resurrection and Bodily Resurrection. But, remember: Our task isn’t to decide which we find more appealing, but to see which—if either—fits the resurrection proclaimed by Paul, our earliest written source. So, whichever of these two possibilities fits with what Paul says will, of course, tell us which version of the claim Paul was talking about.

Spiritual Resurrection Examined

"She was not quite what I had expected. She was a great deal more ordinary".
—F. Scott Fitzgerald (from *The Great Gatsby*)

Uncertain glances pass between some of the Simple Unknowings in a moment of quiet puzzlement. But shortly, one breaks the silence, asking "What are we doing *here*? I mean, why are we starting with Spiritual Resurrection and not Bodily Resurrection? Did you just flip a coin while we weren't looking, or something?"

Fair question. And no, it wasn't a coin flip. There's a reason we're starting with Spiritual Resurrection. A few, actually. But, it's like almost everything else we've encountered on this quest so far. It's complicated. Let me explain.

In the chapter *The Lay of the Land*, I defined Spiritual Resurrection in specific terms. On this view, when Jesus died, it wasn't his *corpse* that was raised, transformed, renewed, or restored in any way. Rather, it was Jesus' *spirit* that was "raised" after he died, while his corpse remained rotting away wherever it was last left. (I'll continue to use this definition consistently).

And as a reminder: I am using the term *spirit* in a deliberately generic sense, referring to a person's survivable component. Other common terms include soul, consciousness, essence, "True Self", atman, pneuma, and so on.

When modern readers first encounter the claim that "Jesus was raised from the dead", many of them instinctively soften it—often without realizing they've done so. The powerful *imagery* of a corpse returning to biological life may be strongly suggested in the claim, but, to some, the image only *represents* reality; it isn't the reality itself. The reality represented (as the Spiritual Resurrectionist would have it) is something that, to some, seems magnificent, but at the same time, familiar: Jesus "lives on in the heavenlies", exalted and glorified by God. Death did not have the final word over his *spirit*. In other words, the claim is interpreted in spiritual terms. Jesus is understood to be alive *in some sense*, present with God, no longer dead, yet not meaning "dead" in the way we ordinarily mean by that word.

It's an easy concept to grasp. It's almost intuitive. For many, it seems to "make sense", or to resonate with them. And, there are reasons for that, and it's those reasons we need to explore a bit.

But before anything else, I want to address a difficulty that arises with the idea of Spiritual Resurrection: The actual verbiage of the *claim itself*—"Jesus was raised from the dead"—is the same as in Bodily Resurrection. The difference is how that wording is understood. In a Spiritual Resurrection paradigm, the statement "Jesus was raised from the dead" comes with an implied "modifier". It must now be understood as "Jesus' *spirit* was raised from the dead", or "Jesus was *spiritually* raised from the dead", or even "Jesus was raised from the dead—*in spirit*". So as long as we're talking exclusively about Spiritual Resurrection, that's the kind of meaning the phrase should convey.

Now, let's move ahead. According to the Spiritual Resurrectionist, in the 1st century, "resurrection" and "raised from the dead" didn't have fixed meanings. They weren't exclusive to Bodily Resurrection. The earliest church, according to the Spiritual Resurrectionist, had its own understanding of these terms, using them to refer to a *spirit* having been "raised". As such, if we read Paul's letters, already having in mind that he was talking about Spiritual Resurrection, then that's what we should see. So, as a matter of fairness, we'll proceed under the presumptions of the Spiritual Resurrectionist. We'll see if what Paul says conveys the Spiritual Resurrection idea. We'll be giving all leeway possible to the Spiritual Resurrection concept.

So, let's start our inquiry with three reasons as to why we're beginning with Spiritual (and not Bodily) Resurrection.

First: The ancients knew as well as we moderns do that "dead people stay dead". So we have to consider that it's *possible* the ancients were simply using imagery when saying "Jesus was raised from the dead". In other words, we Simple Unknowings have to concede it's *possible* that they weren't talking about a Bodily Resurrection at all.

And second: The Spiritual Resurrection option doesn't require God to act as the "cause" of any *observable effects* in the Natural realm. And this gives the Spiritual Resurrectionist the advantage of not having to deal with notions of a God-induced resuscitation or, even more unfathomable, the transformation of a corpse.

But, there's a caveat. According to the Spiritual Resurrectionist, God *does* have to be the source of divinely induced or divinely transmitted information (such as "visions" or "revelations"). And this—God causing thoughts in a physical brain—would *technically* be an instance of God serving as the cause of an effect in the Natural Realm. In other words, it fits the definition of a miracle. But, the Spiritual Resurrectionist might point out that it's not *observable*, and therefore it's not what *they'd* call a "miracle". So, the Spiritual Resurrectionist, by using an unconventional definition of "miracle", can avoid the necessity of Spiritual Resurrection depending on one. As such, the Spiritual Resurrectionist is relieved from having to explain or defend "interactions of God in the Natural Realm".

A Discomfort: We can acknowledge some discomfort in drawing a sharp line between *observable* and *non-observable* divine action—calling the first "miracles" but not the second. After all, God could potentially do things every day in the Natural Realm that would be perfectly observable, but nobody's watching. Nonetheless, we'll proceed on the Spiritual Resurrectionist's own terms.

And third: Because the Spiritual Resurrection Hypothesis doesn't depend on a God who *observably* alters the Natural order, "God" need not be understood as the God of Classic Theism. God may be more Deist-like in nature. For that matter, God may be "God" as conceived in Pantheism, Process Theism, Pandeism, or similar frameworks. Spiritual Resurrection is therefore unusually flexible at the level of theology, which makes it a sensible place to begin. It offers the most options, making the Spiritual Resurrection of Jesus something that would fit into a wide variety of belief systems.

In Spiritual Resurrection, the *spirit* of Jesus, once “resurrected”, existed in the “heavenlies” (however the “heavenlies” might be imagined). Nonetheless, Spiritual Resurrection does account for a “resurrection body”. The Spiritual Resurrectionist would strongly assert that Jesus was given a “spiritual body” as mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:44. In some variants of Spiritual Resurrection, the spiritual body is immaterial, as we moderns tend to consider *spirits*. In others—the hybrid Two-Body Resurrection variants—the resurrection body is *subtly* material, made of “spirit matter”. Still, it wouldn't be *observable* by us, as are the physical and objectively real objects around us. The Hypothesist may attempt to categorize this as a Bodily Resurrection, but we're not taking that bait. Two-Body Resurrection belongs firmly in the category of Spiritual Resurrection, because the “thing raised” (in this view) was Jesus' *spirit*. What we see, either way, is that whether the resurrection body was immaterial or *subtly* material, the core claim remains the same: The “thing raised” from death was Jesus' *spirit*, not his earthly corpse. And any such “spiritual body” given to the risen Jesus (in this paradigm) wasn't publicly observable or physically verifiable.

What this all means is that in the “gospel in a nutshell”—Jesus died, was buried, was raised, and was seen—the word “seen” is being used metaphorically. The Spiritual Resurrectionist makes sure we understand that it's not “seeing, with ordinary eyesight”, but rather “seeing” in the sense of perceiving in the “mind's eye”, as in comprehending or understanding. The Spiritual Resurrectionist explains that this “seeing” of the “risen Jesus” was through subjective experiences—divinely-induced visions, dreams, revelations, or other divinely-induced “inner” experiences.

All put together, it looks like this:

- Jesus died (bodily),
- was buried (bodily),
- was raised (spiritually),
- and was seen (metaphorically, not with ordinary eyesight).

So, with Spiritual Resurrection, we have an accounting of what was raised, and of a “resurrection body”, and of the phenomenon that put the idea into the minds of the original resurrection claimants that, in some sense, “Jesus is alive”. This thought, then, was expressed as the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”.

Now, let's put all this together using our Claim Formation Paradigm. Let's first consider the stimulus that triggered the thought that “Jesus lives, at least *in some respect*” in the minds of the original resurrection claimants.

As I mentioned earlier, our Spiritual Resurrectionists tell us this stimulus was something like divinely induced visions, dreams, or revelations. And, these are all *internal* stimuli, meaning, they were only experienced in the minds of the “recipients”.

What we're asking, then, is whether divinely induced visions, dreams, or revelations are sufficient stimulus to trigger the thought that “Jesus lives” (and by which we mean “Jesus' *spirit* lives”)?

The answer to that is “Absolutely. Of course. Why not”?

You might be wondering how I managed to answer that question so positively, and without explanation. So, I suppose I’d best explain.

What the Spiritual Resurrectionist is saying is this: The Thought triggered by “divine Stimulus” was that “the deceased Jesus’ *spirit* lives” (while his corpse is decomposing somewhere). But—let’s take away the “divine stimulus” part momentarily. What we’re left with is a belief that “the deceased Jesus’ *spirit* lives” (and his corpse remains buried). And *that* is the very essence of one of the most commonly held beliefs in the world: The afterlife.

At the heart of it, then, the Spiritual Resurrectionist is saying that “resurrection” is fundamentally indistinguishable from a very commonly-held belief—an afterlife belief. To be more specific, it’s telling us what happened to Jesus in *his* afterlife. “When Jesus died, his *spirit* was raised to Paradise, and there, God gave the *spirit* of Jesus a place at His right hand, pronouncing him Son of God, Lord, and Messiah”. In other words, Jesus’ afterlife came with perks.

It’s for this reason that I said, earlier in this chapter, that “The reality represented (as the Spiritual Resurrectionist would have it) is something that, to some, seems magnificent, but at the same time, familiar”. The familiarity is in the fact that most people on earth already believe that “when you die, you go *someplace*”. Spiritual Resurrection doesn’t present us with anything that challenges that belief. In fact, it rests comfortably in that spectrum.

So, let’s talk briefly about afterlife beliefs.

A Gallup International survey from 2024 found that about 57% of the earth’s population believes in some form of life after death. A Pew Research survey from 2025 showed that a median percentage of 64% of the populations surveyed believed in some form of afterlife. And we’re talking about a belief that is held even by people in countries having large atheistic or non-religious populations.

There’s a wide variety of afterlife beliefs, and these beliefs can be (and are) expressed in a number of different ways. But in all cases, the belief is that a person has a “survivable component” (i.e., *spirit*, soul, “True Self”, consciousness, atman, etc) that has an eternal destination. And perhaps that destination is Heaven, Hell, Paradise, Nirvana, or to become One with the Universal Consciousness. Or maybe, it’s to return in another body in order to learn lessons, work through its Karma, until such time that the “survivable component” can merge with the divine for eternity. (This is just a partial list of afterlife destinations).

For we Simple Unknowings, none of this “afterlife business” is new. Every one of us has asked, at one time or another, “What happens when you die?” And even we Simple Unknowings, while suspending belief (being the “true agnostics” we are), we’ve *suspected*—just as countless humans have before us—that death is followed by an afterlife. So the idea that death might not be the absolute end is hardly foreign. It resonates with a question every human seems to carry from childhood, quietly shaping the way we imagine life, loss, and what comes after.

Of course, we Simple Unknowings know full well that not everyone has *distinct* ideas about where/how the afterlife would be spent. Because *we* certainly don't (being "true agnostics"). Many people, however, do. They believe in a "survivable component" and a defined afterlife destination.

But, still, there are those who aren't quite so sure. Oddly enough, though, the lack of a firm idea about "afterlife destinations" or the "afterlife experience" doesn't prevent them from being confident that there will be an afterlife. I can be confident that I'll have a vacation this year without having any idea of where I'll go or what I'll do when I get there.

Virtually every human being who has reached an age at which they can acknowledge their own mortality, and has the mental capacity to do so, will eventually formulate some kind of belief *about* the afterlife. But to be sure, not everyone *believes in* an afterlife. The agnostic believes the afterlife is uncertain, and the avowed Naturalist who doesn't believe in a God or that people have anything like a soul or *spirit* that survives into eternity, likewise has a belief about the afterlife: there *isn't* one.

Ultimately, being mortal means that death surely awaits, and there is no hope of avoiding it. Thus, contemplation of what lies beyond that thin barrier between this life and whatever may lie "on the other side" proves to be an almost ubiquitous endeavor among human beings. But the only way to formulate an answer to the question of "what happens when you die" begins with asking it. And then, you have to think about it. Nobody pops out of the womb with that question already answered for them.

The fact is, virtually everyone, from early childhood, has wondered about it. Children are likely to ask "what happens when you die" when they reach 3 to 5 years old. And they're very likely to believe that their dearly-beloved Grandma (or pet cat, etc) who died is still "somewhere".

Quite often, these early-formed beliefs are retained into adulthood. But even if rejected at some point, the rejecter still has some belief *about* the afterlife.

So we've got a few very-human experiences shared by virtually everyone on the planet:

- We're aware of our mortality.
- We can't escape death.
- We wonder whether this life is all there is.
- We form beliefs about the afterlife.
- We can't "prove" there is (or isn't) an afterlife.

These universally shared very-human experiences make afterlife beliefs—whatever they might be—socially acceptable.

Imagine being at a funeral in the U.S., and the Eulogist says, "Dear Fitzwilliam has gone to be with God". Will an avowed Naturalist at the service stand up and object loudly, "Fitzwilliam

hasn't gone *anywhere*, and you're all fools for thinking so!"? No, of course not. In ordinary social settings, people tend strongly to respect the afterlife beliefs of others, even if they don't believe in one themselves.

But aside from "social acceptability", there's something else about afterlife beliefs we should take note of.

Let's say my neighbor, who doesn't believe in an afterlife, told me her second cousin Gertrude (whom I never met) had passed away. I then say, "I'm sorry for your loss. But, take comfort. She's just gone to an eternal existence". Most likely, my neighbor would respond by simply saying "Thank you for your kind thoughts". Demonstrating social acceptability, she'd be respectful of my afterlife beliefs, despite our opposite views.

But let's take a look at the other half of this equation: What did *I* do in this scenario? I made a comment about the afterlife of the deceased Gertrude—a *complete stranger* to me. My "afterlife well-wishes" weren't based on anything about Gertrude herself. I made my comment based on a belief I already held about "*everybody's* afterlife". To put a fine point on it: The only "stimulus" I had for my statement that Gertrude had "gone to another existence" was the fact that Gertrude was dead. That's all it took.

What I'm getting at is two things: First, for the afterlife-believer, the "default position" is that *everybody* will have *some kind* of afterlife destination. Second—and most importantly for our purposes here—is that for the afterlife-believer, the only stimulus needed to trigger the idea that the deceased had "gone into the afterlife" is knowing that a person died. Nothing else is required.

Now, consider this about Spiritual Resurrection: First, a person could potentially claim that "Jesus lives"—that is, in the sense of "his *spirit* being in the afterlife"—without having any stimulus other than Jesus' death. Second, if a person close to Jesus claimed that Jesus had "gone to Heaven to be with God", other people who didn't know Jesus at all would not be likely to object. Permission is given to the speaker to believe what they wish about Jesus' "new existence in the afterlife", even if the hearers themselves don't believe it.

Ultimately, the Spiritual Resurrectionist, in saying "the *spirit* of the deceased Jesus was raised to the heavens", isn't saying anything that a child wouldn't say about their beloved-and-deceased pet cat. And the earliest Spiritual Resurrectionists could potentially have said this about Jesus, having no more stimulus than the fact of Jesus' death.

And here at last, we see the reason for my earlier positive answer to the question of whether a "divine stimulus" was sufficient to trigger a thought that "Jesus' *spirit* lives": If somebody could claim "Jesus' *spirit* was raised to the heavenlies" simply because they already believe *every* dead person goes into the afterlife, then certainly, an intra-mental experience taken as a "divinely-induced revelation" could produce that thought.

The Spiritual Resurrectionist might object, saying we've greatly oversimplified the reality of the thing. They would assert that the stimuli they're talking about—the visions, dreams, revelations, etc—indicated more than just Jesus' *spirit* merely having gone into the afterlife. They were indicative of the *particular qualities* of his afterlife experience. In other words, the stimuli indicated to the original resurrection claimants that not only was Jesus' *spirit* “raised” *into* the afterlife, but it was also “raised” *in the afterlife*, meaning Jesus' *spirit* was glorified and exalted upon arrival.

What this means, then, is that unlike your “average person who dies”, Jesus was pronounced Son of God, Lord, and Messiah, given the very authority of God, and a “name above all names” (and so on). These qualities afforded the deceased Jesus' *spirit* were divinely revealed to the earliest resurrection claimants, and were seen as divine affirmation that Jesus' earthly ministry was vindicated and validated by God.

Thus, according to the Spiritual Resurrectionist, it's *those thoughts* that were triggered by the stimulus, and those thoughts—cumulatively—that “gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead”.

But, this does raise an important question: How was the use of the particular phrase “*raised from the dead*” seen as a logical choice of words to express the idea that someone had simply gone into the afterlife—even an afterlife with some very notable “perks”?

In the chapter *Beyond Miracles*, I gave an example of a stimulus triggering a thought, and of how the thought would be expressed as a claim: “We see a cat in a window, and we think 'there's a cat in a window'. We express that as a claim that 'I saw a cat in the window'". The *thing claimed* normally has a strong correspondence to the triggered thought. And it makes sense for it to work that way. It would be particularly useless if we experienced the stimulus of getting an arm broken, then claimed to the doctor, “I'm here because Cinderella lost her slipper”.

So, we do have to ask: How do we go from a *thought* that “Jesus' *spirit* has gone to the afterlife (plus ‘perks’)” to a *claim* that “Jesus was *raised from the dead*” (for goodness sake)? That is, why was the phrase “raised from the dead” used at all? Was saying a deceased person had been “raised from the dead” a common way to say “he's gone to Heaven (or Paradise, or whatnot)” back in 1st-century Jewish culture?

I had to do considerable searching to find an answer to this. But basically, the answer is a flat “No”. If you went to a 1st-century *Levaya* (Jewish funeral), you'd not have been at all likely to hear someone say of the deceased, “he's been raised from the dead”. Especially not if the deceased's corpse was lying right there in front of everyone, waiting to get buried immediately after the funeral. The phrase “raised from the dead” just wouldn't seem to fit in that circumstance.

Perhaps that's why nobody in the world uses that phrase to express that a deceased person has entered the afterlife. They'll say “he's gone to a better place”, or “to heaven to be with God”, or even “to meld with the Universal Consciousness” (or any one of dozens of other expressions). But no religion or culture expresses the idea of going into the afterlife by saying “he's been raised

from the dead”. The closest we might get might be at a funeral in which someone says “Our Dear Fitzwilliam *will be* raised from the dead”, but this is talking about a future event, not one that's already happened.

But, with Spiritual Resurrection, we're sort of in a world of “exceptions” (and we'll be discussing the exceptional uses of terms and language of the original Spiritual Resurrection cult in depth, in the next chapter). For now, let it suffice to say that this particular cult—the group of people that had been followers of the recently departed Jesus—didn't necessarily stick to convention. As such, while it may well have been that “raised from the dead” was not a common way of saying “he's gone into the afterlife”, it's what this particular group said. We have to allow that they may have used the phrase in an uncommon manner. In the end, what it boils down to in the Spiritual Resurrection paradigm is that the phrase “raised from the dead” was expressing what Yogananda said (as we saw back in *Believing and Knowing*): “Oh Christ, thou art raised *in Spirit*”.

Still—we might balk a little on this idea. So, let me show you how this could work in principle. To illustrate, I'll use a few paragraphs I formulated using the words of Dr Marcus Borg, a scholar who, as best I can make out, could be reasonably categorized as a “Spiritual Resurrectionist”:

It was an “experience of the risen Christ that led them [ed., Cephas and The Twelve] to draw the conclusion that Jesus is one with God, a spiritual reality who shares in the power of God, a spiritual reality who, like God, can be everywhere present, present in more than one place at the same time. The risen Christ is one with God, at the right hand of God, is Lord”.

“They had been moved by the risen Jesus—and would continue to be moved by him, and would continue to experience him in many different ways—some of which would be visionary experiences—experiences not only 'seeing' but also of 'touching' the risen Christ. And, they would experience, in their own lives, the power of Jesus that Peter and The Twelve had known during his life: the power of healing, of transforming lives, and to create new forms of community”.

For Peter and The Twelve, and later, for new Believers, “*resurrection*’ was not about something spectacular happening to Jesus on a particular day in the past; it was about the continuing experience of Jesus after his death”.

A Clarification: The statements in italics in the previous four paragraphs are all based on quotes from Dr Marcus Borg, in his debate with Dr W. L. Craig, October 2001. I felt Dr Borg's view to be very relevant in this chapter, so I've borrowed heavily from them. However, I didn't use “exact quotes”. I had to modify them slightly to work in this format. But I took pains to keep them as close to “original” as possible, refusing to misrepresent the “substance” of what Dr Borg had said.

Here, the “*experience of the risen Christ*” is the divine vision, dream, or revelation; the “internal stimulus”. And it “*led them to draw the conclusion that Jesus is one with God*”, and shares in the power of God, and is omnipresent, and is Lord.

Dr Borg understands “resurrection” as something “spiritual” (and not bodily), saying “I think the Easter stories are true in the sense that the followers of Jesus really did have experiences of Jesus as a living reality after his death”. But to be clear, he has also stated quite directly, “I don’t think the tomb [of Jesus] was empty”. Dr Borg doesn't think anything—except decomposition—happened to the corpse of Jesus.

With this in mind, we see this different “Mode” of resurrection. It's nothing that affected Jesus' corpse. It has to do with the *spirit* of Jesus being “raised” (i.e., exalted and glorified), and becoming “experience-able” by others. And this idea is *labeled* as “resurrection”—or, in Greek, “*anastasis*” (literally, “a standing-up”). And, “resurrection” is the state that one achieves once one is “raised from the dead”. So, if the original resurrection claimants already held a view that “resurrection” was a *spiritual*—not a *bodily*—thing, then perhaps this explains the decision to use the phrase “raised from the dead” when making their claim to others. (I want to stress, though, that this is just one possible explanation. I'd also stress that I'm not sure it's a convincing one).

To those on the “inside”—the members of the early cult comprised almost entirely of Jesus' former followers—this could all make sense. It was their terminology, their definitions, their “code”. Outside that cult, others hearing “Jesus was raised from the dead” might have to ask, “What do you mean?” But, in that case, explanations could follow. “Oh, what we *mean* is that Jesus' *spirit* was raised”.

Now, there could be lots of other theories about how or why the thought that Jesus' *spirit* had been glorified and exalted came to be expressed as “Jesus was raised from the dead”. I'm simply allowing the *possibility* that the original resurrection claimants could use this verbiage while *meaning* “Oh Christ, thou art raised *in Spirit*” (as Yogananda puts it).

What it boils down to, in our Claim Formation Paradigm, is this:

- **Stimulus:** Divinely-induced revelatory experience
- **Thought:** Jesus lives (meaning, his *spirit* lives)
- **Decision:** I won't sound crazy for telling anyone that Jesus' *spirit* was “raised and exalted”
- **Claim:** “Jesus was raised from the dead (tacking on “*spiritually, that is*” if asked about it)

So the thing we Simple Unknowings need to know is this: Does anything in Paul's letters actually *require* us to think that Spiritual Resurrection is what was originally claimed? The Spiritual Resurrectionist certainly says so. And we say, “Fine. Then what Paul says surely ought to match up with the Spiritual Resurrectionists' ideas about resurrection and such”. And that's what we'll look at next.

Is This What Paul Was Claiming?

If you torture the data long enough, it will confess to anything”.
—Ronald Coase (Economist)

The Spiritual Resurrectionist assures us that the original meaning of “raised from the dead” had to do with Spiritual, not Bodily resurrection. And as we saw in the previous chapter, any difficulties that arise between the concept of Spiritual Resurrection and what Paul says about resurrection can be attributed to a misunderstanding: Paul is writing in code.

But we can't take the Spiritual Resurrectionist's assurance too seriously. We Simple Unknowings have stacks of Hypotheses piled to the ceiling, and the Hypothesists all say the same thing: “My Hypothesis tells us what *really* happened, and how the resurrection claim *really* started”. But in the chapter *Narrowing the Field*, we discarded a whole slew of Interpretive Resurrection Hypotheses because it was clear they're not even talking about what our earliest source—Paul's letters—were talking about. So here, with Spiritual Resurrection, we need to do a little vetting.

The Spiritual Resurrectionist has given us an accounting of what was raised, and of a “resurrection body”, and of the phenomenon that put the idea into the minds of the original resurrection claimants that, in some sense, “Jesus is alive”. This thought, then, was expressed as the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. We've seen that *bona fide* divinely-induced “revelatory experiences” could certainly account for someone saying “Jesus had gone into the afterlife and was given a golden crown and other perks”. But, we've also seen that such divinely-induced experiences aren't even necessary: A child could claim “my little kitty died and went to heaven, and eats cake every day”, based on nothing more than the very natural inclination toward believing a deceased loved one is still present in some sense.

So far, though, the Spiritual Resurrectionist does present us with a “believable” option—one that doesn't require an explanation for the embarrassing and unbelievable notion of a divinely caused Bodily Resurrection (a la Traditional Christianity). The Spiritual Resurrection option is decidedly more accessible and acceptable to the mindset of the post-modern, post-Enlightenment, post-Christian individual living in a Western culture. And, it even has an appeal outside those bounds. As we saw in *Believing and Knowing*, even Yogananda, a Hindu, could acknowledge a Spiritual Resurrection of Jesus.

Even better for we Simple Unknowings, the Spiritual Resurrectionist insists we'll find the evidence that Spiritual Resurrection was the original claim if we “simply read Paul's letters under the presumption that he's talking about Spiritual, not Bodily Resurrection”.

This contention itself, though, brings up a question: If Paul and the early church were claiming a Spiritual Resurrection, then wouldn't they simply say “Jesus was *spiritually* raised from the dead”? As we noted earlier, saying “Jesus was raised from the dead” is powerful *imagery*—but—it could certainly be misleading. In a 1st century Jewish culture that believed in a miracle-working Creator God, the phrase “raised from the dead” would be likely to be taken “literally”, by default. It's the kind of expression one might use when talking about people that had been

miraculously resuscitated in the Old Testament, such as the son of Zarephath's widow (1 Kings 17:17-24), or the Shunammite woman's Son (2 Kings 4:32-37).

To avoid confusion, Paul could have made things abundantly clear by simply saying—even *once*—that “Jesus was raised *in spirit*”. Consider the Corinthian Creed, intended to express the core beliefs of the church, and intended to be kept verbally intact. If it were important to preserve the Creed's *meaning* of “raised”, this could have been accomplished easily: “Christ died, was buried, his *spirit* was raised”, and *voilà*, the “meaning” issue is permanently solved. And, after all, this was an easy move for Yogananda. He had no problem making his meaning clear: “O Christ, thou art resurrected *in Spirit*”.

But neither Paul nor the early church did so. But, still, that doesn't *necessarily* mean they *weren't* talking about a Spiritual Resurrection. The Spiritual Resurrectionist would insist that Paul clarified his (and the church's) position in other ways, through other phrases or concepts. So let's move ahead and look at some of these “other ways”.

In the chapter *Narrowing the Field*, we touched on Paul's term “flesh and blood”. We saw that “flesh and blood” was a common Semitic idiom having to do with humans being “mere mortals”. And it was also used in Greek cultures, expressing the same idea.

However, the Spiritual Resurrectionist would insist that “flesh and blood” is one of Paul's “unconventional” uses of language or terminology. Rather than a statement that “*mere mortals* will not inherit the kingdom of God”, the Spiritual Resurrectionist would say that, *in this case*, Paul is using the phrase literally. He's using it *this time* to indicate that *corpses* will *not* be “raised from the dead”. What it amounts to is that the Spiritual Resurrectionist has to insist that Paul is using a common idiom that people would almost assuredly understand to mean one thing, while in fact, he means something quite different.

This leads directly to another issue regarding Paul's statement that “this mortal must put on immortality”. If Paul is talking about a *spirit* being raised, are we to understand that in Paul's view, *spirits* are “mortal” and therefore must “put on immortality”? Even we Simple Unknowings are aware that *spirits* are not considered “mortal” in any commonly held view. They're called “survivable components” for a reason; they're designed for an afterlife. They're designed to *survive* death. So, here again, we're seeing Paul using common terms in a very uncommon way.

Another thing the Spiritual Resurrectionist must insist on is that the “resurrection body” is a “*spiritual body*” (1 Corinthians 15:44), meaning it's composed of “*spirit* matter” that is non-observable by ordinary means. So, in this view, the term “spiritual” is meant to reflect the *composition* of the resurrection body.

However, it also means that Paul is being inconsistent even with his own terminology. He consistently uses the term “spiritual” to denote a *quality*: “material things” vs “spiritual things” (1 Corinthians 9:11), “fleshly people” vs “spiritual people” (1 Corinthians 3:1), “natural discernment” vs “spiritual discernment” (1 Corinthians 2:14), “human wisdom” vs “spiritual thoughts” and “spiritual words” (1 Corinthians 2:13). Paul even explains the nature of the

resurrection itself by saying, “the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual” (1 Corinthians 15:46). In all cases, he's contrasting *quality*, not *composition*.

And here, we can't help but notice something else: All of these instances appear in the same letter—1 Corinthians. And additionally, all (except his summary explanation in 1 Corinthians 15:46) *precede* what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:44 about a “natural body” vs “spiritual body”. In other words, Paul displays this consistent pattern in chapter after chapter *of the same book*. But then—*boom*—just like that, the consistency abruptly ends (at least, according to the Spiritual Resurrectionist). Paul drops his use of “spiritual” to denote a *quality*, and instead uses it *this one time* (in 1 Corinthians 15:44) to denote a *composition* of the resurrected body. And then, just as abruptly, he immediately reverts to using “spiritual” to denote a *quality* in his explanatory statement in 1 Corinthians 15:46. It's like using the term “black and white” to mean “opposites” in every instance in a letter—*except once*—where it means “identical”.

Still another observation worth noting, regarding another well-worn and widely understood metaphor: To “sleep” was a conventional way of referring to natural death itself. For example, Old Testament scripture tells us that “David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the City of David”. (1 Kings 2:10). And there are plenty more examples of “sleep” referring to natural death in the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 31:16, 2 Samuel 7:12, 1 Kings 11:21, 1 Kings 11:43, 1 Kings 14:20, Job 14:12, Psalm 13:3, Daniel 12:2, and others.

Using this phrase didn't refer to a change of perspective, belief, or inner state, but to the concrete condition of a person's physical body having “given up the ghost”, becoming lifeless, then being “laid to rest”. So when Paul says that “we will not all sleep”, (1 Corinthians 15:51) he's using this metaphoric term (“sleep”) to refer to the natural death of a physical body. Rather, he intends to distinguish between those who have already died and those still living at “The End”—when Christ returns.

It seems a bit striking, then, that Paul places this familiar metaphor side by side with the language of being “raised”. Because by doing so, it strongly appears that Paul is talking about *naturally dead bodies* being raised to life at The End.

However, in Spiritual Resurrection, it's never naturally-dead physical bodies that are raised. *Spirits* are. So, the Spiritual Resurrectionist would have to assert that *in this case*, Paul is once again using a well-known figure of speech in a very unconventional (and easily misunderstood) manner. He was using it to say that a *spirit*—not a naturally dead body—would be raised.

What we're seeing, then, is that if the Spiritual Resurrectionist is correct, Paul is perfectly willing to redefine common metaphors, terms, and idioms “midstream”, and will do so without signaling any shift in register or meaning. The reader isn't warned of these alterations in meaning, but evidently, must figure it out on their own. But what we Simple Unknowings can observe is that Paul's inconsistent uses of language could certainly lead to some serious confusion.

But of all things Paul says, and which are difficult to reconcile with Spiritual Resurrection, the most notable example (in my opinion, at any rate) has to do with the “general resurrection” at The End.

After Jesus died, he was “raised from the dead” and placed at the right hand of God on “the third day” (according to the Corinthian Creed). The Spiritual Resurrectionist would agree with this. In fact, they’d insist on it. (And remember, the Spiritual Resurrection would be using “Jesus” as a placeholder for “Jesus’ *spirit*”). Now, as we saw in the chapter *One Phrase, Many Meanings*, the Modal Resurrectionists (which includes the Spiritual Resurrectionists) consider the “third day” to be eschatological, not chronological. So, Jesus may not have been raised on the third “calendar day” after his death, in this view. Nonetheless, on whichever day it took place, Jesus is understood by Paul to already have been “raised from the dead” and residing in the heavenlies.

However, in Spiritual Resurrection, things are apparently different for “ordinary Believers”. As we saw in *Narrowing the Field*, Paul considers Jesus’ resurrection to be the first of many to come. At The End, all Believers will be raised, just as Jesus was. However, ordinary Believers *do have to wait* until The End, when the “dead in Christ will be first to rise” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). And this raises questions: How can there be “dead in Christ” if, in Christ, Believers are “spiritually alive”, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 15:22 and Romans 6:11? Are these “dead in Christ” the same as those who “sleep” in 1 Corinthians 15:51? And why do “the living” ordinary Believers have to wait until The End to get transformed? Doesn’t Paul indicate that the transformation of Believers is already underway? (Romans 6:4).

Perhaps, when Paul talks about the “dead in Christ”, he actually *is* talking about people who have physically died. He does, after all, say “while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord”, and that we “prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). This seems to indicate that when our *spirit* leaves our body (at death), we’ll be “at home with the Lord”.

But, then, we have to ask: If our *spirits* are already “at home with the Lord” after our deaths (as Paul would have it), then exactly what will be “raised from the dead” at The End? If Paul is talking about our *spirits* being raised at The End, yet our *spirits* are already “at home with the Lord”, then where will our *spirits* be raised up to? And *from* where?

Notice what’s happening here: Once resurrection is detached from the body, the entire structure of Paul’s end-time expectations begins to wobble.

The questions don’t end there. Paul tells us that those who are *still living* at The End will be transformed. But in what sense? Are their *spirits* transformed? If Jesus was Spiritually Resurrected in some process that didn’t involve his body at all, then surely those still living at “The End” wouldn’t have *their* bodies “magically transformed”, either. So, Paul must mean their *spirits* will be transformed.

The problem: Their *spirits* are still in their living bodies. Supposedly, then, a “spiritual transformation” takes place in those living Believers. Well and good. But it raises a further question: Do those who are living at The End simply miss out on the re-making of the Cosmos—the very thing which resurrection is a part of?

Let me explain why I ask. If Spiritual Resurrection is correct, then it would appear that those who are living at The End will be left alive, albeit apparently with “transformed *spirits*”. But at the same time, the *spirits* of naturally dead people get “raised from the dead” to a glorious afterlife. We Simple Unknowings can say, “Well, OK then, maybe that's the way things work. What do we know”?

But if it *does* work that way, then what happens when the “still living” *eventually* die a natural death? The resurrection of the dead that Paul mentions would already have happened. So we have to wonder: Is there another, and *later*, “catch-up resurrection” in the planning stage? Something that'll happen somewhere down the road for those who die later? And what, pray tell, is to happen to those who are still alive at that catch-up resurrection? (I could see where this could go on forever). At the bottom, if Spiritual Resurrection is what Paul was talking about, the *spirits* of naturally-dead people get “raised”. But it seems like the *living* will be stuck right here on Planet Earth. But darn it, they've got transformed *spirits*, even if they might not *ever* get resurrected.

What we Simple Unknowings can observe, then, is that in some (very important) instances, Paul's language does cause considerable difficulties for Spiritual Resurrection. But, on the other hand, maybe these difficulties do have explanations. And maybe it's quite simple: Maybe it's that Paul's readers already understood, beforehand, what he was writing about. Therefore, Paul felt no need to re-explain what his audience already knew. Thus, things that appear *to us* as conundrums were not conundrums at all for them. All the things we question had already been answered for them in the in-person teaching of Paul and other apostles.

If that's the contention of the Spiritual Resurrectionist, then what they're saying is that Paul is, from our vantage point, writing in “code”. His use of common metaphors in uncommon manners, his inconsistent use of terms or idioms, or his speaking of “future resurrection-related events” in an almost incomprehensible fashion—these are all a *secret language* that only those on the “inside” can decipher. But the insiders “get it” because they already understand how Paul is using his terminology. The problem we “moderns” have is that we really *can't* “get it” because we don't have the deciphering manual. And we missed the TED Talks and Q&A sessions.

However, we Simple Unknowings can't be blamed for entertaining a more cynical suspicion: That this is more than just a clever explanation, but rather, the Spiritual Resurrectionist's methodological escape hatch. Once opened, anything Paul says can be made to mean whatever the interpreter needs it to mean. At that point, Paul's text no longer governs the Hypothesis—the Hypothesis governs Paul's text.

But—we need to curb our cynicism. Let's take a deep breath, back up, and consider this carefully.

We have (at least) one possible explanation offered for the seeming mismatch between what Paul says and what the Spiritual Resurrectionist says: Paul writing in “code”. We Simple Unknowings can complain that it's a sort of “shaky” explanation, but what are we to do? We're surely not going to be able to either confirm or refute the idea. So, maybe it's true, and maybe it's not. But, if it's *possibly* true, then so be it. We have to allow for it—even with reservations.

Maybe we're just asking the wrong questions. So let's change that.

Up to this point, the kinds of things we've been asking fall into the realm of theological, or perhaps philosophical, questions. But Paul does give us a point at which this “belief system” does bump into “real life”, with historical consequences: Paul's persecution of the church.

The church's claim of Jesus' Spiritual Resurrection might, itself, provide us with a rationale for Paul's persecution. And after all, even the Spiritual Resurrectionist would agree that Paul did indeed engage in such activity. The question, then, isn't whether persecution occurred, but whether that claim provided justification for opposition.

Let me illustrate what I mean. These days, it's not uncommon to hear someone say, “The ancients believed the world was flat”. We're talking about a claim made many thousands of years ago—a claim that was once widely held, but then met opposition. And one (but not the only) reason we know this claim was made is that, going back to Pythagoras (c. 500 BCE), Aristotle (c. 384–322 BCE), and Eratosthenes (c. 276–195 BCE), these writers began to assert the reality that the earth is a sphere. The very existence of opposition to an idea can itself be evidence that the idea opposed was actually made at some point.

With this in mind, let's see if anything Paul says indicates that his opposition to the church had to do with their (presumed) claim of Jesus' Spiritual Resurrection.

As we saw in the chapter *The Conundrum*, Paul said of himself that he was “persecuting the church of God beyond measure and trying to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13). And in that same chapter, I noted that the core elements of that faith were that Christ died, was buried, was raised, and was seen by Cephas and the Twelve.

Presuming the church was preaching a Spiritual Resurrection, then, as we've seen, what they're actually proclaiming is something about Jesus' afterlife experience. They weren't proclaiming that God did anything in the “here and now”, nor that anything in this physical, observable world had been changed as a result of Jesus' “resurrection process” itself. Any changes that might have occurred in Jesus' resurrection were of a “spiritual” nature.

The point is this: A Spiritual Resurrection wasn't the kind of thing that could be “proven” in a court of law. There could be no tangible evidence of it, no “eyewitnesses” to its occurrence. It existed only as a “belief”, not as something that happened in a this-world, this-timespace event. In short, it's not something that could be *known*. It could only be *believed*. (Here, I'm harkening

back to definitions of “To Know” and “To Believe” that were set in the chapter *Knowing and Believing*).

Was it possible, though, that certain afterlife beliefs themselves were “outlawed” in the Laws of Moses, and as such, “persecutable”? To answer this, we Simple Unknowings have to find out something about Jewish afterlife beliefs.

Fortunately, we can do so easily enough. We can read what Jews themselves say on popular websites, such as “Judaism 101”, “My Jewish Learning”, and “Chabad”. These sources aren’t heavy-duty scholarly expositions, of course. However, they do show what Jews actually believe (and, as a bonus, some reference academic sources as well). Or, we can just look up “Afterlife: Jewish Concepts” on encyclopedia.com. But the reason this works is because Jewish afterlife beliefs aren’t “ancient history”, per se. Jewish views on the afterlife have existed continually for centuries.

Reading on these websites, what one learns quickly is that in ancient Judaism, there was allowance for a very wide spectrum of afterlife beliefs—the same as today. Going back to the 1st century, the common belief of the Pharisees was a “Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day”. The Essenes, the Therapeutae (in Egypt), and apparently most of the Hellenistic Jews believed in some kind of “soul survival” (like, dying and going to Heaven or Paradise). Judaism even allowed for reincarnation as another human being (but draws the line at coming back as a warthog or turnip or anything non-human). And to round things out, the Sadducees didn’t believe in an afterlife at all.

The wide variety of afterlife beliefs in Judaism harkens back to the fact that the Torah doesn’t prescribe any “necessary” beliefs about the afterlife. The focus of Judaism is on life in the “here and now”. To be an observant Jew was to live according to the Laws of Moses, and one could do so without holding to a particular afterlife belief at all.

This isn’t to say that the afterlife was an afterthought in Judaism. It wasn’t. There were certainly “hints” found in the Torah that there may be an existence on the other side of death. It was this that allowed for (primarily) the later Psalmists and Prophets to explore the notion more fully.

Presuming a Spiritual Resurrection, the early church was talking about a fairly generic belief that when a person dies, their *spirit* goes to a pleasant afterlife experience. But even tacking on notions of being glorified and exalted, and in the presence of God, wasn’t pushing things too far. The idea of “heavenly vindication” was already in Apocalyptic literature, such as the books of 2 Maccabees and 1 Enoch.

The church’s Spiritual Resurrection claim itself doesn’t provide a “legal” rationale for a persecution of the church, because “legally”, a Jew could believe pretty much what they wanted about the afterlife. But, maybe, if Paul’s persecution of the church was a “sectarian” matter of admonishing certain sect members that had strayed from the sect’s doctrines, then we might be on to something. But Paul doesn’t tell us whether the “church persecution” is a “legal” or a sectarian matter.

This means we've struck out. Based on what we have, we can't say with any certainty whether Paul's persecution of the church had to do with a belief in Jesus' Spiritual Resurrection. As such, this whole exercise turns out to be a wash.

Let's try another possibility. What about the church proclaiming the *spirit* of Jesus is Lord or Messiah? (In a Spiritual Resurrection paradigm, that's what they would have been claiming). As we've seen, "the faith" Paul wanted to "destroy" had to do both with Jesus' resurrection and with the belief that the resurrected Jesus was Lord and Messiah. So it's not a stretch to think that the "Lord and Messiah" proclamations might have been the real reason for the persecution.

Starting with the "Messiah" proclamation, we've got the same kind of issue as we did with afterlife beliefs: A belief in a Messiah isn't required in Mosaic Law. The Pharisees certainly believed in a "promised Messiah". The Essenes believed in two of them. And the Sadducees didn't believe in even one.

So, here again, it's hard to find "legal" grounds for Paul's persecution. But again, what if Paul's persecution was simply a matter of getting rid of wayward sect members who professed a belief contrary to the sect's doctrines? Here, we hit the same problem: We Simple Unknowings don't know if Paul's persecution was a legal or sectarian matter. He doesn't say. So it's a wash.

Another possibility: the church's declaration that "Jesus is Lord". In Jewish culture, the term "Lord" could safely be used in a manner similar to Medieval European practices: A king, prince, priest, or even a judge could be referred to as "Lord". A commoner might even address, say, a wealthy businessman as "Lord".

But, among the Jews, the term "Lord" was also used in a "higher fashion" as a substitute for Yahweh (the name of God). Jews wouldn't utter the name Yahweh out of profound reverence for that name, and to avoid a possible violation of the commandment against taking God's name in vain. So, for example, when reading a scripture aloud that referenced "YHWH", they'd speak the word "Lord".

If the early church was proclaiming Jesus was "Lord" in that "higher fashion"—equating Jesus' authority with that of Yahweh—then potentially, that could be both a legal and a sectarian issue. But in a Spiritual Resurrection paradigm, that's not what they were talking about. They were talking about the *spirit* of a dead Jesus—not the *person* of Jesus—having been given authority by God. The thing is, we see God giving "spirit beings" authority in Jewish literature dating back to the time of Jesus (or before). In 1 Enoch, God gave "spirit beings", such as Michael, Uriel, and Raphael authority over the cosmos, natural elements, and the spirits of humanity. And in the Dead Sea Scrolls, God appoints the "Prince of Lights" to rule over the righteous, while a malevolent spirit of darkness (often called Belial or Melchiresa) is granted temporary authority to test and afflict humans. And these kinds of things call into question whether saying the *spirit* of Jesus was given authority is even a persecution-worthy offense to begin with.

However, there is one thing that could be a factor in both “Lord” and “Messiah” declarations: Mosaic Law says that anyone who was “hung on a tree” was considered “cursed” (Deuteronomy 21:23). Thus, it seems impossible that a cursed man could be either Messiah or Lord.

This “cursed man” business might (I suppose) give both legal and sectarian justifications for a persecution. But, once again—provided this did give such justification—such justification could equally apply to someone claiming the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus. So, the “cursed man” issue doesn’t offer even slight confirmation that the church was specifically proclaiming a Spiritual Resurrection.

Now, if we Simple Unknowings stop and consider everything we’ve covered in this chapter, we have to ask: “Does anything in what we actually have *require* us to think that Spiritual Resurrection is what was originally claimed”?

And the answer is “no”. As things now stand, we can certainly grant the *possibility* that Spiritual Resurrection may have been what was originally claimed. But at the same time, we have to grant the possibility that the whole of the Spiritual Resurrection paradigm is nothing more than the product of the Hypothesist.

A Questionable Answer

"It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"
—William Shakespeare

We Simple Unknowings had one job: To see whether what the Spiritual Resurrectionist says about resurrection lines up with what Paul, our earliest source, says. However, we also wanted to take the Spiritual Resurrection Hypothesis *on its own terms*.

To this end, we've gone along with the presumptions of the Spiritual Resurrectionist. We presumed Paul was indeed talking about Spiritual Resurrection. And we've presumed the earliest church, in their in-house terminology, was using unconventional definitions, metaphors, and so on. Furthermore, we've presumed that the Spiritual Resurrectionists' explanation as to why there are some notable mismatches between Spiritual Resurrection and what Paul says is adequate: The earliest Believers all had a shared understanding already of Paul's position, which we moderns aren't privy to. But to us, it appears that Paul was sometimes writing in "code".

Furthermore, we've presumed that there was some valid reason for Paul's persecution of the church—a Jewish persecution of other Jews. Perhaps most importantly, we've even gone so far as to presume that there really are such things as divinely induced revelatory experiences.

We've gone the whole other mile to give Spiritual Resurrection a fair shake. But, we've also seen that to accommodate these presumptions, there is considerable "special pleading" necessary, and a great deal of "plain reading" of the texts that needs to be set aside. It's quite clear that when you drill down deep enough, more questions arise than answers. Ultimately, there is nothing that obviously affirms the original message of Cephas and The Twelve was of a Spiritual Resurrection of Jesus.

That's all fine, though. If Paul was talking about Spiritual Resurrection, and if there are indeed such things as divinely-induced revelatory experiences, and if Paul is writing in "code" and if and if—then, yes, we do have reason to believe that Cephas and The Twelve "saw" the risen Jesus (metaphorically speaking) through some form of divinely-induced revelatory experiences. And thus, they claimed Jesus was raised from the dead—in *spirit*.

Of course, none of this means we Simple Unknowings have personally embraced the belief that there are such things as divinely-induced revelatory experiences, whether visions, dreams, or revelations. We don't even know if there's a God who does such things. We're agnostics. As such, we certainly haven't agreed that something special happened to Jesus in the afterlife. Because we're not sure there's one of those, either.

We can, though, clearly see this: If it wasn't for a divinely-induced stimulus (vision, dream, revelation, what-have-you), then the message itself—"After Jesus died, his *spirit* went to heaven where he was exalted, glorified, pronounced Lord and Messiah"—is just an expression of an afterlife belief. To be more specific, it's what Cephas and The Twelve said about Jesus' afterlife (if the Spiritual Resurrectionist is correct). But it boils down to this: Jesus died, and his *spirit* went somewhere, and was exalted, glorified, and so on.

The thing is, that sort of message by itself doesn't get too far. Let me illustrate what I mean with this scenario: Little Hortence says, "Grandma died and went to heaven and got a crown of glory, and she's now Queen of all Grandmas everywhere". This is "true"—at least, in the eyes of Hortence, who misses her Grandma. And of course, Hortence is free to believe that (and may her Grandma rest in peace). Hortence's belief is a sentiment, a mechanism for coping with loss and grief, a way for her to honor the memory of Grandma.

But would a "hearer" of Hortence's thoughts turn around and report to someone else, "Hortence's deceased Grandma was crowned in heaven as Queen of all Grandmas" as if it were fact? Almost assuredly not. It's Hortence's belief about her Grandma, not the hearer's belief.

The hearer might believe in reincarnation. Or maybe that a deceased person's consciousness melds with the Universal Consciousness. Or any one of a countless number of possible afterlife beliefs. But even if the hearer believes in heaven (as does Hortence), they're not likely to repeat Hortence's "Queen of all Grandmas everywhere" claim as if it were a true fact. And especially not if the hearer believed that same thing about her own loved-but-lost Grandma. If Hortence's claim was repeated at all, it would likely be only to remark on something "endearing" (or "cute", or even "sad") that little Hortence said. But as a claim of any wider theological or explanatory relevance, or especially, as a claim of true fact, Hortence's statement gives others no reason to repeat it, preserve it, or treat it as publicly meaningful.

Now, let's consider the Spiritual Resurrection message of the earliest church. There's nothing in the message itself—"Jesus' *spirit* was raised to heaven, glorified and exalted"—that anyone outside the small-ish group of Jesus' former followers would have found especially worth repeating. We can grant that those former followers, as "insiders" of the movement, might have shared that sentiment with each other. They all knew Jesus personally in his earthly life. He *mattered* to them. But to people outside that small circle—especially to Gentiles from a non-Jewish culture—a message about a stranger named Jesus who died, went to heaven, and was proclaimed Lord and Messiah wouldn't have been particularly relevant. And without relevance, it's difficult to see how such a claim would carry a high degree of repeat-worthiness.

In general, for a claim to become widespread, it tends to be sharply focused, debatable, emotionally compelling, and relevant. A claim that "Jesus was spiritually raised from the dead" is certainly sharply focused, debatable, and (to some, at least) emotionally compelling. But the thing I want to focus on here is the "relevance" factor.

If a claim isn't relevant to the hearer, then the hearer of that claim isn't likely to become a repeater of it. Granted, a person could certainly repeat a claim to debate its truth. But aside from that, if they don't see the claim as relevant to anyone else, then its truth hardly matters; they won't repeat it, and the message goes no further. My neighbor can claim, "I washed the car this morning", and while that claim may be perfectly true, I'm not likely to repeat it to anyone else. It has no relevance beyond the person who uttered it. It's a "shoulder-shruger".

So, for a claim to be repeated on a broad basis in a culture, it needs to be relevant within that culture. A claim that evokes a response of "*meh...*" and a shoulder-shrug isn't likely to travel too far.

And this is precisely where the cultural world of the Greeks and Romans matters. These were the cultures that early Christianity spread to during the life of Paul. For the Greeks and Romans, the idea of a person named Jesus having died, gone to Heaven, and been glorified didn't present any new or unfamiliar concepts. They already believed that through apotheosis (deification), their rare heroes, demigods, and later, Roman emperors could be elevated to dwell among the gods—on Olympus or in heaven. In fact, most religions of the ancient Near East already included notions of glorious intermediate beings, deified humans, and divine heroes residing in a “spiritual realm”.

So the message that a Jew named Jesus had been “spiritually raised from the dead”—and even that he'd been granted special power or prestige—represented a concept that those in Greco-Roman cultures already believed in. In both Greek and Roman cultures, an “exceptional” individual might be “raised” after death to attain the status of “hero”, or undergo apotheosis and become a minor deity. Even asserting that Jesus was a truly outstanding person who championed the oppressed, embraced the marginalized, and stood up for social justice, and still, it's nothing new. The Greco-Roman cultures already had figures like Prometheus, Theseus, Perseus, Dionysus, Heracles, and Hecate, all of which were viewed as “champions of humanity” in one respect or other.

At the bottom, the whole of the “Jesus idea” represented a concept already very familiar in those cultures. And familiarity is precisely the problem.

To a Greek or Roman, hearing that some Jewish rabbi had died and that his *spirit* had been “raised up and glorified” would hardly have sounded extraordinary. It would be rather like a person in the U.S. hearing a foreigner from a small, underdeveloped nation announce enthusiastically, “In my country, we have traffic lights!”, as though this were something new and remarkable. It might be true—but for the American, it's hardly out-of-the-ordinary. And because it adds nothing new to the American hearer's understanding of the world, its very commonness drains it of relevance—and with that, of any real repeat-worthiness.

This raises a question: Why would Greeks or Romans bother to pass along a claim about an otherwise unknown Jew whose death was followed, allegedly, by being “spiritually raised” in a heavenly exaltation? Why would this story be any more important to them than the already-common stories of their own demigods and heroes?

It's here that divinely-induced revelatory experiences play their big role.

To we Simple Unknowings, there's nothing “special” about the message that someone named “Jesus” (who we've never heard of) getting “raised to the Heavens, glorified, and exalted”. It's a statement about Jesus' afterlife, which may or may not be true. But if there was something we experienced—something that was believed dependent on a “risen Jesus”, and which confirmed it's truth—then things are different. That claim becomes something more than just a child speaking about her deceased, beloved Grandma. It might well go beyond an intellectually-held belief (or, “acceptance that something is true”) about gods or demigods. It can be seen as a “reality”.

We actually see this kind of thing quite commonly among modern Traditional Christians who believe Jesus was Bodily Resurrected. They'll say they've experienced the “presence of Jesus”, or

that the Holy Spirit “opened their eyes”, and from that point, they “just knew” that Jesus had been raised from the dead. And of course, in Traditional Christian circles, they mean bodily resurrected. Because that's the story told in Traditional Christian circles.

Back in *Believing and Knowing*, we talked about this very thing, noting that for Traditional Christians, there is a reason for it: “Because the Gospels not only proclaim Jesus' bodily resurrection but also promise his continued presence, such an experience of the risen Christ demonstrates to the 'experiencer' that the promise of his continued presence is true, and therefore ... the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus must likewise be true”.

The Spiritual Resurrectionist is saying nothing different (except in terms of the “mode” of resurrection). Paul repeatedly tells his readers that the “risen Christ” is a living, indwelling spiritual reality inside the ordinary Believer. He uses highly experiential, intimate language for this:

- Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”.
- Romans 8:9-10: Paul uses the phrases “the Spirit of God dwelling in you”, “the Spirit of Christ” and “Christ is in you” almost interchangeably to describe the daily reality of Christian life.
- 2 Corinthians 13:5: He challenges his readers to test themselves: “Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”

For Paul, the Christian life isn't about following a dead teacher's ethics; it is a supernatural, participatory experience of being “in Christ” and having “Christ in you”.

What I'm getting at is this: Aside from the mode of resurrection, the Spiritual Resurrectionist is saying nothing different than the Bodily Resurrectionist: A Believer can “know” that Christ was (spiritually) raised from the dead by experiencing the inward presence of Jesus.

All this, taken together, seems to hint at something: Perhaps the repeat-worthiness of the claim that “Jesus' *spirit* was raised and exalted” wasn't really the calling card used to reach out to non-Believers (in a Spiritual Resurrection paradigm). Maybe it really worked more like this:

Jesus dies and is buried. The community of his followers is devastated. But then, Cephas and The Twelve each have some kind of profoundly powerful experience of the presence of Jesus. They “see” Jesus' *spirit* as having been raised, exalted, vindicated, and validated by God, and given a place in the Heavens as God's Son, Messiah, and Lord. Cephas and The Twelve are convinced that these experiences are revelations from God Himself. It's as if Jesus had been “raised from the dead” (in a manner of speaking, of course).

Cephas and The Twelve first tell other former followers of Jesus of their experiences, and what those experiences revealed to them. And many of those former disciples received the news gladly. And some of them subsequently have their own experiences of the “living Jesus”, understanding that now, “Christ is alive *in me*”.

This becomes a contagion in the community of former followers of Jesus. And, in the Spiritual Resurrection paradigm, it's because of the “reality” that God had actively revealed this truth to

them.

In short order, this community decides to spread the “good news”. To this end, a small group of these “Jesus followers” who have experienced “Christ in me” move from Judea to a Greek culture city. There, they meet regularly. They share meals, fellowship, and love for one another. And, they invite others to come for their “meeting times”. Some of these others might be the marginalized, the socially destitute—the poor, the slave, the widow. There, the visitor is welcomed into this community. They feel acceptance and love. They feel a sense of belonging. And, eventually, they learn that this community exists because of the community's devotion to someone named “Jesus”. They learn that Jesus was an extraordinary man who loved unconditionally and taught others a radical new way of life in “God's Kingdom”. And, the visitor learns that Jesus had died, but his *spirit* had been raised by God, and proclaimed Lord. And, in the process, some of those visitors might likewise have eye-opening experiences of “the *spirit* of Christ in me”. They become new converts.

In other words, for those who spread the message that “Jesus' *spirit* was raised and exalted”, there was no reliance on the “uniqueness” of the message itself. That message itself, after all, wasn't really all that unique.

But the lack of uniqueness wouldn't hamper evangelical efforts. It could be fully understood that leading off with a claim that “Jesus' *spirit* has been raised and exalted” was of little value. So instead of leading with that particular belief, the community of Believers led by something else. They presented a particular lifestyle of being unconditionally loving and accepting of others, hospitable and kind toward the outcasts, the underprivileged, the poor, the “marginalized” of society—“just as Jesus was”. The belief that Jesus was Spiritually Resurrected (as it had been divinely revealed) was presented, in this context, as the reason this lifestyle had been chosen.

Basically, then, the message of Jesus' Spiritual Resurrection was spread, but it didn't spread because it was, in itself, innately repeat-worthy. Rather, it was spread in sort of a “stealth” fashion, as the explanation they offered for their own existence as a group, and for their chosen manner of life. New converts weren't really responding to the Spiritual Resurrection message itself. They were responding to the unconditional love and acceptance of this group. Only later did they learn it was “all made possible” because of someone named “Jesus” who had died, but, whose *spirit* had been vindicated and validated by God. And if the person who'd been attracted by this group eventually had some kind of experience that, to them, validated that Jesus' *spirit* had indeed been raised and exalted, they'd become part of the group. They became “Christians”.

This paradigm shouldn't be terribly foreign to anyone in a modern, Western culture. This is precisely the kind of thing even Traditional Christians do. You'll practically never hear a Traditional Christian preacher engaged in evangelism leading with a message that “Jesus was bodily raised from the dead”, as if that, in itself, was the very thing that a “hearer” should find of great importance. Rather, what seems to happen is that the Traditional Christian will offer certain promises of redemption, forgiveness, and peace even in difficult situations. As a bonus, “when you die, you'll go to Heaven to be with Jesus”. Of course, it may ultimately be explained that this is all made possible because “Jesus was raised from the dead”. And if so, it can't truly be said that Jesus' resurrection is treated as a “secondary notion”. But it's not the first thing put forth, either.

However, I don't mean to draw any conclusions from this. We are, after all, living in a world in which Christianity has existed for some 2000 years now. It's long been entrenched, and many Traditional Christians simply assume that "Everybody knows, 'raised from the dead' means 'bodily raised from the dead'". The fact (as the Traditional Christian would have it) of Jesus' bodily resurrection no longer carries with it the "shock value" it might have once had.

Let me stop right here, though, and get back on track with Spiritual Resurrection.

We Simple Unknowings see that if Paul really was talking about Spiritual Resurrection, then, it's possible to account for the spread of the resurrection claim, even though that claim, by itself, wasn't terribly repeat-worthy.

But still, there's something we can't overlook: Someone having an experience of "Christ in me" isn't somehow "proof" that there is a "Christ in me" at all. In fact, it's not "proof" that Jesus (Christ) was "Spiritually raised from the dead". Potentially, all these experiences could have been nothing more than feelings, sensations, or thoughts attributed to God or a risen Jesus, but neither God nor Jesus were the real source. Anyone who was told that they could "know Jesus spiritually" only needed to believe that they *could*. Then, they'd then be open to labeling any experience that was cathartic, or joyful, or profoundly peaceful, or enlightening, or awe-inspiring or, mystical (and so on) as an "experience with the risen Jesus".

Ultimately, what we are dealing with here are a succession of abstract beliefs—convictions, concepts, or ideas that exist in the mind without direct, tangible connection to physical, observable reality. This isn't like seeing a boulder at the bottom of a cliff and believing it fell from the top of the cliff. This would be an "ordinary belief", and may be correct or incorrect, but at least it's based on something that could potentially be observed in nature. But Spiritual Resurrection is like a belief that the boulder magically appeared in that spot one day, materializing out of nothing. That's an abstract belief—the kind we're working with here. And in Spiritual Resurrection, it's abstract beliefs all the way down.

However, having said all that, we Simple Unknowings must remember: It's not incumbent on us to make any defense whatsoever for Spiritual Resurrection. We're not trying to "prove" whether divinely-induced revelatory experiences really happen. Neither are we trying to "prove" whether Jesus was Spiritually raised from the dead, because clearly, nobody could ever "prove" that. Nor are we trying to "prove" the spiritually risen Jesus could be "experienced". We're just trying to find "What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead".

At the bottom, Spiritual Resurrection **does provide an answer to our Primary Question**: The thing that gave rise to the claim that Jesus was *spiritually* raised from the dead was a divinely-induced revelatory experience.

But to get there, we've had to grant quite a lot: awkward definitions of terms, misuse of common idioms, unclear metaphors, "writing in code", the list goes on. At nearly every turn, we've been asked to accept another assumption, another special pleading, another almost-incomprehensible rendering of Paul's language could more easily be understood in some other fashion.

Of course, we Simple Unknowings don't object to making allowances when the evidence calls for them. But when the allowances begin to outnumber the observations they're meant to explain,

we start wondering whether we're still following the evidence—or rescuing the hypothesis.

The best we can say, then, is that after making a remarkable number of accommodations, the explanation does work—*on its own terms*. But as we move ahead, we'll see a very odd thing: If we are to truly accept that Spiritual Resurrection was the original claim of the church, then *on its own terms*, the original meaning of the resurrection claim wasn't important enough to preserve.

The Required Vanishing of Spiritual Resurrection

*“The tragedy of Science—the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact”
—Thomas Henry Huxley”*

If Spiritual Resurrection was indeed the original claim of Cephas and The Twelve, and if the belief system built around it had forever remained intact, then we’d be home free. We’d be finished with all this. We Simple Unknowings could conclude that the thing that gave rise to the claim that Jesus’ *spirit* had been “raised from the dead” was divinely-induced revelatory experiences. And we could leave it to someone else to figure out whether there’s a God who does divine revelations or not.

But Spiritual Resurrection didn’t produce a belief system that forever remained the only belief system built around Jesus. So, that’s not the history the Spiritual Resurrectionist can offer. Rather, they must, by necessity, offer not only a history of Spiritual Resurrection, but also of the advent of Traditional Christianity.

Let me explain: If the Spiritual Resurrectionist is right, then Spiritual Resurrection was the *original* and *genuine* claim. But clearly, that claim *didn’t* remain the message of the church for all time. Somewhere back in ancient history, the meaning of “raised from the dead” had to have undergone a **Big Switchover**. That is, the meaning of the claim somehow changed from “Jesus’ *spirit* went to heaven and got exalted and glorified” to “a deceased Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, vacating his final resting place” (the Traditional Christian claim). In both cases, the claim used the same verbiage—“Jesus was raised from the dead”. Only, the original *meaning* had morphed into something radically different.

What we see, then, is this: It *can not be true* that Spiritual Resurrection was the original claim if it’s not *also true* that the original meaning of that claim underwent this Big Switchover.

That’s because of the *undeniable reality* that’s right in our face: The message that’s been passed down through history is of the *Bodily* Resurrection of Jesus. So, the Spiritual Resurrectionist has no choice but to posit that the Bodily Resurrection message was a “morphing” of the Spiritual Resurrection message.

An objection could be raised at this time: Maybe there wasn’t any “morphing” of the message at all. Maybe the original churches believed in a Spiritual Resurrection, but eventually, there were *other* churches that sprang up elsewhere that believed (wrongly) in a Bodily Resurrection. And maybe the original churches were somehow “stamped out” by the later, Bodily-Resurrection-believing churches.

Objection noted. But let me explain why that’s not the case.

According to Paul, during the first half of the 1st century, Cephas was one of The Pillars of the Jerusalem church, and later in leadership in the church of Antioch. Likewise, during that timeframe, Paul himself had both taught at and written to the churches of Rome, Philippi,

Galatia, and Corinth, and mentions the church at Ephesus. So we know those churches existed in the lifetimes of Cephas and Paul.

Now, fast-forward to the end of the 1st century, or the early part of the 2nd century. Those same churches were still in existence. By then, there certain men who reached adulthood in the 1st century and had become Christians. Later, they had risen to positions of leadership in some of those same churches. Among them were Clement of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna, and Ignatius of Antioch.

These men, as important leaders, had each written to other churches. Clement of *Rome* wrote to the church of *Corinth*. Polycarp of *Smyrna* wrote to the church at *Philippi*. Ignatius of *Antioch* wrote to *Ephesus*. Every one of the churches that these men either wrote *from*, or wrote *to*, (or perhaps both) had been ministered to earlier by one or more of the original Revelation Recipients. These were the very people to whom it was originally revealed that Christ's *spirit* had been raised.

What we're dealing with here is one group of churches, all holding to a gospel of Jesus' Spiritual Resurrection (according to the Spiritual Resurrectionist). And these same churches existed from the time of The Pillars and Paul, up until the end of the 1st century or beginning of the 2nd century. That's when Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius were leaders in the church.

Now here's the problem: Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius all believed in a *Bodily* Resurrected Jesus. And they were writing as if their recipient churches likewise believed in Bodily Resurrection.

Thus, it would appear that this same group of churches that had once believed in Spiritual Resurrection now professed Bodily Resurrection. Their leaders were professing a Bodily Resurrection, and they were writing to churches that likewise believed it.

But let's go back to the original objection being addressed: "Maybe the original churches believed in a Spiritual Resurrection, and eventually, there were *other* churches that sprang up elsewhere that believed (wrongly) in a Bodily Resurrection. And maybe the 'original' churches were somehow 'stamped out' by the later, Bodily-Resurrection-believing churches".

The reason it *can't* be that is this: We're talking about the *same bunch of churches*: Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Antioch. These churches had existed all along, from the time of The Pillars and Paul. If they'd been "stamped out", then they wouldn't have been in existence such that Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius could have been leaders of some of them and written to others of that same bunch of churches.

What's clear is that none of these churches were "stamped out" by some rival group that believed in Bodily Resurrection. These churches stayed in existence all along. So, we're back to the necessity of the Big Switchover.

And here, we have to acknowledge one of two things: Either...

- a. all these churches that had learned of the Spiritual Resurrection of Jesus directly from original Revelation Recipients later rejected that foundational message in a Big Switchover to a (false) Bodily Resurrection message, or
- b. there was never a Big Switchover at all, but rather, those churches had believed in the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus all along.

The question now becomes “Is it even true that this Big Switchover ever happened?” And for that, we’re going to need some evidence. A person might claim that a thousand-mile-long river of clear water begins as a giant mud puddle. Maybe that’s true, and maybe it isn’t. But to convince everyone who lives along that river, the claimant’s going to have to show some evidence. Mud puddles don’t usually produce clear water.

What we’ve got, in terms of “church history”, is a message of the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus having been passed along for some 2000 years. That’s “traceable”. We live in the very influence of that belief system. We don’t need “proof” that it exists. So, we’re going to need some evidence to convince us that it exists because a Big Switchover happened ages ago.

So, what’s the evidence for this Big Switchover?

There isn’t any. None. There’s nada. Zilch. Such evidence doesn’t exist. I had to do an incredible amount of digging around to figure this out, and in the end, all I could find was that there are professional researchers who’ve come to the same conclusion: There isn’t any evidence of the Big Switchover.

Dr Carrier, whose own Hypothesis of a Mythological, Celestial Jesus would benefit tremendously from such evidence, says, “We have no record of how the religion shifted from internal visions ... to the elaborately historicized appearance narratives in the Gospels”. (Carrier, Richard, article “How Did Christianity Switch to a Historical Jesus?”).

And likewise, author J. M. Cameron asserts that there is “no text, no primitive record, no known fragment, to which we can appeal to justify this view [ed., that the message ‘morphed’]”. (Cameron, J. M., “A New New Testament”, published in The New York Review of Books, December 4, 1986).

Now, it’s not my intent to present an “argument from silence”. We Simple Unknowings aren’t presenting any arguments at all. We’re looking at those presented (in this case) by the Spiritual Resurrectionists. They are the ones arguing for the Big Switchover, and they have the same difficulty we’ve encountered: There’s no evidence for it.

The modern Spiritual Resurrectionist might respond to this conundrum saying, “Well, there may be no evidence of the Big Switchover, *but we know it happened!* Paul was talking about Spiritual Resurrection, and it wasn’t until later on that we see writings about Bodily Resurrection. So there *must have been* a Big Switchover”.

This is too obvious a “ploy” (and an absurd one at that). It’s entirely dependent on the *presumption* that Paul was indeed teaching that Jesus was Spiritually Resurrected—the very thing

we've been presuming. But it's right here that we've got to question whether it's a presumption we should be making at all. After all, throughout this whole endeavor, it's never been decisively demonstrated that Paul was indeed teaching Spiritual Resurrection. We Simple Unknowings have generously accommodated that view (and often, despite some real difficulties). But that view itself is quite debatable. So, when we're forced to reckon with the alleged Big Switchover between Spiritual Resurrection and Bodily Resurrection, it makes no sense whatsoever to treat the latter belief (Bodily Resurrection) as “proof” of the earlier Spiritual Resurrection belief while simultaneously explaining the latter belief by the earlier one.

In other words, the Big Switchover from Spiritual Resurrection to Bodily Resurrection can't be taken for granted. Once Spiritual Resurrection attempts to assert itself as the precursor for Bodily Resurrection, it's making a very loud statement about historical chronology: “Historically, the Bodily Resurrection message was the late-comer”. Perhaps more to the point, it's saying “Spiritual Resurrection was the lit fuse, and Bodily Resurrection was the explosion”. But that is no longer merely a theological or philosophical claim. It's a claim about what actually happened in time—about the sequence of events in real history. And claims about what happened in time require evidence.

That's the point at which we realize we can no longer simply *believe* Paul was indeed writing about Spiritual Resurrection. We'd need to *know*—as a justified, true belief—that he was. But we don't know that. We've just presumed it. And we've now reached the very place where the Spiritual Resurrectionist must ante up and provide evidence for the historical sequence they are asserting. Yet there is no evidence for that history.

Let's back up and put the whole of the Spiritual Resurrection idea in a different perspective.

Jesus is crucified, dies, and is buried. Then—according to the Spiritual Resurrectionist—Cephas and the Twelve receive Divine Revelation that the *spirit* of Jesus has been raised and exalted. But we should pause here and spell out what this actually entails.

(I'm going to attempt this “spelling out” using the kind of terminology which seems common among modern Spiritual Resurrectionist authors).

There was a moment in time—from our earthbound point of view—in which God-Very-God, the Eternal and Incomprehensible, the Ground of Being, the Source, the One, the Ultimate, Universal Consciousness, the I AM—(however one conceives of “God”)—did something both pointedly specific and all-encompassing. It was an act of profound intent, having world-changing ramifications. Through Divinely-induced revelatory experiences, God instilled in or transmitted Truth to Cephas and The Twelve. And the Revealed Truth was that the *spirit* of Jesus had been raised up to the pinnacle of the Heavenlies for all Eternity.

This “raising up” and exaltation—this Spiritual Resurrection—was the Universal Consciousness's validation of what Jesus taught, the vindication of everything Jesus was in his earthly life. Given to Cephas and the Twelve was a Truth that would be of the most consummate and unequivocal significance—not merely to a small sect, but to the whole of humankind, and to the course of history itself.

In this moment—this sublime, terrifying, and wondrous interaction with the overwhelming Radiance of the I AM—Cephas and the Twelve came to *experience* the “living Jesus”. Not as a memory, not as a metaphor, but as a real and accessible expression of all that the Eternal and Incomprehensible God is.

This Divine Revelation, the unchangeable and eternal expression of the Everlasting Love, was the very foundation of the church, the primal disclosure of the Divine at work in the world, the basis upon which human beings could understand their relationship to the Source of Life and Truth. It was the outpouring of the Eternal Love that fills the cosmos, first manifested in the life of Jesus. And now it’s revealed in the raised up and eternally exalted *spirit* of the Christ—an invitation into a new and transformed existence for all who would open themselves to this indwelling reality.

But... Well... somehow, all this sort of got lost in the shuffle.

Apparently, the very revelation of the God of Ages just sort of drifted into a dense fog and disappeared. Whatever it once was become a forgotten memory.

The once profoundly significant message of the Spiritual Resurrection of Jesus lost its significance in the very churches that preached it. It lost its significance in the cultures it had spread in. And it lost its significance in history, leaving behind no footprints, no hints that it had ever existed in the first place.

All in all, the Spiritual Resurrection message was a “loser”.

And here’s the deal: This “lost message” business, oddly enough, *has* to be precisely the contention of the Spiritual Resurrectionist, if there is no evidence that the Spiritual Resurrection message had been “stamped out” or underwent a “morphing” process. Minus those kinds of external processes, the Spiritual Resurrection message just died on it’s own. And there is no evidence of either to be found.

Granted, the Spiritual Resurrectionist may object that this way of putting things sounds cynical. But from a critical standpoint—one concerned not with devotional reassurance but with the reality of the thing—the conclusion is impossible to avoid. If Spiritual Resurrection was the original claim, and was made known through a deliberate divine communication from God, then the church utterly failed to preserve what would have been its most necessary and foundational truth.

Had the church regarded this divinely revealed Spiritual Resurrection as non-negotiable—had it been fully committed to guarding and transmitting it as the precious thing it (supposedly) was—then something doesn’t make sense. Why didn’t something of such profound significance, communicated from the very heart of God, remain the core message of the church that professed it? But clearly, it did not—if the Spiritual Resurrectionist is right (oddly enough).

Was the original claim of Cephas and the Twelve—the divine presentation to humankind of the truth of Jesus’ revealed resurrection—not worth preserving? If it had been, it *would* have been. After all, the alternative claim—a mistaken or fraudulent claim of witnessed, Bodily Resurrection (if the Spiritual Resurrectionist is correct)—was preserved, and with remarkable tenacity, for

nearly twenty centuries. So it strains credulity to suppose that the original and true *meaning* of Spiritual Resurrection, had it truly been the movement's foundational message 'of first importance', would have failed to endure at all.

At the bottom, if the Spiritual Resurrectionist is right, the intended *meaning* of "raised from the dead"—a *spiritual* "raising"—faded from view. The Spiritual Resurrectionist might say the meaning morphed into something that conveyed the idea of a crude Bodily Resurrection because "people live unawake in a matrix", and their finite minds couldn't comprehend the Infinite. Their "energy" or "vibe" wasn't right.

But it could have been something more mundane: Maybe it morphed due to overuse of metaphors, poorly-chosen analogies, and misunderstood idioms. Who knows? Maybe, in the end, the idea of an ordinary afterlife repackaged as a "spiritual resurrection" just wasn't worth repeating.

It's at this point we Simple Unknowings must realize something of tremendous importance: The precise "how" behind the Great Switchover isn't the central issue. The real question is far more unsettling: If Jesus' Spiritual Resurrection was the God-revealed, foundational Truth of the church, how could the church have allowed the Great Switchover to occur at all?

Where was the pushback against the deceit of some new and untrue message creeping into the churches that Paul, Peter, and other Revelation Recipients had ministered to, or perhaps even founded? Did no one in Corinth, Antioch, Philippi, Galatia, or Rome stand to assert boldly that "this upstart Bodily Resurrection idea is *not* the Truth that we were taught from the beginning!"?

Well, perhaps there was a pushback. Maybe there was a virtual war going on in those churches at some point. But we'll never know. There's no evidence of it—no letters of protest, no recorded schisms, and no "orthodox" Spiritual Resurrectionists decrying the "heresy" of Bodily Resurrection. In the historical record, this supposed conflict is a total vacuum.

This silence is telling, because it suggests the conflict itself is a modern invention. Indeed, the evidence shows that the idea that the earliest church professed a purely Spiritual Resurrection was actually developed in the last 200 years or so. During and after the Enlightenment, scholars began re-examining inherited doctrines with new historical and critical tools. In that setting, figures such as Reimarus, Paulus, Strauss, Bauer, and others constructed an alternative explanation, claiming it to have been the "real thing" that had been lost to time. From their perspective, traditional Christian orthodoxy had gotten something fundamentally wrong, and Spiritual Resurrection was proposed as a corrective. It was, they argued, a rediscovery or reconstruction of what the earliest followers of Jesus had really meant all along.

Put plainly, it's a corrective that creates bigger problems than it solves. The forcing of metaphors, poorly-chosen analogies, misused idioms, and the necessary 'Big Switchover', all put together, feels like a bridge built of shadows. It's as if it's an attempt to force a complicated explanation onto a simple reality. If we go with **Occam's Razor**, looking for the Hypothesis with the fewest assumptions—the simplest explanation—we can stop trying to accommodate a 'morphing' process that left no trail and left no witnesses. We can consider another option we still have—one that is a much more straightforward possibility: Maybe the church has been saying the same thing since

the very first morning because that's exactly what they meant to say. It's time for the Fellowship to look at the message that actually survived the journey intact: **Bodily Resurrection.**

On to Bodily Resurrection

*"Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!"
—Isaiah 26:19"*

Having managed to arrive at Bodily Resurrection, we Simple Unknowings are surveying a strange territory indeed. The Bodily Resurrection territory is divided into two great sections. One section is occupied by the Traditional Christian Hypothesis and the other by the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses.

Both the Traditional Christian Hypothesis and the Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses posit that the earliest resurrection claimants did indeed *claim* the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus. The dividing line between these two sections *appears*, to some, to be like this:

- The Traditional Christian section is defined by the proposition that "it's *true* that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead".
- The Ersatz Bodily Resurrection section is defined by the proposition that "it's *false* that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead".

If put in this fashion, it forces a discussion about whether Bodily Resurrection itself can or cannot happen. In turn, that can lead to endless discussions about "miracles", and whether there's even a God, and if there is, whether God is the type to sometimes do "uncommon" things in Nature, and so on and so on. In other words, viewing the topic of Bodily Resurrection as a "True or False" kind of thing can lead to a dense agglomeration of bunny trails.

But we Simple Unknowings aren't tripping into that underbrush only to get lost in it. We're true agnostics. We don't know whether there's a God or not, or if there is a God, whether He's the type to tinker with Nature, and so on. The only honest answer we can offer, if somebody asks us whether it's True or False that a bodily resurrection can occur, is "I don't know". We don't know a thing about the truth or falsehood of it.

In any case, the truth or falsehood of Jesus' bodily resurrection isn't something we're trying to determine, anyway. We're trying to determine the phenomenon that ultimately gave rise to the resurrection claim. What we're doing is the difference between determining whether Bigfoot is real or not, and figuring out what was behind a tourist saying he'd seen the creature.

Ultimately, we're asking about what *people* did back in the 1st century: They made a *claim*: "Jesus was raised from the dead". Both the Traditional Christian Hypothesisists and Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypothesisists agree that those people meant "*bodily* raised". Our primary concern, then, is with uncovering (a) "what happened" that put the idea in their heads that Jesus was "alive again" as an embodied being, and (b) what prompted them to tell other people that very thing.

To this end, let's begin by looking at what we've got.

In our collection of Hypotheses, there's only one Traditional Christian Hypothesis. But there's a bunch of Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses. The thing they have in common is that they all

have to address certain points: Jesus' death, his burial, and the stimulus experienced by the earliest resurrection claimants. But quite importantly, in the end, they all have to reach a point at which those resurrection claimants actually do make the claim that “Jesus was (*bodily*) raised from the dead” aloud, publicly, to other people.

From Here On: The Traditional Christian Hypothesis may be abbreviated as the “TCH”, and an individual Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses may be abbreviated as an “EBRH”, or “EBRHs” for plural. That's going to be a lot easier for all of the Simple Unknowings (me included).

In our definitions set back in *The Lay of The Land* (and elsewhere), both the TCH and the EBRHs agree that Jesus was the “Known Jesus”—an historical person known by contemporaries. Also, in all these Hypotheses, Jesus died as a result of crucifixion. And one other thing held in common is that the claim “Jesus was raised from the dead” is meant as “Jesus was *bodily* raised from the dead”. Beyond those shared basics, the Hypotheses begin to diverge—especially on matters like Jesus’ burial and the nature of the stimulus behind the resurrection claim.

The TCH says that the corpse of Jesus was buried. Likewise, some of the EBRHs assert this same thing. But others assert that Jesus' corpse was left hanging on the cross—some saying it was left there till it fell apart from decomposition, others saying it was left there for some span of time, then eventually thrown into a pit somewhere, or onto a trash heap, or what-have-you. This issue of “burial” becomes a complication.

Another area of complication has to do with the stimulus that triggered the thought that “Jesus lives”, and which was subsequently expressed as “Jesus was (*bodily*) raised from the dead”.

In the TCH, the “seeing”—the *stimulus*—was witnessing, via ordinary eyesight, an objectively real, observable, living-again person named Jesus.

In the EBRHs, each Hypothesis in this category offers its own proposed stimulus. Some EBRHs propose an *illusory* stimulus—for example, that one or more claimants saw a Jesus lookalike and took him to be Jesus himself. Others propose an *internal* stimulus—a vision, dream, hallucination, or other inward experience later expressed as “seeing” Jesus. Still others effectively replace “seeing” with *realizing*: Jesus was understood to have been bodily raised from the dead through scriptural reinterpretation or theological reflection rather than through any visual encounter at all. (This, too, is a kind of *internal* stimulus). Of course, the “particulars” of any proposed stimulus will vary from one EBRH to another.

The thing is, examining the TCH alongside every individual EBRH would turn our process into a massive comparison-and-contrast exercise. We’d not only have to compare the TCH with each EBRH, but each EBRH with every other one. In the end, we Simple Unknowings would be left staring at a huge comparison chart we’d created and deciding which Hypothesis we liked best—a particularly vain sort of decision.

What we're looking at, with the TCH on one hand and the stack of EBRHs on the other, is a problem of *efficiency*. So, we're going to simplify matters a bit.

First, remember how the earliest resurrection claimants experienced the series of events: Jesus dies, then at some later point, Jesus is “seen” as “alive-again”. From this, it is deduced that Jesus was raised from the dead, and that leads to the subsequent claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”.

The TCH is the only Hypothesis in which the stimulus corresponds directly to something that was actually *observed correctly*. It says that the stimulus that ultimately led to the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead” was the witnessing—via ordinary eyesight—of an objectively real, observable, living-again person named Jesus. This witnessing, then, led to the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. This is like, “I watched a house burn down. Later, I saw it standing again. So I told others, “The house was rebuilt””.

But the EBRHs don’t work that way. Whatever stimulus they propose—whether external, internal, or illusory—it corresponds to something *observed incorrectly* (like an illusion), or to something that wasn’t actually *observed* at all (like hallucinations, dreams, or “realizations”). What happens, in every case, is that the earliest resurrection claimants had some type of *experience* which was misinterpreted. It was this misinterpretation, then, that led to the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”. It’s like: “I watched a house burn down. Later, I *dreamed* it was standing again. So I told others, “The house was rebuilt””.

Our simplification, then, will be to proceed first with the TCH, because it's the only one that both *asserts* and *requires* a direct correspondence between the stimulus and something actually *observable*. In this Hypothesis, the origin of the resurrection claim is straightforward. The stimulus was a genuinely living-again Jesus witnessed, via ordinary eyesight, after death. At the origin stage, the TCH requires no additional layer of explanation between the stimulus and the claim that followed from it. If the earliest claimants really witnessed a living-again Jesus, then the claim “Jesus was raised from the dead” follows naturally enough.

Only if the TCH proves insufficient do we need to explore the alternate explanations offered by the EBRHs. So, let's start at ground zero and get a good understanding of what “Bodily Resurrection” is really all about.

Our working definition of “Bodily Resurrection” is this: “The term ‘bodily raised’ or ‘bodily resurrection’ should be understood to mean the ‘reconstitution’ of a ‘*whole person*’ who had died. This process involved both the reconstitution of the physical body, plus the reunification of that body with the person's *spirit* (which had been separated at death), resulting in a being fit for an eternal life”.

I myself put the definition in that form, but the definition itself didn't come from me. For that matter, it didn’t come from the earliest resurrection claimants (i.e., Cephas and The Twelve). Paul didn’t concoct the idea, either. Before Jesus was even born, the idea of Bodily Resurrection had already become an established concept in Judaism.

More importantly for our purposes, it's still the view held today by Orthodox Jews (and, I believe, by many Conservative Jews as well). In other words, we're not dealing with purely ancient concepts that must be reconstructed through specialized historical research. It's a living theological tradition.

Consider the opening line of an article at My Jewish Learning: “Resurrection of the dead—*t’chiyat hameitim* in Hebrew—is a core doctrine of traditional Jewish theology. Traditional Jews believe that during the Messianic Age ... the bodies of the dead will be brought back to life and reunited with their souls” (‘Jewish Resurrection of the Dead’, myjewishlearning.com). The article isn’t attempting to reconstruct history; it is simply describing a belief that traditional Jews still hold.

The point, then, is this: Jewish Bodily Resurrection isn’t some lost idea that must be painstakingly recovered from the distant past. It’s been taught all along—a doctrine preserved through centuries of tradition. Most of the material presented in this chapter is information I gleaned from modern Jewish sources that aren’t “doing history” in the academic sense. They’re just talking about a belief that’s been passed along for centuries. What some might regard as “ancient history” is, to others, simply the story they have known all along.

Of course, an “ongoing tradition” means just that: There was a beginning, and from that beginning, the tradition continues. But the beginning of the Jewish Bodily Resurrection idea wasn’t in the form of a single, clear pronouncement from a solitary prophet. Rather, the idea began primarily as the convergence of two influential currents:

- A question of justice, and
- later prophetic and apocalyptic literature, such as the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel

The question of justice was fairly simple: In this world, there is plenty of injustice that is never rectified. When would we see God’s justice enacted for all those who had died without having received justice in this life?

In this life, the word “justice” often acts as a mere placeholder for order or consequence; it can punish a perpetrator, but it lacks the power to restore a victim. If a life is taken or a body is broken, no amount of legal retribution can “set things right”—one of the basic requirements of true justice. A courtroom can offer a verdict, but it can never offer a return of years, health, or wholeness to the victim. This inherent inadequacy suggests that within a closed physical system, true justice is an impossibility.

The ancient Jews could see this as well as any modern. But, for the Jews in particular, with their belief in a God of justice, it was a vexing problem. However, certain Jewish writings from about the mid-500s BCE to about the 160s BCE offer hints toward an answer.

The Book of Ezekiel presents the vision of the “Valley of the Dry Bones”: bones come together, are covered with flesh, and receive breath—the *spirit*—and are brought back to life. Daniel 12:2 declares, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt”. Isaiah 26:19 states, “Your dead shall live; their corpses shall rise”.

But these aren’t all. There are other passages of scripture—some older than the ones mentioned above—which point in similar directions: God was capable of raising the dead, and seems to intend to do so.

What we see, then, is that the convergence of these two streams—the desire for justice and the understanding that God may have a purpose for raising the dead—suggests that God’s ultimate justice would be carried out *beyond* this life. It seems it was largely these two things, taken together, that led to the Jewish hope for Bodily Resurrection. It didn't emerge as a flight of fancy, but as a logical necessity for a just universe. If there is a God of Justice, His work must eventually transcend the blunt instruments of human law. True justice, in this view, requires the Resurrection of the Dead—a divine “undoing” of entropy, a reconstitution of the *whole person*—body+*spirit*. It wasn't merely the victim's *spirit* that was violated in the crime; the body was likewise involved. And for the perpetrator, this is equally true: It wasn't just the perpetrator's *spirit*, but his/her body that committed the crime. True justice must be for the “whole person”, whether victim or perpetrator.

In this view, then, if there was ever to be a true enactment of God's justice, a Bodily Resurrection was required. The resurrected, reconstituted person would then exist forever in the “wholeness” of God's justice.

But these resurrected, eternally-living people have to have a place designed to support them. And that gave rise to the belief in the *Olam Ha-Ba*—Hebrew, meaning the “World to Come”. In the Second Temple era, *Olam Ha-Ba* was envisioned as a physical yet flawless, reconstituted Earth, suitable for eternal life. The imagery of a “New Heaven and New Earth” (Isaiah 65:17) was often used to describe the transformed state of the universe after the final judgment. In this world, a real “balancing of the scales” would be possible. A true justice—one that not only involved punishing the wrongdoer, but also making the victim whole again in a reality where death and disfigurement no longer have the final word—could be carried out. And in this New Earth, justice would be forever.

To be sure, other ideas were also developed as part of, or in conjunction with the whole “Bodily Resurrection” paradigm. Most notable were the “Messianic Age” and the belief Bodily Resurrection would occur at the “Last Day”. The Messianic age was a future, divinely instituted era of global peace, justice, and prosperity, initiated by a Davidic king (Messiah) who would break foreign, pagan rule. Bodily Resurrection was connected to the Messianic era, and was slated to occur at the “Last Day”. However, there was debate about whether the “Last Day” would mark the end of the Messianic Age or its beginning.

Now here's what I'm getting at: By the time Jesus was born, the ideas of Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day, a New Heaven and New Earth, and the Messianic Age were already established ideas in Judaism. The sect that became known as the Pharisees had formed around the idea of Bodily Resurrection and refined it. By the 1st century CE, the Pharisaic framework had successfully defined the “brand” of bodily resurrection for the Jewish public.

Belief in a “literal”, corpse-affecting Bodily Resurrection was so central to Pharisaic identity that a Jew could hardly be considered a Pharisee while denying it. And to be clear, Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection meant that a grave would be emptied, and the physical “person” (which was comprised of both body and *spirit*) would be reconstituted.

We can grant that there were other Jewish groups that permitted a wider range of views concerning the afterlife. But the Pharisees held exclusively to Bodily Resurrection. For them, this

view was unequivocal. It was the only faithful answer to the question, “What happens when you die?”

However, some historians and theologians would assert that there were Jews (though not strictly Pharisaic Jews) that believed in “resurrection”, but not a “Bodily Resurrection” as the Pharisees defined it. It would seem that a significant minority of Hellenized and apocalyptic “diaspora” Jews—those outside of Judea and Galilee—held a Two-Body view. Thus, they proffered a “bodily resurrection”, only, it was one that didn't affect a corpse. The corpse remained buried, and the *spirit* was given an altogether new body.

If this sounds like a clever linguistic redefinition, that is because it is. Let's return to something I said in *Spiritual Resurrection Examined*, in regard to Jesus' resurrection: “The Hypothesist may attempt to categorize this [ed., Two-Body Resurrection] as a Bodily Resurrection, but we're not taking that bait. Two-Body Resurrection belongs firmly in the category of Spiritual Resurrection, because the ‘thing raised’ (in this view) was Jesus' *spirit*”.

As a matter of history, the majority of Pharisaic Jews didn't “take the bait” either. The Rabbinic establishment recognized that if you concede that the corpse stays in the dirt forever, you lose the literal fulfillment of God's promises in the Hebrew Bible (like Ezekiel's dry bones or Isaiah 26). They saw the Two-Body view as a rhetorical “sleight of hand” that surrendered the physical reality of the resurrection.

The idea of a Two-Body Resurrection was shunned, and eventually, Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection became *the defining belief* in Judaism regarding the ultimate, non-negotiable destination of the deceased. This belief became codified as the orthodox standard in Judaism—one which remained unchallenged until the 19th century—roughly in the same era when the TCH began to be challenged in Academia.

Going forward, then, when I speak of Bodily Resurrection or Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection, I'm referring to a resurrection that affects the corpse, resulting in the reunification of a *spirit* with its body, resulting in a reconstituted “whole person” who could live eternally. This was the most common belief among the majority of 1st century Jews. But Two-Body Resurrection belongs in the Spiritual Resurrection category (where we put it in an earlier chapter). Discussion of it doesn't belong here.

Now, Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day wouldn't be an event that anyone would necessarily witness. It was directly tied to the reconstitution of the Cosmos. The living and the dead would, at that time (which might occur “in the wink of an eye”), be reconstituted as part of that Cosmic re-making. So, it's not as if anyone on this side of that event was necessarily going to know about it. Nobody was going to know whether that reconstitution of the Cosmos (or their own reconstitution) had happened until they were on the other side of that event.

To put it another way: If the entirety of the Cosmos underwent a cataclysmic reconstitution tomorrow, none of us living at that time would know if we had been transformed until (and unless) we showed up in some other form after that event happened. In this respect, then, Bodily Resurrection, which was to happen as part of the greater event of the reconstitution of the Cosmos, was as speculative as any other afterlife belief: There is no way to prove it's going to

happen, or for anyone in this life to prove it did happen (whenever it happens), and there's no way to falsify the belief.

The belief in Bodily Resurrection does bring up questions, though. The question of "what happens when you die?" still matters. The answer to this question was (basically) that for all those who die sometime between "now" and The Last Day, the *spirit* of the departed goes somewhere. Most of the Jewish literature I've read specifies a destiny of Gan Eden (Hebrew for "Paradise"), but I suppose there may have been other possibilities (such as going into a "sleep" in Sheol). This much of the Bodily Resurrection belief is similar to (but not exactly like) the belief that a person has a survivable component that departs the body at death and goes on into eternity.

The very important difference is that in Bodily Resurrection, the *spirit's immediate* destination (i.e., Gan Eden, Sheol, etc) is an *intermediate* destination, not a final or eternal one. The *spirit* goes to this *intermediate* destination only while it awaits its reunification with the body in the future event of The Last Day. Thus, for those who have died, there is an "afterlife" in this *intermediate* destination (i.e., "dying and going to Heaven"). Resurrection, though, is a second step after that afterlife. It's basically an Embodied Life after a Disembodied Afterlife.

After this second step of reunification of body and *spirit*, the resurrected beings will dwell eternally in the "New Heaven and New Earth" (aka "the World to Come"). In short, the Bodily Resurrectionist is going to agree with other "afterlife believers" that "when you die, you go somewhere". But the Bodily Resurrectionist also believes that at the end of this current Cosmos, the *spirit* and body are reunited, and eternity will be spent as an embodied *spirit* in a re-made Cosmos, not as a disembodied entity floating in the Eternal Ether.

Another question that arises is "what happens to those who are still living on the day of the great reconstitution of the Cosmos?" I've noted that Bodily Resurrection is "Embodied Life after a Disembodied Afterlife", as to set it apart from an "ordinary" belief in "life after death". That's partly because some of us may be alive at The Last Day—a possibility the believers in Bodily Resurrection had to consider. If The Last Day was indeed an actual, single day—or single moment—in history, and if there were no external reason (for example, some scripture in the Tanach) to believe that all of humankind would die off before The Last Day, then it was presumed that there would be people still living on that fateful day. They would become eternally living beings, but exactly how would that happen?

It seems a variety of ideas were developed by the Rabbis to answer this question. One idea is that at the Last Day, those who were still living would all die for the tiniest split second, then be immediately raised from the dead in a form fit for eternal life. Another idea was that the still-living at that time wouldn't die (even for a split second), but rather, would instantly be "transformed", becoming eternally-living beings as a result. There may have been other ideas about this, but the general idea was that the body of a living human being, at the Last Day, would cease being "mortal" and become "immortal", one way or the other.

Basically, then, Bodily Resurrection is a belief about life after this mortal life, and in this one respect, it's no different than any other afterlife belief. Where it differs (radically) is that there will be a reunification of body and *spirit*. As such, the eventual mode of eternal existence will be as a “whole person” (body+*spirit*). And there will be a “New Heaven and New Earth” because embodied creatures need a place to live. But, it's all *after this life*—after our existence as mortal beings ends.

However, there's one last topic to touch on: There wasn't a hard-and-fast rule on how the terms “raised from the dead” and “resurrection” could be used outside of a Bodily Resurrection paradigm.

For example, there are accounts of people who had been miraculously “raised from the dead” in the Old Testament, such as the son of Zarephath's widow (1 Kings 17:17-24), or the Shunammite woman's Son (2 Kings 4:32-37). The terms “raised from the dead” and “resurrection” (or, in Greek, “a standing up”) were as applicable in those instances as they are in Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day.

The difference has to do with “context”.

In the case of the son of Zarephath's widow, we could certainly say the person was “raised from the dead”, or “resurrected”. But he wasn't “raised *at the Last Day*”, nor was he raised to an *eternal life*. He was raised up, restored to the life he'd previously had, and was destined to eventually die again. These days, we'd probably call that “resuscitation”.

But on the other hand, saying “Dead people will be raised to an *eternal life* in the resurrection *at the Last Day*” is to put a very specific context in place. And it was these contextual characteristics—“raised to an *eternal life*” and “*at the Last Day*”—that gave Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection its very-specific meaning. As such, when a Pharisee spoke of “resurrection”, he was speaking of something definite—something timed, embodied, and eternal. And that specificity will matter as we move ahead.

Conceptually, the Pharisaic notion of Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day is fairly simple: If God could create the entirety of the Cosmos (including all living creatures), then there was no prohibition from God being able to reconstitute the whole of the Cosmos (including living creatures). It's this unlimited ability of God that even allows for the concept of Resurrection at the Last Day.

This “conceptualization” brings us to something I'd want to emphasize: Like all beliefs about “what happens when we die”, Bodily Resurrection in Judaism is seen as speculative. And even the circumstances under which Bodily Resurrection happens—at The Demise of History Itself, and the remaking of the Cosmos—are also speculative. What this means is that Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day is always kept at a “safe distance”: It's off in the future, and even when it happens, there won't be anybody here to say it did, because at that time, *everything* gets reassembled in a totally different paradigm. There won't be any “here” here.

In short, Bodily Resurrection was a “*doctrinal* viewpoint”. It's probably safe to say that, by the time Jesus was born, a Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day was the belief held by most (but not all) Jews. I'd imagine asking most 1st-century Judean or Galilean Jews, “What happens when you die?”, would elicit a response of something like “Your *spirit* departs your body, and will be reunited with it in resurrection at the Last Day”.

We see this very thing echoed in the Gospel of John. But, let me preface: Here, I'm keeping with the decision not to use The Gospels as “historical references” regarding Jesus. I'm just using this writing to demonstrate what an author born in the 1st century indicates about the already-common belief in a “Resurrection at the Last Day”. John tells us that Jesus' friend Lazarus had died, and Jesus goes to Lazarus' tomb, along with Lazarus' sister Martha, and others. There, Jesus remarks to Martha, “Your brother will rise from the dead”. Martha responds, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day”.

The point: The author of the Gospel of John includes this story without a twitch of hesitation, clearly thinking he could report Martha's statement without the slightest bit of explanation. And that's because what Martha recites was already a widely-held belief. Any 1st-century Jew hearing this story would have understood what Martha was talking about.

For we Simple Unknowings, then, the path forward is fairly plain. When we ask what “resurrection” might have meant to those making the earliest claims about Jesus, the most responsible place to begin is with the understanding of Bodily Resurrection that is actually visible to us in the Jewish tradition—this Pharisaic expectation of the dead being raised bodily at the Last Day. This belief, still held by Orthodox (and perhaps other) Jews today, has been consistently preserved and articulated within Judaism for centuries.

Paul's Pharisaic View

"It is a very remarkable circumstance that a man should have a color of his own, and that it should be so like him".
—Charles Dickens (from *Oliver Twist*)

Having just defined the Bodily Resurrection paradigm as it existed prior to Jesus, the mission is a "go". It's like we're in a spacecraft waiting for liftoff. The checklists have been done, and the countdown has begun. The excitement is electrifying. Anticipation hangs in the air like a heavy mist. But then... the countdown stops. "Houston, we have a problem".

We learned back in *The Conundrum*, that Paul was a Pharisee. And for we Simple Unknowings, that provokes a peculiar problem. When looking at Spiritual Resurrection, we asked whether the concept of Spiritual Resurrection matched up with what Paul says about resurrection. That was our direction. But here, in dealing with Bodily Resurrection, following that same course may not get us to where we'd like to go.

You see, with Paul being a Pharisee, and with no clear and compelling reason to believe Paul dropped his Pharisaic views on Bodily Resurrection, we're sort of stuck. We'll have to assume—at least provisionally—that when Paul speaks of resurrection, he's speaking about the Pharisaic notion of Bodily Resurrection. What this means, though, is that the question we end up asking is this: "Is the Pharisaic view of Bodily Resurrection consistent with Paul's view?" The problem is that all we're asking is whether a Pharisee, when he speaks of resurrection, sounds like one.

Well, fine. It is what it is. We Simple Unknowings didn't create that history. It's just what we've been handed. So, we'll do "liftoff" with what we've got. If the best we can do is to ask whether the Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection concept is consistent with what "*Paul the Pharisee*" says, then so be it. At least we can expect that everything he says should line up with that concept—at least *conceptually*.

But even still, there is a noteworthy upside: We're not importing a later Hypothesist's definition backward into the 1st century, as was necessary when examining Spiritual Resurrection. Rather, we'll be asking whether Paul was talking about a belief in Bodily Resurrection that had already been defined before Jesus was even born.

So, that issue addressed, the countdown continues, and at last, it's liftoff. And a "glitch warning" appears almost immediately. Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection was about something that *would* happen. It was tied to the "Last Day"—a *future* event belonging to the coming *Olam Ha-Ba*. But that, in itself, isn't a problem: Paul likewise affirms a resurrection at "The End". The problem is that Paul also proclaims an *exception*—something that *did* happen: Jesus' resurrection.

Doesn't that immediately tell us that Paul *wasn't* talking about Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection?

Yes and no.

Yes, in the sense that whatever happened in the case of Jesus didn't coincide with the Pharisaic timetable. Jesus' resurrection, as Paul describes it, wasn't synchronized with the expected schedule.

But no, in the deeper sense. The reason we Simple Unknowings examined Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection at all wasn't to guarantee their chronology. We can't even presume the Pharisaic timetable was "reasonably reliable". Maybe the whole idea of Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection (schedule and all) was right, and maybe it wasn't. But, we have to keep in mind that while Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection was the most widely-held view among 1st century Judean and Galilean Jews, it wasn't the *only* view. A Jew could believe in an afterlife that didn't involve resurrection at all. And maybe *they* were right.

At the bottom, the Pharisaic belief in a Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day was a speculative *doctrinal expectation* about how God would act—not a *prophetic declaration* of how history must unfold. There's a difference in saying "I believe God can do all things" and "God told me He'll do *this particular thing*".

The point is this: It's one thing to hold a *theological* conviction about the future; it is another thing entirely for historical events to occur in a way no one anticipated. But even if something occurs "early", that doesn't change its *category*. If someone expects the first snowfall in December but it happens in October, that doesn't make it *not snow*. It makes it *early*.

So, what we have before is two related but distinct issues: (1) the nature of resurrection (i.e., its category, such as Spiritual, Interpretive, Bodily, etc), and (2) the timing of resurrection.

Both matter. And we'll address both. But we can't address them simultaneously without confusing the question.

For the moment, then, we'll focus on the *nature* of resurrection itself. When Paul says "resurrection," is he speaking of the same kind of embodied, enduring event Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection presents, or of some other "resurrection category" altogether?

The *timing* question will require its own consideration. Specifically, we'll need to know why Jesus' resurrection happened when it did, while everybody else's happens at "The End". But first, we have to determine whether we're even dealing with the same category of event.

Chronology may have shifted. The category may not have. So for now, our status is still a "go".

Let's get on, then, starting with the message that Paul considered "of first importance"—the Corinthian Creed.

The base facts, in an abbreviated form of that Creed, are that "Christ died, was buried, was raised, and was seen by Cephas and The Twelve".

We can, in a Bodily Resurrection paradigm, understand it like this:

- Christ died (bodily)

- Christ was buried (bodily)
- Christ was raised (bodily)
- Christ was seen (bodily, as objectively real, and visible with ordinary eyesight)

What Paul says here regarding the bodily nature of resurrection, and in a “plain reading”, easily aligns with the long-existent Pharisaic concept of Bodily Resurrection.

One point of alignment is this: A “person” (body+*spirit*) died. Death was, after all, what happened when the *spirit* was separated from the body. Then, it was a “person” (body+*spirit*)—that was raised. The idea that a “whole person” gets raised is perfectly consistent between Paul and the Pharisaic view of Bodily Resurrection.

Drilling down a bit further, looking at the Greek language of the Creed, Paul uses the word *egeiro* (“to raise”) to indicate that the thing buried (a deceased person) was the thing raised (as a living person). This dead-and-buried person is the thing brought up, out of the grave. In a plain reading, this too fits perfectly well with the long-established idea of Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection. Using *egeiro* in its “literal” meaning was the very language of the Pharisaic Bodily Resurrectionist. A *whole person* is raised in *anastasis*—the Greek word for “a standing up”, and which we translate as “resurrection”. And “standing” is something done by the living, not the dead. That, right there, is the core understanding of the nature of Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection itself: dead bodies are raised to life.

Another point of alignment is that the risen Jesus was “seen”—*ophthe*, in Greek. Here again, in a “plain reading”, using the word's “literal” definition, this lines up with the bodily nature of Bodily Resurrection in the Pharisaic view. In this view, resurrection wasn't a ghost story; it was the objective reconstitution of the deceased person, becoming a living person with an imperishable body. But this imperishable body wouldn't be a phantasmic vapor. It would have a physicality about it. And it would be endowed with the kinds of senses our earthly bodies have, such as sight, smell, touch, and taste. Having a physicality to it, it would be observable as an objectively real object. And there's a reason for this: If a bodily-resurrected person wasn't observable as an embodied person, they couldn't be identified as the person who had died in an unjust world, totally defeating the very purpose of Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection: Justice.

Consider the thousands of Jews crucified by the Romans in retaliatory acts around the time of the First Jewish–Roman War, circa 70 CE. Crucifixion wasn't merely a way to kill someone; it was a way to shame them publicly—to leave their bodies exposed as a warning to others. However, in the view of the Pharisaic Bodily Resurrectionist, if God raised a *spirit* but left the “shamed” corpse decomposing, the shame would remain physically unreversed. But Bodily Resurrection is precisely this public reversal: The same person who was humiliated in death must be seen restored in the resurrected life.

None of this requires that the resurrected person would appear as a “mere mortal”, though. After all, we're talking about a resurrected person who would live eternally. That's not precisely the “stuff” we “mere mortals” are made of. The problem, though, was that there was no way to know exactly what an eternally-living resurrected person would look like, because nobody had ever seen one. The best anyone could do was speculate. Maybe the resurrected person would appear as a “physical” person commonly appears, or maybe they would appear as, say, a

“luminous”, yet embodied person. Maybe they'd appear to be in their prime of life (say, 20-40 years old), or maybe their appearance at any given time was up to the discretion of the resurrected person. The point is that nobody really *knew*.

Unfortunately, for we Simple Unknowings, Paul never spells out for us what Cephas and The Twelve (and later, himself) actually saw. At best, Paul's writings just affirm the Pharisaic view that a resurrected person would be observable (by others) via ordinary eyesight.

What it all boils down to, though, is this: If we read the Corinthian Creed in a plain reading, with no “forced” interpretations, this statement “of first importance” lines up perfectly with the nature of resurrection given us in Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection. And we begin to suspect that maybe we're going in the right direction. But let's move ahead with other things Paul says, and see whether they line up with that concept or not.

Paul notes that “Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him” (Romans 6:9). If read from a viewpoint of Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection, Paul's statement here can be understood to mean the *person* “Christ” (Jesus)—a body+*spirit*, having been bodily raised from the dead, would live eternally. And an eternal embodied life is exactly what 2nd Temple era Pharisees believed. Once again, we see Paul's writings as consistent with Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection.

What about Paul's statement that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50)? If Paul were using “flesh and blood” as the common and oft-used idiom it was (both in Jewish and Greek cultures), then it signified “mere mortals”. So, what Paul is saying is that “mere mortals cannot inherit the Kingdom of God”—a point that Paul reinforces a couple of verses later when he says that because of this, “this *mortal* must put on *immortality*”. Again, it's a “bingo!”, absolutely consistent with the Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection concept. (See Ephesians 6:12, Hebrews 2:14, Matthew 16:17 for idiomatic uses by other 1st century writers of “flesh and blood”).

Paul also tells us this: A deceased person's body “is sown a *natural* body, it is raised a *spiritual* body” (1 Corinthians 15:44). We've already seen, in the chapter *Is This What Paul Was Claiming?*, that Paul “consistently uses the term “spiritual” to denote a *quality*: 'material things' vs 'spiritual things', 'fleshly people' vs 'spiritual people', 'natural discernment' vs 'spiritual discernment', 'human wisdom' vs 'spiritual thoughts' and 'spiritual words'. But the Spiritual Resurrectionist has to explain that, when it comes to “what was raised”, Paul is being inconsistent: “Natural” and “spiritual” can no longer be used to denote a *quality*, but a *composition*.

In a Bodily Resurrection paradigm, we can fully retain Paul's consistency when he says a “natural body” is buried and a “spiritual body” is raised (1 Corinthians 15:44). But, doing so means it's the *same body*. The difference is that now, it's of a *spiritual quality*, not a *natural quality*. Its base elements haven't been swapped out for some kind of ethereal, “immaterial” matter. Rather, those base elements have been fully activated in some fashion, every particle of those base elements now operating with a new power source. As a weak analogy, it's sort of like switching on the electricity to a neon light: The element of neon gas inside the tube doesn't change, it just “comes alive” with a vibrant, radiating brilliance.

This, too, is entirely consistent with the Pharisaic view of Bodily Resurrection: The “resurrection body” is one reconstituted from base elements, yet permeated and energized by the *spirit* rather than base, human tendencies. It's a glorified, immortal body, reflecting the radiance of God, suitable for the World to Come. A resurrected body, then, being of a “spiritual *quality*”—no longer of a “natural quality”—is perfectly in line with this Pharisaic view.

And as we saw in that same earlier chapter, “To ‘sleep’ was a conventional way of referring to natural death itself”. When Paul says “we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed”, he’s clearly comparing what will happen to those who are *not* “sleeping” (aka “those who are alive”) with those who *are* “sleeping” (or, dead). Those who are still alive at “The End” will be “changed”. Those who are dead—that is, those who “sleep” and have been laid to rest—will be raised up, imperishable. In both cases, what Paul says will happen at “The End” is an expression of Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection beliefs.

But there's something else I want you to notice: In Paul's aforementioned discussion (1 Corinthians 15:51-55), by focusing on the “change” of the living, he clearly demonstrates something of profound importance. The resultant state of the living, yet changed, person and that of the resurrected person are the same. In both cases, we're talking about a body that has been “transformed”, occupies space, and emits “glory”—a person who is definitively “there”. And once again, this is consistent with Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection.

Another thing we see is an unmistakable consistency between what Paul says about a “Cosmic renewal” and the Pharisaic concept of the reconstitution of the current Cosmos into a “New Heaven and New Earth”—something that is part and parcel of the whole Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection concept. As we noted back in *Narrowing the Field*, resurrection “marked the beginning of an all-encompassing Cosmic renewal ... a time in which ‘the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. And then comes The End ... The last enemy that will be abolished is death’”. At the climax of this Cosmic renewal, Christ will “put an end to all rule and all authority and power” so that “God may be all in all”, indicating ultimate scope of God's redemptive work encompassing the entire created order, where all opposing forces are overcome and all things are made subject to God. The language Paul uses in these passages is what might be expected from a Pharisaic Rabbi.

Let me cut to the chase here. In the chapter *Is This What Paul Was Claiming?*, we asked whether Paul's passages about resurrection could be made to fit a Spiritual Resurrection framework. What we found was that we had to make allowance for inconsistencies in terminology, (supposed) shifts in metaphor, using idioms in a non-idiomatic manner, and even relying on the (rather hand-waving) idea that Paul was writing “in code” to make it all fit with the idea of Spiritual Resurrection.

Now we ask a different question: What happens if we read them presuming Paul is speaking of Bodily Resurrection in the Pharisaic sense? Do the tensions remain—or do they dissolve?

If you were to go back to all of Paul's passages we examined in the aforementioned earlier chapters, you'd find that virtually everywhere Paul addresses resurrection *categorically*, his plainly-read language rests very comfortably within the contours of Bodily Resurrection as understood in the Pharisaic tradition. Unlike in our attempts to match what Paul says with what

the Spiritual Resurrectionist says, which requires (often badly-strained) explanations, what Paul says fits like a glove with Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection.

In what we've got so far, then, it appears that simply knowing Paul was a Pharisee, and that what he's saying is (almost predictably) consistent with the very-Pharisaic idea of Bodily Resurrection, we Simple Unknowings have reason to suspect that yes, that's what Paul is talking about.

But what about Paul's persecution of the church? Does that give us any clues?

In *Is This What Paul Was Claiming?*, we found that a Jew could pretty much believe what they wanted about the afterlife. Because of this, a Jew might be perfectly comfortable with someone saying "God raised Jesus' *spirit*". That was, after all, just an expression of an afterlife belief: "Jesus died, and his *spirit* went to Heaven". However, every Jew could hold their own opinion on the matter: "I believe God sent Jesus' *spirit* to Sheol", or "God sent the *spirit* of Jesus to inhabit the body of a newborn". These are all just abstract beliefs about the afterlife. And Jews were free to believe what they wanted.

The point is that simply saying "God raised Jesus' *spirit* to Heaven" was not, in itself, a persecutable offense.

But in a Bodily Resurrection paradigm, the claim that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead—whether it's true or not—is a profoundly serious matter. The early church was saying "God raised Jesus from the dead", and they meant *bodily* raised from the dead, such that there was no corpse left in the tomb. They were claiming a historical fact, not merely expressing an abstract belief. They were saying "*this happened*"—a real-life event that took place in the world of ordinary history. And because of that, even if nobody considered it an offense to call this Bodily-Resurrected Jesus Lord or Messiah, there would still be undeniable grounds for persecuting the church.

Paul himself gives us an almost impossibly obvious hint as to what the real offense was—one that works *only* in a Bodily Resurrection paradigm. In 1 Corinthians 15:14–15, he says: "if Christ has not been raised" (understood here as *bodily* raised), "then our preaching is in vain ... moreover, *we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ*".

The early church was saying that God bodily raised Jesus from the dead in real life. If that were not true, then they were bearing false witness.

Notice the language Paul uses: "false witnesses" and "testified". This is legal terminology—the kind of language you'd expect in a court of law. And it points directly toward a major infraction of Jewish Law: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor". Bearing false witness against a neighbor was to break one of the Ten Commandments. But bearing false witness against God—saying, for example, "I was deathly ill, and God healed me", when in fact you were never sick in the first place—that's wrong on several levels. It's even *worse* than bearing false witness against a neighbor.

Paul says something else that hints in the same direction. He encourages Christians to endure hardships—including beatings, imprisonments, and mob attacks—while being accused of being

“deceivers”, despite being “true” (2 Corinthians 6:1-10). Claiming that God raised Jesus from the dead, when God never did such a thing (as some would have it), could certainly invite such an accusation.

It gets down to this: To some who heard “Jesus was (*bodily*) raised from the dead”, it was a claim about something that supposedly happened in real life. But it was false; it never happened at all. In their eyes, the church wasn't merely mistaken. They were telling a *lie*—and a grievous one. It was blasphemy.

Now, we Simple Unknowings can't conclude that the “falsehood” of the Bodily Resurrection claim was the *sole* cause of the persecution. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was that plus other theological, philosophical, legal, or even sociological matters. But, in asking whether the persecution of the church could have been caused, even partly, by the church's claim of Jesus' Bodily Resurrection, the answer would be “yes”. Blasphemy was a punishable offense under Jewish Law.

So, when we step back and look at the whole picture, a pattern begins to emerge. In terms of substance and vocabulary, Paul's message is indistinguishable from the Pharisaic hope of a Bodily Resurrection. We Simple Unknowing can see that in a plain reading of what Paul says. We need no “presumptions”, special pleadings, awkward explanations for inconsistent terminology or misused idioms, no hand-waving explanations that Paul is writing in “code”. Paul is talking about a Bodily Resurrection paradigm that was established even before Jesus was born.

And, if Bodily Resurrection was indeed the thing Paul and the earliest church were claiming, then, unlike Spiritual Resurrection, there is no need to account for any kind of “Big Switchover”: The claim of Jesus' resurrection began as a claim of a Bodily Resurrection, and has been consistently carried forth through history in that fashion.

Here, we Simple Unknowings, have reached a crucial checkpoint. In terms of “resurrection, as a category”, Paul's language about resurrection—the very idea of being “raised from the dead”—lines up with Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection. On that front, the spacecraft systems are green, the instruments humming normally. Mission parameters checked. All appears nominal.

Paul's Bodily Resurrection fits with a plain reading of the Corinthian Creed, but now, we can put it in our Claim Formation Paradigm. And doing so, we see that the stimulus corresponds directly to something that actually happened, and the claim is the natural expression explaining that stimulus.

- **Stimulus:** Seeing, via ordinary eyesight, an objectively real, living-again Jesus
- **Thought:** Jesus is alive.
- **Decision:** Should I tell others what I've seen? (Evidently, the decision was to do so)
- **Claim:** Jesus was raised from the dead.

All put together, it does seem to confirm that Paul's understanding of resurrection is that of Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection. And it fits seamlessly with both the Corinthian Creed and with our Claim Formation Paradigm. And it all fits with the Traditional Christian Hypothesis. It appears we have a match.

But suddenly, there's an explosion of chaos and confusion. Warning lights start flashing. Buzzers pierce the cabin. But it's not about the timing of Jesus' resurrection. We already got that alarm. We're good to go on dealing with that. These alarms signal something different. It's two problems we didn't see coming, because they're not really about "resurrection as a category". They're not even about the timing of Jesus' resurrection. But what are they?

A “Eureka” Moment?

*“The universe is full of magical things, patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper”
—Eden Phillpotts (from A Shadow Passes)*

We got the first alarm shortly after liftoff. That was the “timing” alarm, warning us about a “glitch”: Jesus’ resurrection didn’t happen at the Last Day. But, it wasn’t enough to scrub the mission; we were still on course with the Bodily Resurrection category. But then came the next two alarms. These went off to warn us of two other issues which, like the “timing” issue, arise only from the subset of Jews—primarily Pharisaic Jews—who believed in a Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day.

The reason we have all these alarms is that they’re signaling that Paul’s view of Jesus’ resurrection wasn’t really Pharisaic. So, here’s the breakdown on these Three Issues (and going forward, I’ll capitalize the term like that).

The first was the “timing” issue: Paul said that Jesus had been raised (bodily) from the dead. However, the Pharisees held that resurrections are slated to happen only at the Last Day.

The second and third “warnings” came later. They’re not actually issues about “resurrection itself”, though. They’re about “Messiahship”. Still, they’re connected (albeit indirectly) to the resurrection issue.

One is the “crucifixion-as-a-curse” problem: Paul said Jesus is the Messiah. But, a man “hung on a tree” (as an execution) is considered accursed (Deuteronomy 21:22–23). For some Jews, the curse was a sign of eternal exclusion. Pharisees, though, said the curse was to be executed in that fashion, but once the person was dead, the curse ended. Either way, the curse presented a logical and spiritual impossibility: The executed person *can’t* have been simultaneously the Blessed Messiah and a Cursed Criminal.

And the other issue has to do with the identity of the Messiah: The Messiah was supposed to be an extraordinary person—a triumphant king who’d restore Israel or a priestly figure who’d institute world peace. But Paul said Jesus—an obscure (and dead) Galilean peasant who was executed (and cursed in the process)—was the Messiah. So, Jesus didn’t fit the “Messiah” mold, and Paul’s view doesn’t fit the Pharisaic mold.

Now, let’s back up for a moment. We intended to deal with the “timing” issue at this point. But now, we’ve got the “cursed man” issue and the “Messianic identity” issues added. But there’s no cause for panic. There are common threads between these issues which may give hints as to how we deal with them:

- None of the Three Issues have to do with Bodily Resurrection as a category; they have to do with when Bodily Resurrection happens, and to whom it happens.
- All of the Three Issues exist only because Paul and the early church were saying something different than the Pharisees.

- Not everyone was a Pharisee. Thus, the Three Issues aren't “universally Jewish”. At best, they're fodder for a sectarian squabble, insignificant to those outside the sect.

That last point raises a question, which I'll call **Question #1**: Is it important for we Simple Unknowings to delve into non-universal, “in-house”, doctrinal-based Jewish issues in our quest to find a convincing answer to our Primary Question?

But the Three Issues themselves point to another question, which I'll call **Question #2**: Don't Paul's views on resurrection and the Messiah show he *wasn't* really talking about Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection?

Good questions. Let's deal with **Question #1** first.

Up to this point, we've had preliminary questions we needed to answer in order to get this far. For example, “Was Jesus historical, mythological, or folklore-ish?”, and “What was meant by ‘raised from the dead’ and ‘resurrection’?” But the Three Issues are only issues for those who held Pharisaic beliefs about resurrection and the Messiah.

So, is it really important for us to deal with what amounts to a sectarian squabble?

Actually, it *is* important—but not because we Simple Unknowings have any need to unravel sectarian, doctrinal/theological Jewish matters. The real importance, for our purposes, isn't in the differing viewpoints. It's in who formulated the differing viewpoint, and why.

In the Corinthian Creed, we're told that Jesus was raised from the dead and seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve. Of course, as we saw back in the chapter titled *Beyond Miracles*, the way it really worked, in their experience, was this: Cephas and The Twelve saw the risen Jesus, and from this, they deduced that he'd been raised from the dead. That, though, only tells us what Cephas and The Twelve came to believe about Jesus “*post-crucifixion*”. It doesn't tell us what they believed *before* Jesus' crucifixion.

Unfortunately, though, Paul never tells us what Cephas (or The Twelve) believed *before* Jesus had died. Given that Jews were quite free to believe pretty much what they wanted about the afterlife and the Messiah, Cephas and The Twelve potentially could have had, among themselves, a variety of beliefs about afterlife-related matters before they came to believe Jesus had been resurrected. So it's *possible* that some of them believed in a Messiah, yet didn't have any “set” definitions of who the Messiah would be. And maybe some of them didn't believe in a Messiah at all. And perhaps some of them believed the *spirits* of the dead went to the netherworld of Sheol, and some believed in a destination of Paradise or Gehenna, and others believed the deceased's *spirit* would eventually be installed in the body of a newborn.

So, let's just suppose, then, that Cephas and The Twelve *didn't* hold to Pharisaic beliefs about the Messiah and resurrection *before* Jesus' death. This would mean that upon seeing that Jesus had been resurrected to an eternal life, they'd be forced to rethink their views on the afterlife. But it wouldn't raise “resurrection timing” issues or Messiah-related issues *for them*. If they didn't hold to Pharisaic beliefs, they wouldn't have preconceived ideas of when resurrection should

happen, or about who the Messiah should be. The only people for whom these issues would be problematic would be those who already held contrary beliefs, like the Pharisees.

But what if a *Pharisee* had seen the bodily resurrected Jesus? (Answering this question will take us to the answer to Question #2).

It's the *Pharisees* for whom a resurrection *before* the Last Day would represent a total systemic failure, and declaring a crucified and cursed peasant as the Messiah would be unfathomable. To such a mind, God's universe operated by precise, revealed rules: the Messiah wins, the cursed can't be the "Son of God", and the Resurrection happens all at once at the finish line. What we'd need to know is how a person like this would deal with seeing a Bodily Resurrected Jesus.

Fortunately, we have such a person: Paul—in his pre-Christian role of *Paul the Persecutor*. We already know that before Paul became a Christian, he was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5) who was "extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Galatians 1:14). And we've seen in the previous chapter that what he said about Bodily Resurrection (as a category) is totally in line with Pharisaic beliefs. This would, of course, mean that nobody could rightly claim a "resurrection"—whether one that was more like a resuscitation, or one that was a *bona fide* resurrection to an eternal life—without an observable body being involved. Put it all together, and *Paul the Persecutor* was someone for whom the Three Issues, and indeed, the resurrection claim itself, would be *serious* business.

So, let's consider *Paul the Persecutor*. As we saw in *The Conundrum*, he had been "*handed*" the message—"Christ (Jesus) was raised from the dead"—by the early church (as had many). For *Paul the Persecutor*, it was the identifying statement of "the faith" he sought to destroy. And it's quite clear that he didn't "*receive*" that message (or, in Greek, *paralambano* -"take to himself as his own") upon being handed the message by the church.

Paul the Persecutor regarded the message as *untrue*. After all, he himself admitted later—as Paul the Apostle—that if Jesus *wasn't* raised from the dead, then "we [the Apostles] are even found to be *false witnesses of God*, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise" (1 Corinthians 15:15). What Paul came to say as an Apostle is precisely what he would have said earlier as a Persecutor. It's the same verdict—now spoken from the other side.

On top of that, though, given *Paul the Persecutor's* Pharisaic beliefs, he would also have found the whole of the "Jesus crucified / Jesus resurrected" message a theological impossibility. The Three Issues would have been in line right behind the "false witness" problem.

Put succinctly, he didn't merely refuse to take the message of Jesus' resurrection "to himself, as his own". Upon being handed that message, he wadded it up and lit a match to it. And then, he went after the messengers.

Clearly, *Paul the Persecutor* was an enemy of the church, bent on the destruction of "the faith" expressed in the Corinthian Creed. He wasn't a "seeker". He had no particular fondness for the person of Jesus, and the whole of "the faith" expressed by the early church was, I suppose, more like a virus that needed to be eradicated. He soundly rejected this "false message" and sought to wipe this "insanity" from the map of Israel.

As such, he was a man who possessed neither a psychological motive to resurrect a Jesus he had no connection with, nor an emotional void that needed to be filled with an imagined resurrection of Jesus. He hadn't been a devoted "follower of Jesus". His world hadn't been shattered by Jesus' execution on the cross. It's doubtful that he even knew about Jesus' execution when it happened. Scour Paul's writings as closely as we might, we'll find no indication that Paul knew, or had even seen Jesus during Jesus' lifetime. It simply doesn't appear that Jesus was even on *Paul the Persecutor's* radar until after the early church began making its resurrection claim.

Ultimately, *Paul the Persecutor* had no more desire to see Jesus "alive again" than a gardener has to see a weed pop up immediately after he pulled one. What he did have a desire for was to hunt those who claimed Jesus' resurrection, focused on putting an end to that nonsense.

So it's vitally important to grasp this: It was *this* Paul—*Paul the Persecutor*—who witnessed the resurrected Jesus. It *wasn't* "Paul the devoted Apostle". It was someone who had neither desire nor expectation to see Jesus "alive again" who saw Jesus alive again.

We need to stop here for a moment and understand what kind of experience this "seeing" might have been for *Paul the Persecutor*. When we read Paul's unvarnished statements like "Last of all ... he was seen by me also" (1 Corinthians 15:8), it's easy to minimize that "seeing". It's easy to think Paul is saying something very ordinary, like saying "I saw a house". But, Paul's plain declaration is like a witness in a murder trial answering the question—"Yes or no"—"Did you see the defendant shoot the victim?" and replying, "Yes". A single word—but behind it lies the unbearable and emotion-laden fact that the defendant was her brother, and the victim was her mother. You don't get all that from the simple, one-word answer to the question.

As we've already noted, Paul's encounter with the risen Messiah was both unexpected and unwanted. But whatever else it may have been, it couldn't have been a matter of just seeing Jesus in an "ordinary" form. Paul wouldn't have recognized the "resurrected Jesus" if he appeared as an ordinary man, because Paul had no idea of what Jesus looked like in the first place. Even if an ordinary-looking (but resurrected) Jesus had walked straight up to Paul and said, "Paul, I am Jesus", Paul would likely have smirked and walked on, thinking, "This guy's just trying to rattle my chain".

So whatever Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus entailed, it had to have involved an objectively real person for Paul to declare "resurrection". That's because, in Paul's Pharisaic view, a resurrected person should be observable with ordinary eyesight. But given that Paul couldn't have recognized Jesus, the man Paul would see could not be a man in any ordinary sense. It would have to be a man who was unmistakably "resurrected", glorified and eternally-living—one whose very appearance alone declared "This is the Christ the church was proclaiming". If this man uttered a mere four words—"Paul, I am Jesus"—then whatever uncertainty remained would evaporate instantly.

What Paul had to have experienced was an "in your face, whether you like it or not", nuclear-powered introduction to an unknown reality, and that reality had a name: Jesus. This encounter would be the curtain pulled back, exposing the disorienting and discombobulating truth that the world Paul thought he lived in was no longer the world that was actually there.

So whatever this encounter comprised, it forced upon him the terrifying conclusion that the crucified Jesus—the man whose followers Paul was persecuting—was not only alive, but overwhelmingly so. And Paul was looking at him right now. It would be an encounter that could no more be denied than the need for air to breathe, no more forgotten than the law of gravity.

The world of *Paul the Persecutor* would have been shattered. This wasn't a man secretly hoping the resurrection claim might turn out to be true. Seeing a bodily-present, living-again Jesus was a violent collision with a Fact that shouldn't exist, a disorientation so profound that the ground on which he stood would feel like liquid. It *couldn't* have been a “peaceful” transition; it was the absolute, violent execution of his illusion that “real life is what I think it is”. This was coming face-to-face with the disconcerting truth that “real life” is what *God* says it is.

And here's the thing: If we don't allow for that moment of absolute, heart-stopping disorientation—that sense of being a small creature having fallen into the gears of a large and terrifying machine—then we have missed *Paul the Persecutor* entirely. He didn't “find a new religion”; he experienced the wreck of the world as he knew it.

Very often, it's *loss* that forces us to restructure our lives. We lose a loved one, and our brains have to go through the painful process of rewiring to accommodate a life without the loved one. But the same kind of thing happens when we lose possessions we've grown accustomed to having. If your car is stolen, it can radically change the routine of your life, forcing adaptations. (And it can be astoundingly aggravating, and something that puts you in the role of “victim”—emotional changes that must be dealt with).

But sometimes, it's the arrival of a “new thing” that's disruptive, requiring time to accommodate. Ask any couple how their lives changed with the birth of the first newborn, and the stories will continue well through dinner. Life ceases to be “about the couple”, but becomes “about the baby” with an instantaneous fury. It's not simply a matter that “there's now a baby in the house”. It's more like, “because there's a baby in the house, the concept of a 'full night of sleep' disappears. It's a 24/7 cycle of feeding, changing, and soothing. We no longer have the spontaneity in our intimacy, and simply going out to dinner requires as much logistical planning as a military invasion”.

What I'm getting at is simply this: The addition of something new into one's life can mean a lot of unexpected changes.

For Paul, the stimulus—the introduction of a risen Jesus into his life—didn't necessarily form the simple Thought that “Jesus lives”. Paul might well have been left with a myriad of lingering, confusing questions and vaguely-connected ideas that hadn't congealed into a well-formed Thought. But he had the undeniable reality of that experience. That couldn't be un-done. Ultimately, the thought that formed would certainly have been triggered by that experience, but it meant more than just the fact that “a resurrection took place”. In the moment, though, its full meaning remained veiled. There is nothing about the visual data of a resurrected person that automatically dictates a specific *meaning*. To go on and say “this is the Messiah”, or “he died for our sins”, or “was raised because our justification”—that's something more. Those are not things the eyes alone can supply. They are conclusions drawn, meanings assigned—claims about purpose, about significance, about what, in the end, this encounter was for.

Ultimately, Paul (no longer the *Persecutor*) had to move from the “fact” to the “meaning”. Or perhaps, better said, he was *forced* to make that move. The “fact” was a “done deal”; he'd seen what he'd seen, and as they say, “it is what it is”. But getting to the meaning, once the “fact” had settled in, was a different step.

Here, a historical analogy might be useful: Albert Einstein was once a firm believer in a “static universe”. Einstein had been committed to the idea of a “Static Universe”, even fudging his math with the “Cosmological Constant” in order to keep his idea intact, matching the era's consensus. But in 1929, along came astronomer Edwin Hubble, who, through telescopic observations of the universe, proved the universe was expanding. What did Einstein do? He had no choice but to discard his “Cosmological Constant”, reportedly calling it his “greatest blunder”. His earlier ideas had to be revised to reflect the reality of an expanding universe.

But it took months before Einstein could produce a new version of his own theory. And when he did, it fit the facts Hubble had uncovered. And Einstein's theoretical universe was no longer “static”. It had to expand, as did his thinking.

For Paul, as for Einstein, there was an element of time between being hit with an unexpected fact and the understanding of what that fact meant in the bigger picture.

For example, Paul writes “But when He who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him for fifteen days”. (Galatians 1:15-18).

For some, this account conflates Paul's event of “seeing” the Lord with “revelation”, as if Paul's “seeing” the risen Christ was the same as when God “was pleased to reveal His Son in me”. In other words, Paul's “seeing” of the risen Jesus was itself a “revelation”—a “divine vision”. (The Spiritual Resurrectionist, such as Marcus Borg, would view it this way)

In the Traditional Christian paradigm, as in Paul's Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection paradigm, this isn't an option. Nor is it suggested in a plain reading of Paul's letters. Paul's “seeing” was of an objectively-real, observable, Bodily Resurrected Jesus.

What this means, though, is that the “revealing” of God's “Son *in me*” (Paul) had to have been something different and separate from the “seeing” of the objectively-real, risen Jesus.

The experience of “seeing” (or witnessing) the risen Jesus was an external, sensory experience. In it, he witnessed as objective reality the very basis of that gospel—“Christ was raised from the dead”. Paul stresses that this witnessed gospel was “not of human invention”; it wasn't a “story” he'd made up in his own mind. Nor was it a story he learned from someone else. “For I neither received [*paralambano*] it from man, nor was I taught it, but through a revealing of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:12). This was the “from-covering” (literal Greek) of the living Jesus Christ to Paul. In witnessing the Risen Christ himself, he didn't need to be “taught” from anyone else that Jesus was raised from the dead.

On the other hand, the “revealing” of God’s “Son *in me*” (Galatians 1:16) was, by its nature, clearly a subjective, internal, and interpretive event. In reading what Paul says (in Galatians 1:15-17), there is no way to say with any certainty whether that subjective “revelation” happened immediately upon seeing the risen Jesus, or whether it happened minutes, hours, days, weeks, or months later. All that can be said is that Paul had witnessed the bodily-risen Jesus, and *whenever it happened* that “it pleased God to reveal His Son in me”, Paul left Damascus, went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus. And after three years, he went up to Jerusalem to meet with Cephas.

But it was this internal, interpretive event that gave Paul the meanings, the significances, of the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

Now, having said all this, it's here that we can finally answer our earlier-asked **Question #2:** “Don't Paul's views on resurrection and the Messiah show he wasn't really talking about Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection?”

These views were views that demanded revision, given the introduction of the “new fact” that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead. And yes, it’s certainly true that Paul's re-thinking of the Three Issues represents profoundly significant departures from Pharisaic Jewish beliefs. In fact, they are part of the “uniqueness” of Christianity.

But the very fact that he had to make revisions at all would not have been necessary if he weren't a Pharisee to begin with.

So, Paul the Apostle's views on resurrection and the Messiah—and the fact that he even feels he needs to offer explanations for them—tells you that Paul's view of resurrection was indeed Pharisaic Bodily Resurrection.

And now we can take a look at the Three Issues and Paul's revisions.

Paul's solution to the “timing” issue was to understand Jesus' resurrection as the “first fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). “First fruits” referred to the earliest harvest, and were the “promise” that more was to come. But it also refers to the Festival of First Fruits, which begins the day after the Sabbath following the Passover (Leviticus 23:10-14). Jesus’ resurrection was the initial instance of a process that had already begun, and would reach its climax at the Last Day. In other words, Jesus' resurrection was not a violation of the established eschatological schedule; it’s the *beginning* of the epoch which would terminate with the broader resurrection at the Last Day. This “timing adjustment”, though, had another significance. With Jesus' resurrection, the power that had raised Jesus had been loosed in this world and was already at work in the lives of Christians, preparing them for the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Paul confronted the curse of crucifixion by distinguishing human judgment from divine purpose. Jesus' execution placed him under an apparent “curse,” but in Paul's reframing, what appeared cursed by human eyes was, in God’s plan, precisely the means by which redemption was accomplished. The “curse” was a functional step in divine purpose rather than a final verdict on Jesus’ legitimacy or status. So he writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'” (Galatians 3:13).

Paul dealt with Jesus' Messiahship by recognizing that the pre-crucifixion, “earthly Jesus” was only part of the full picture of Jesus. There was also the post-resurrection Jesus. The earthly Jesus was a lowly Galilean peasant executed publicly, which didn't match traditional human notions of power, triumph, or grandeur. But in the resurrection, Jesus was exalted and glorified, being given a status far beyond a mere king or priestly figure; he'd been given a “name above all names”. So, while there may have been those who *believed* (against all conventions) that the “earthly Jesus” was the Messiah, it was because of the resurrection that it could be *known* that Jesus was the Messiah—and one who exceeded all expectations.

Each of these refinements was prompted by the observable fact of a bodily resurrected Jesus. Paul didn't invent them arbitrarily; they were corrections to a theology that could no longer be maintained.

These divergences from Pharisaic beliefs don't weaken the case—they confirm that what was being discussed was the Pharisaic notion of bodily resurrection. And the Bodily Resurrection paradigm works with the core facts of the Corinthian Creed in a plain reading:

- Christ died (bodily)
- Christ was buried (bodily)
- Christ was raised (bodily)
- Christ was seen (bodily)

Likewise, it all fits within our Claim Formation Paradigm:

- **Stimulus:** Witnessing, via ordinary eyesight, the risen Jesus
- **Thought:** “Jesus isn't dead, but very much alive again as a real person”
- **Decision:** “Should I tell others what I've seen?” (and the answer was “yes”)
- **Claim:** “Jesus was raised from the dead”

But equally important to note is that, unlike the (supposed) Spiritual Resurrection claim, this Bodily Resurrection claim was decidedly worth preserving. It was preserved in creeds and in the general teaching of the church—a message that was “handed down” and “received”. And this fundamental, foundational claim was committed to writing, just as Paul had done in 1 Corinthians 15.

And unlike the (supposed) Spiritual Resurrection claim, this Bodily Resurrection claim demanded repeating. It was repeated by Paul. Repeated by individuals and churches. Repeated in creeds. Repeated in worship. Repeated in persecution. Repeated in prisons. Repeated at funerals and baptisms and executions. And it has continued to be repeated now for some two thousand years.

This was not a claim about a private, inward realization of a “Spiritual Resurrection” that faded from history. This was a claim about history itself. Something had happened. Something public. Observable. And something of profound significance, not only to Humankind, but to every creature in the Universe. And because it had happened, the spiritual implications followed behind it like thunder after lightning.

Ultimately, this Bodily Resurrection claim can be seen in a plain reading of Paul's writings. No "code book" is required. No reliance on unconventional idioms. No forced reinterpretations of Greek terms, as we encountered with Spiritual Resurrection. Altogether, the Bodily Resurrection doesn't fit merely as another piece in the puzzle. Rather, it's the very image that emerges when all the pieces are finally allowed to fall naturally into place.

And here, perhaps for the first time, a realization begins to dawn on we Simple Unknowings. We may actually have found the answer to our Primary Question: "What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead?" And the answer, astonishingly, is neither convoluted nor hidden beneath layers of theological machinery. It is simple and straightforward. A Bodily-Resurrected Jesus had been witnessed by ordinary people, via ordinary eyesight—and they said so.

And here, it seems we've reached a moment for celebration. A "eureka!" moment. A "break out the champagne" occasion. The kind of moment where we reserve The Grand Ballroom at the local Ramada Inn for a night's revelry.

But instead... crickets are chirping.

The End of the Quest

*“What people think of as the moment of discovery is really the discovery of the question”
—Jonas Salk*

The silence in the room is finally broken by a question from a Simple Unknowing.

“So... ummm.... How is the Traditional Christian Hypothesis *convincing*? I mean, we're looking for a *convincing* answer to the Primary Question, right? And, sure, the Traditional Christian Hypothesis meets all the ‘criteria’—but—*seriously*? What we're saying here is that the thing that gave rise to the claim of Jesus' resurrection was that somebody saw a dead man who somehow came back to life as an eternally living being and got himself out of the grave. And that's supposed to be *convincing*?”

This is followed by a brief pause, and a conciliatory suggestion. “Here's another idea: If we just said the earliest resurrection claimants just *believed* they'd seen the risen Jesus, *that* would be more convincing”.

Several other Simple Unknowings nod and shrug, agreeing apologetically. And it's not without reason. It does seem, after all, that the exact same claim—“Jesus was raised from the dead”—could have been made simply because the earliest resurrection claimants *believed* they'd seen a bodily resurrected Jesus. Maybe they saw a Jesus lookalike or had hallucinations—something along those lines. But whatever it was, it caused them to *believe* they had seen a “real” resurrected Jesus. And therefore, they said so. (But of course, they were mistaken).

So, now we see why crickets were chirping at the end of the previous chapter. The idea that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead and (quite literally) *witnessed* by others is—to be kind—rather far-fetched. So it's natural to think the reality is more like what leads to a claim of “I saw Elvis, and he's still alive”: The claimant just *wants* it to be true, so they “see” what they want to see.

But what makes the notion of a bodily resurrection itself seem so far-fetched? It's amazingly simple, really: It's an idea that's entirely outside our realm of experience. Our common, human experience is that *dead people stay dead*. And based on that common, human experience, it's far easier to surmise that something else *besides* witnessing a living-again, resurrected Jesus gave rise to the claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”.

It's this very thing that gives us the premise of every single Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypothesis (EBRH): The earliest resurrection claimants merely *believed* they'd seen a bodily resurrected Jesus (but they were wrong). And based on this error, they went ahead and made the claim that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead.

Only the details differ in the various EBRH Narratives. But they're assertions based on the premise that Cephas (et al) merely *believed*, not *knew*, they'd seen the risen Christ.

What we Simple Unknowings need to do is be careful here. We need to maintain our status as *true agnostics*. After all, we agreed to do that until the end of the quest. So, sure, we can

acknowledge that our common, human experience tells us that dead people stay dead. But as true agnostics, we can't let that override the *possibility* that there might be a God who sometimes does uncommon things.

However, we also have to acknowledge that we've found one more thing we need an answer for:

Whether Cephas (et al) merely *believed* they'd seen the risen Jesus, or whether they *knew* they did.

A Reminder: As we discussed in *Believing and Knowing*, “to believe” means “to accept, as true”, and “to know” is “a justified, true belief”. It might be worthwhile to review those distinctions, as discussed in that same chapter. We'll be relying heavily on them in this chapter.

The trick, as we've seen repeatedly throughout this writing, is in asking the right *preliminary* question. And in this case, it's simple (at least, on the surface):

“*Who does this*”?

That is, who goes around telling people that a dead-and-buried man they knew just came back to life? And not only that. He vacated his grave, took on eternal life, and dropped by for a visit. And they *saw* him. *Who does this*?

We already know our “present-day” answer to that. *Nobody* (ourselves included) does such a thing. But it's here that we have to ask another question: Was it any different for Cephas and The Twelve *before* the “Jesus incident”?

No. It wasn't.

Cephas and The Twelve didn't live in a world where dead-and-buried people popped up after a few days to announce “I'm back”. Neither did they live in a special time and place where a person could just *say* something like that about a deceased family member or friend and have others respond like “Well, whaddya know? But, hey, it happens”. People were going to question it, and rightly so. And probably question the sanity of the claimant.

The ancients were just as 'locked' by the finality of death as we are. These were people who lost loved ones, and had to bury deceased parents, spouses, siblings, and children. Only, they had to do the burial themselves. There were no morticians, no funeral parlors. The ancients mourned. They wrapped the bodies of those they lost. They dug the graves. They knew what death was because they lived nearer to it than most modern people do.

The finality of death was nobody's secret. Everybody—including Cephas and The Twelve—knew the “rule”. Not even a resuscitated life, as in the ancient cases of Elijah or Elisha, undid this finality; it just postponed it. The only thing that would change the rule—at least, as far as *some* Jews were concerned—would be a Resurrection at the Last Day. But that was an “After the Afterlife” belief—something that would happen when the rulebook itself was torn up, and the

whole of the cosmos reconstituted. It had nothing to do with the reality of death being the irreversible thing it is in this present world.

Yet, Cephas and The Twelve became the first humans in recorded history to claim that a known contemporary who was dead and buried had returned to a state of being a fully-living person, saying *sayonara* to their Final Resting Place. It was a completely new (and very bizarre) thing they were claiming, a total violation of the global consensus—something that was a stark denial of “reality as we know it”.

The group consisting of those mentioned in the Corinthian Creed—Cephas, The Twelve, James, and ending with Paul—are apparently the only ones in history to have been originators of that specific kind of claim. And if the Bodily Resurrectionists are right, they did so because of a specific stimulus: the witnessing of an objectively-real, bodily-risen person.

And what’s interesting is that since the time of Jesus, no other person has made this specific claim about anyone else.

Consider this: There have been countless deaths since the time of Jesus. And there are billions more people today who believe in “Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day” than there were in the 1st century world. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all fall into this category. Yet despite the countless deaths, and despite the addition of billions more who believe in Bodily Resurrection at the Last Day, we haven’t seen “repeats” of this kind of claim. That is, nobody else has claimed that someone they knew who died and was buried was now alive again and out of the grave. The claim of Jesus’ bodily resurrection was a one-off kind of thing.

My guess? People must have some kind of inhibitions that prevent them from claiming that kind of thing.

Making that proclamation is like asserting seriously, “I invented a square circle”: most hearers would assume the claimant had seriously lost his mind. At the same time, the claimant will almost certainly have lost their trustworthiness, reputation, and credibility in the view of the hearer.

Moreover, dropping a claim like that on the grieving family or close friend of the deceased can be deeply damaging. When you bury a loved one, your mind has to do the exhausting, painful work of accepting a brutal new reality. You have to mourn. To do that, humans actually have a harsh but profound inward need for certainty—we need to know that the dead-and-buried will truly stay dead-and-buried. It sounds cold, but that absolute finality is the only safe foundation upon which the emotions can safely surrender and begin to heal. If someone walks up and says, “Your mom is alive again, and out of the grave, and I know this, because I saw her yesterday”, you’d not receive that message with joy. You’d see it as a cruel psychological ambush that drags you into an agonizing tug-of-war between a rational mind and a broken heart. You’d reject it outright. And you’d probably tell the messenger to “get lost”.

Ultimately, a claim like this is a gross mockery of the family’s pain. It stands as an utter affront to the hard human necessity of letting go. Grief is a painful process of transitioning from a relationship of physical presence to one of quiet memory. Someone introducing a jarring counterfeit of a lost loved one pollutes that process. Instead of allowing the survivors to

remember the loved one with peace, they now have to expend effort to reject thoughts of the deceased wandering around somewhere outside of her grave. It violates the sanctity of the quiet memory they must necessarily build, fracturing trust and isolating the griever at the very moment they need solid ground. The claimant would be an unwelcome intruder into that process.

In short, making a “resurrection claim” has no upside for the claimant. It amounts to social suicide. And among Jews, living under Mosaic law, saying “God did it” only exacerbates the problem. It’s a claim that God did something that He never did. And that’s blasphemy.

But let’s bring this up real close and personal so can see exactly what I’m talking about. Let’s say someone offered you \$50k if you tried this experiment:

The next time a close relative or friend dies and is buried, wait a few days, then send an email to the family and mutual friends of the deceased, saying this: “I have some wonderful news! Our dear [*deceased’s name here*], who died and was buried last week, is alive again, and has left the grave. I know this is true because [*he/she*] came to see me this morning”.

The Rules: You can’t add “disclaimers” or explanations to the email, like “I’m doing this just as an experiment, so don’t take it seriously”. And you must stand by that claim for six months, after which you can tell people it was an experiment.

My guess? You wouldn’t try the experiment at all. Not even for \$50k. You’ll find some reason not to. “I’d be embarrassing myself”, or “it would cause hurt feelings”, or “that would be an utterly immoral thing to do”, or “I’d not be able to stand by that story for the full six months”, or “nobody would ever trust me again. I’d be labeled a psychotic liar or delusional and in need of psychiatric care”.

Now, what if you *believed* you’d seen the deceased, out and about? Would that make a difference? Would it somehow make it easier to send that email? No. It wouldn’t. There have been hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of people throughout history who’ve *believed* they’d seen a deceased loved one, perhaps due to an hallucination or in seeing someone with a resemblance. But they didn’t turn it into a bodily-resurrection claim. It always turns into some other kind of claim, if it’s spoken at all.

Hallucinations and Lookalikes: See the *Appendix A* entry titled “Hallucinations and Lookalikes (Illusions)” for more information on these phenomena.

Yet, this is exactly where the historical record takes a bizarre, unprecedented turn.

In the “Jesus Incident”, Cephas and The Twelve threw out all prohibitions. They did what I cannot imagine myself ever doing—and what virtually nobody would ever do. They publicly declared that someone’s deceased and buried son, brother, cousin, or friend—someone known, loved, mourned, and buried—was now alive again as a real and embodied person who would live forever.

“Oh, well, sure, we wouldn’t do such a thing, but *they* would”, we say.

We moderns have an arrogance in our reasoning: “The ancients were overly religious, superstitious, and ignorant. They lived in a world where every strange noise outside might be a spirit or a ghost, and random acts of nature were expressions of some god being angry about something. They were prone to making irrational claims”.

But take a look at the sentiments below:

- Yet, taught by time, my heart has learned to glow for others’ good, and melt at others’ woe.
- Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.
- I know there is something all wrong about me—believe me. Sometimes I shock myself.
- Of all creatures that can feel and think, we women are the worst-treated things alive.
- Pride goes before destruction.
- One word frees us of all the weight and pain in life. That word is love.
- There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good.

Every sentiment expressed in these lines could be expressed by someone in a coffee shop conversation today. But every quote in this list is well over two thousand years old.

This reveals a great misconception. We moderns like to regard the ancients with a false sense of intellectual and emotional superiority. We’re more “advanced”. We don’t buy into fables of Minotaurs and Sirens, and our “feelings” are more refined, more sophisticated.

But read the writings of the ancient Greek playwrights and poets or the Hebrew psalms, and you’ll find love and hatred, joy and sorrow, hope, grief, friendship, a longing for justice, and an aching awareness of injustice. We moderns, with our technologies and sciences, our conveniences and our contraptions, are clearly not the ancients. But the human psyche has changed little over the centuries. And when we hear those ancient voices, it’s not strangers we recognize, but ourselves. We might not be the ancients, but the ancients are us.

This brings us to a second, closely related misconception. It’s the common assumption that the story of Jesus’ resurrection was simply a product of its time—just another entry in a long line of ancient myths about dying and rising gods.

We know the ancients made the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. This tells us that they were quite capable of telling such a story, but it also tells us that (at least some) others were willing to believe it.

But tales of the dead coming back to life were not a common Jewish trope. Still, some would insist that by the time of Jesus, Jewish culture had become inundated with Greek influences. Indeed, the 1st-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria leaned heavily on Plato and the Stoics, attempting to harmonize Hebrew scriptures with Greek allegorical philosophy. Centuries before Jesus, the Jews of Alexandria had translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek-language Septuagint—because a massive portion of the Jewish population no longer wrote or spoke Hebrew. And 1st-century Jerusalem housed entire synagogues dedicated entirely to

Greek-speaking Jews, the language of Homer and Alexander the Great actively spoken in the shadow of the Temple.

Clearly, with this infusion of Greek thought into Jewish culture, there were Jews who had heard the ancient Greek tales. But, demigods and heroes had no place in Jewish belief which stood in stark contrast to the Greek devotion to figures like Heracles. Still, some would note that the story of Jesus having been raised from the dead looks as if it follows the same general arc as the tale of Heracles: A Jewish “hero” of the common man, struck down by evil forces, rises again to the status of a demigod, and is now worthy of our worship. This causes some to assert that the earliest Christians were, in some sense, mimicking Greek influences.

But did the Greeks, Romans, or Egyptians really tell the kind of story we have about Jesus? No, they didn't. They had stories of the dead-but-risen gods, or the hero-to-demigod. But these were never stories told of historical people who lived as contemporaries of the equally historical storytellers, some of whom knew the main character personally. They were always stories that came to be told long after the fact—if there was any fact to begin with.

Take the great founder of Rome, Romulus. Legend said he vanished into a violent storm. Then a politician named Proculus Julius claimed he saw the king alive on a road, ascending to heaven. But the earliest record we have of this tale was written seven centuries after the purported events. It's “just a story”. Nobody knows if Romulus was even a real person, and certainly not whether Proculus Julius was.

Such are the stories of gods, demigods, and fabled humans—figures like Osiris, Dionysus, and Heracles. For the ancients who told their stories, these entities belonged to a distant, mythological past—a “once upon a time” era. Even when dealing with later, semi-legendary historical figures like the Greek poet Aristeas of Proconnesus, the tales morphed into unverified folklore. Nobody in the 1st century was claiming to have had dinner with Osiris in Alexandria, or to have walked the roads with Aristeas just three weeks ago.

But people indeed believed these stories—at least, in some sense. Some may have believed them as incidents that really happened once, long ago and far away. Others might have believed them only in the sense that there was some kind of relevant and underlying “truth”—not an “historical truth”, but a philosophical or metaphysical kind.

It's because of these kinds of tales told by the ancients that we might assume that the story of Jesus' resurrection was this kind of story. It's what we think the ancients did. So, we treat the tales they told about gods, demigods, heroes, and great kings like children's campfire tales that adults simply forgot to stop believing. We look back at them the way we look at modern children who believe in Santa Claus, assuming the ancient world simply never grew up to learn the truth.

In a very real sense, though, we moderns have our own myths. We have our soaring tales of heroes struck down, then risen, like Obi-Wan Kenobi, Gandalf, and Spock. We have an innate desire to believe there are champions with powers beyond the ordinary. I watched the film *Man on Fire* when I lived (briefly) in Mexico, the place where the story unfolded. And my Mexican friends insisted John Creasy (the main character) was a real person. They *wanted* to believe such a paladin existed. Alas, the blood of the ancients runs in our veins. We still possess a massive, collective appetite for the heroic, the tragic, and the larger-than-life.

But neither the ancient tales nor modern fictions are the story of “Jesus, raised from the dead”. This was a story of a real person, told by other real people who knew the main character. It was a story that happened in the “here and now”, not “long ago and far away”. And Jesus, who’d been crucified in a Roman-inflicted execution, had a surviving family and friends who suffered the grief of his loss.

It was in this very “present-day”, very-human context that Cephas and The Twelve claimed that they’d seen the risen Jesus. They said it publicly, out loud, where Jesus’ grieving family could have heard it. They may have even said it to that family in person. Once James, the brother of Jesus, had seen the risen Christ, it’s difficult to imagine he never mentioned it to his family. After all, he was openly declaring it out in public. And Cephas, The Twelve, and James—like us—would have been fully aware of the severe effect such a claim could have on that grieving family.

What I’ve been getting at is this: The early disciples weren’t primitive minds playing with creative folklore, nor were they writing “once upon a time” allegories. They were ordinary people, possessed of human sensibilities, aware of “ghost stories” and probably of the myths of the ancient Greeks. Yet they were making a concrete claim in the raw here-and-now, and it was a claim that carried consequences. That claim, in this setting, wasn’t some kind of theological or doctrinal point. This got down to real life.

It’s here, then, that we have to refine our answer to the question “*Who does this?*” We’ve only partially answered it: It was ordinary people (like Cephas and The Twelve)—men having sensibilities that would normally tell them *not* to make such a claim. And yet, they did.

However, our answer doesn’t tell us what we really need to know, which is this:

Under what conditions would an ordinary person ever make this claim?

(And here, we have to exclude things like “torture” or “threats of death”. There’s no evidence that Cephas and the other earliest resurrection claimants were “coerced” into making the initial resurrection claim).

This was the issue I encountered decades ago. And it’s a tough one. I can’t interview Cephas (et al) and ask them about this. They’re long gone.

I could have, I suppose, simply *assumed* that the necessary conditions would be extraordinary, but that’s like assuming “the earliest resurrection claimants just *believed* Jesus was raised from the dead”. It’s begging the question.

Eventually, though, I realized that what I can do is to look at how ordinary people navigate real life.

But there was a catch: Nobody goes around claiming that one of their relatives or friends who was dead and buried is now “alive again” and out of the grave, and that they know it’s true because they’ve seen him. So, I couldn’t go out and survey people about that. The best I could do is scale the problem down to an ordinary, relatable circumstance. I could ask about a realistic,

non-religious scenario to see exactly how much evidence an ordinary person requires before it will run the risk of telling a grieving family their believed-to-be dead loved one is actually alive.

So, I took another approach, which I'll demonstrate.

Consider this scenario carefully: Imagine you're part of a family composed of several siblings and a mother. One of your siblings is named Bob. Bob is lost at sea in the Pacific when his cruise liner sinks in a storm. Eventually, he's declared dead *in absentia*, and your family holds a memorial service. A few weeks later, you're walking down a crowded street in San Francisco and catch a glimpse of a face in the crowd. It looks exactly like Bob. Before you can reach him, he vanishes into the crowd. You then realize *it is possible* he survived—perhaps picked up by a passing fishing boat—but you have no proof.

My question to each of you: What would you do in this scenario? Would you say anything at all to your family? Or if you did, would it be something like "I thought I saw Bob in San Francisco", followed by a wistful sigh? Or would you want to investigate further to see if you could substantiate that you'd actually seen Bob? There could be many options, but *what would you do?*

Years ago, I actually put this scenario in a real-world survey. I gathered responses from 442 anonymous respondents.

More about the "Bob" Survey: You can read the actual survey and see its results in Appendix B titled "Bob, Lost at Sea Survey"

But frankly, my survey was flawed, though it's results weren't useless. But still, I'm not going to use the data collected in order to "prove" anything by it.

Rather, I'll simply say this:

If your thought, regarding the "Bob scenario", was something like, "I wouldn't claim certainty. I'd just tell them I think I saw him", you're in good company. When I ran my survey online, every single person who left a comment in the provided Comment Box expressed this same kind of thought.

But if you considered what level of evidence you'd need in order to claim certainty, and you realized that level was considerably high, then likewise, you're in good company. The overwhelming majority of the survey's 442 anonymous respondents chose an answer from the given list of "evidence required". Their answers indicated that, *at a minimum*, they'd need an *in-person conversation with Bob that convinced them this was truly Bob*.

In the end, the survey only suggests what we already instinctively understand: When it comes to making a claim of something that could profoundly affect the lives of others, we choose caution. Either we'll need a high degree of certainty about what we're claiming, or, we may not make the claim at all.

Now, let's get back to Cephas and our original question of "Under what conditions would an ordinary person ever make this [resurrection] claim?"

Is it truly too much to suggest that Cephas needed to *know*, and not merely to *believe*, that he'd seen the risen Jesus before making his claim? Some would persist in saying we can't fully understand how the ancients thought, and thus, we need to take care not to impose "modern thought" onto the claimants in the matter of the resurrection claim.

But the idea of having sufficient justification before we'd consider something true (especially if we'll be the ones claiming it) isn't limited to "modern thinking". It's not a matter of moderns being more enlightened or sophisticated than the ancients, and certainly not a product of modern education. Nor is it due to the development of science or modern philosophy. The ancients, just like we moderns, understood the necessity of recognizing the difference between what we merely *believe* and what we *know*. We can see this very thing in action, in the Odyssey, written roughly 2700 years ago.

In Homer's Odyssey we encounter an interesting pericope. Odysseus is married to Penelope. But Odysseus has been gone for twenty years, and Penelope believes him to be dead. Then, one day, a man appears before her claiming to be Odysseus. But Penelope doesn't simply accept his claim. She doesn't merely *believe* the guy. She puts him to a test. She asks about their marriage bed—a secret known only to the two of them. And the man gives the answer only the real Odysseus could know. And it was then that Penelope is convinced that her long-lost husband is actually alive.

At best, upon seeing Odysseus, Penelope *believed* "this *might* be my husband". But she wanted proof. She wanted to *know* before she said "I'm convinced".

What we see, then, is that there clearly were ancients who realized that *believing* is not the same as *knowing*, and that in some situations, *knowing* was a necessity. And *knowing* requires evidence.

Now, let me backtrack a bit to the "Bob, Lost at Sea" survey. In that scenario, we were talking about a case in which a person ("Bob") was *presumed* dead, but could *potentially* be alive. And even in my limited survey, it's still clear that in such a situation, people would need some "proof", much as did Penelope. But what if we closed the "presumed dead, but potentially alive" loophole entirely? What happens when there is *no possibility* of survival, and the person is *known* to be dead and buried?

This is a much more difficult situation. If yesterday, I saw my beloved, deceased-and-buried Grandma, I wouldn't even bother thinking, "I need to verify that was really her". I'd think, "I'm seeing things", or maybe, "I saw her *spiritually*"—something along those lines. But I'd never consider looking for evidence that she was physically alive. And apparently, nobody else having this kind of experience does, either. There are no documented cases of a person experiencing a "seeing" of a dead-and-buried loved one (which was probably a hallucination or illusion), then launching a physical investigation to see if they'd come back to life.

This, though, shouldn't be surprising. As we've noted, universal human experience tells us that dead people stay dead. "Sightings" of the deceased are ultimately tricks of perception; maybe an

hallucination, taken as a “spiritual encounter” of some sort. Or maybe it’s an illusion—a “lookalike” perhaps—something seen for a moment, but which ultimately serves only as a reminder that the beloved-but-deceased is indeed gone from *this* world.

But oddly enough, this very thing would seem to unravel the case for a genuine bodily resurrection. If people “instinctively” interpret such “seeings” in these manners, then why would we think Cephas or James would have considered them differently? Why would *they* claim a bodily-resurrected Jesus? After all, nobody else claims a “bodily-resurrected Grandma” after “seeing” her for a moment in a “spiritual encounter”.

The difference comes down to the nature of the encounter.

When a person merely *believes* they saw a dead person, alive again, it becomes a moment for a mental recalculation. The deceased person is reinforced as being deceased, not as alive. Human beings don’t consider such instances as grounds for believing a dead-and-buried person has come back to life and left the grave.

But history does give us one rare, terrifying category where a “dead” person is suddenly found alive in a way that utterly overrules our psychological instincts. It doesn’t happen at a graveside, though. It happens in the hands of professionals.

There are numerous documented accounts of extreme medical anomalies—cases where a person is mistakenly, but clinically, declared dead in person—only to suddenly wake up in a morgue or a coffin, or even in an autopsy. Now, in real life, these “dead people” weren’t really dead. But in the *human experience* of the morgue attendant, the mortician, or the medical examiner, they certainly were. That’s why these “dead people” were in the morgue, the funeral home, or the autopsy room in the first place.

Sometimes, these “declared dead” people will suddenly wake up in these situations, and when they do, two things happen universally. First, the witnesses experience pure, unadulterated terror. Their hearts jump, they may scream, and they often bolt from the room in a panic. But right after the initial shock wears off, something else happens: they instantly start telling people.

Social anxieties simply evaporate because a stark, undeniable reality has just forced its way into their world. They scramble, they shout, they call for doctors, they demand blankets, and they dial emergency lines. They act because the living reality in front of them completely overrides any concern for what people might think of them. The dead person is alive, and that reality has to be dealt with right now.

“The Waking Dead”: You can read some real-life, documented stories of “dead people” who “came back to life” in the *Appendix A* entry titled “Waking Dead, The”.

And right there lies the massive, unbridgeable chasm between *believing* and *knowing*.

If Cephas and the Twelve were merely working from a *belief* that they’d seen Jesus alive again, and not from certain knowledge that they had, then there’s no more reason to think they’d claim he’d been raised from the dead than a grieving widow who momentarily “saw” her deceased

husband would have. We'd never have heard the claim that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead if the earliest resurrection claimants had merely *believed* they'd seen him.

Believing something is to "accept it, as true". But *belief* cannot make something true if it's not. It's not like *knowing*—a justified, true belief. And if we can take anything useful from our "Bob, Lost at Sea" survey, it's that the overwhelming majority of people who would declare to the family that the presumed-dead "Bob" is actually alive would need strong justification before doing so. They'd need to *know*.

I think we all know the reason for this. We'd never announce to our neighbor that "your daughter, who was alive this morning, is now dead" just because we'd "accepted, as true" (or *believed*) a rumor. And in the same way, mere *belief* would never, *ever* be sufficient justification for a person to risk their reputations, or risk causing further grief to an already-grieving family by claiming a man known to be dead and buried is fully alive again, and out of the grave. A mere *belief* can no more produce a public claim of the bodily resurrection of an individual known by the claimant than simply *deciding* to make that claim could—and that sort of thing is something we'd not do even if offered \$50k. We know the *absurdity* of that claim. And we know the damage it could cause, not only to ourselves, but to others.

It's here that we're faced with something of profound importance: Upon seeing the risen Jesus, what Cephas and The Twelve did was to blow past every single social prohibition, every thought of being considered "insane", every concern of adding to the grief of an already grieving family, and every legal implication with the same frantic urgency as a morgue worker who just saw a body bag move. They *told everyone*. Their behavior *after* their "seeing" experience, whatever it may have entailed, was *not* driven by an abstract *belief*. It was driven by the sheer, unyielding weight of *knowing* something true.

It's in that "*afterwards behavior*" that we can tell the difference between whether Cephas and the Twelve merely *believed* they'd seen a bodily-risen Jesus, or whether they *knew* they had.

You see, this isn't like a case of someone believing a bomb has been found in a building, then frantically telling everyone to "get out!". If it turns out it's not a bomb, nothing is really lost. And the "bomb claimant" is appreciated for at least trying to be vigilant.

In the case of claiming a dead Jesus to have been bodily raised from the dead? There's no upside for anyone if it's *not* true. The consequences of being wrong are substantial. But quite the opposite if it *is* true. The implications of being right are utterly staggering on a vast number of levels. And because of this, the claim *demand*ed to be made. Publicly. Despite any fear. And repetitively. And that's what we see.

Decades ago, I reached this very spot, and as far as I was concerned, I had no further need to investigate. Everything pointed to this answer to the Primary Question:

The thing that gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead was that the earliest resurrection claimants had witnessed, with their ordinary eyesight, an objectively-real, living-again Jesus. And thus, they said so.

This is the answer that best fits the criteria (as we saw in the previous chapter), but also best addresses the human concerns that arise *before* making such an outrageous claim in the first place. And our reasoning is sound, the very premise of every EBRH—that the resurrection claim was made simply because Cephas (et al) *believed* they'd seen a living-again Jesus—has been dismantled.

It's not necessarily the answer we might prefer. But sometimes, answers are that way. But as I said in *The Visitor Center*, "We don't struggle with questions. We struggle with answers we don't want to hear".

For me, then, this was the end of the quest I'd undertaken decades ago. And now it's here that the Fellowship of Simple Unknowings has also reached the end of this present quest. For my part, I can take you no further. We've ended at the same spot I ended at decades ago.

For the Fellowship, then, there is but one last task.

Epilogue

*“We don’t struggle with questions. We struggle with answers we don’t want to hear”
—from this book, chapter “The Visitor Center”*

We may have reached the endpoint of our quest. But the path we’re standing on hasn’t come to a dead end. No more than a few strides away, it splits at the base of a colossal grey stone Monolith that towers above us, an unyielding gatekeeper demanding a toll before going a step further. The two paths diverge, each curving away gently, in opposite directions, each quietly disappearing into their own forests.

On one side of the base of the Monolith there is an “arrow symbol” which points down the path going in that direction. It’s labeled “Yes”. And on the other side, another such symbol pointing down the other path, labeled “No”.

But as our eyes move up the Monolith, we see, carved in ancient runes, a question: **“Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?”**

We’ve encountered that question before. It’s the very same question we naturally gravitated to, back in the chapter *Walking Out the Door*. We were inclined to understand that the stressed “*really*” was referring to a Bodily Resurrection. After all, that’s been the “default” understanding in Western cultures for some 2000 years.

However, back then we discarded it, having determined it to be the *wrong* question to use as a starting point. We said this:

“That’s a ‘yes or no’ kind of question. We Simple Unknowings would have to decide, stepping outside the door, which of those two directions we’re going. We’d either have to commit to one answer or another, then try to somehow ‘prove’ that answer. And, whatever we’d be trying to prove might not be the right answer in the first place. But as Simple Unknowings—true agnostics — we’ve got no idea of whether we need to go the ‘yes’ or the ‘no’ route anyway”.

Then, in our “Simple Unknowing-ness”, we formulated our new Primary Question: “What gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead?” This was a wholly different kind of question. And then, the Fellowship of the Simple Unknowings set off courageously, only hoping to find the answer to *that* question.

As it turned out, our assessment that the “*really* raised” question was the “wrong” question ultimately proved wise. Once on the quest to answer our new Primary Question, we quickly discovered that there were many other questions that needed to be answered first. There were many ideas floating around about what was meant by “raised from the dead”. We even discovered that we’d have to determine, somehow, whether Jesus was even a real person.

Without answering those preliminary questions, we’d never be able to answer our Primary Question. And without answering *that*, asking “Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?” would

itself be unanswerable. So asking “Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?” was never part of the deal.

In the final analysis, the quest we undertook was the quest we needed to undertake. But now, we’ve reached the end of that endeavor. And we’ve never once asked the question “Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?” And yet, in a strange twist at the end, here stands this Monolith asking that question *of us*. And it offers only two answers: “Yes” or “No”.

If “raised from the dead” means “raised from the dead – *in a manner of speaking*”, there’s no point in saying “*really* raised...”. There is no “*really*” to it, if resurrection is something that happens only “*in a manner of speaking*”.

If the phrase should be understood as “*really* raised from the dead—*spiritually*”, the use of the word “*really*” would be senseless. How would anyone *know* that after Jesus died, anything at all happened with his *spirit*? One can only formulate a *belief* about such a thing. The problem is that if one believes Jesus’ *spirit* was “raised up and exalted”, then that’s valid only to that person. Someone else might believe nothing at all happened with Jesus’ *spirit*. But that too, is valid—to that second person. In either case, we’re dealing with beliefs about what may or may not have happened to Jesus’ *spirit*, rather than an objectively decidable historical event. So in this paradigm, using the word “*really*” renders the question unanswerable.

We could, I suppose, address every “resurrection type” suggested by various Hypothesisists—such as “symbolic”, “metaphoric”, and “idealist”—but what we’d find is that, in the end, the question of “Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?” only makes sense if we’re talking about a Bodily Resurrection. That’s the only kind of “resurrection” that one can say either “*really did*” or “*really didn’t*” happen.

And, that’s exactly how we’ve ended up here, after finding the best answer we could for our Primary Question. The thing is, though, our accomplishment merely allows us to give *intellectual assent* to that answer. We’re saying, “In our view, as ‘true agnostics’, the best explanation for what gave rise to the claim of Jesus’ resurrection is that the resurrected Jesus was seen as an objectively real, living-again person by a variety of people”. That statement, though, is merely saying that, *in principle*, it’s the best explanation. But it doesn’t automatically cross the finish line to tell us that’s what actually happened. It doesn’t tell us it’s *true*.

Here, at the Monolith, we’re being asked “Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead?” We’re being asked to decide whether it’s *true* or not. Our “Yes” or “No” choices on the Monolith directly correspond to whether we consider it *true* or *false* that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead. Answering “Yes” to the question of “Was Jesus really raised from the dead” is to say “It’s *true* that Jesus was raised from the dead”, and answering “No” is to say it’s *false*.

The difficulty is that you can’t answer the “*true* or *false*” question regarding Jesus’ resurrection without answering (what I call) the “God Question”: **“Is there a God who has the power to raise the dead—and who chose to raise Jesus from the dead?”** The first part arises from the fact that Nature has no power to resurrect the dead. Therefore, if Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, the power responsible could only have been Supernatural. But the second part of the question has to do with whether that Supernatural power actually chose to raise Jesus from the dead.

The thing is, a bodily resurrection isn't merely changing water to wine, or even healing a sick person. It is indeed the *reversal of death itself*. But death is a part of the very system we call Nature—the system we live in. Death is a “fixture”, something that must be as assured as gravity. Else, the whole of the system fails to work.

So it's not surprising that anyone would have a hesitancy to accept a claim of a bodily resurrection. It's a hesitation which seems to be baked into our cognitive DNA. We know (as did the ancients) of the finality of death.

But at the bottom, one thing we Simple Unknowings—true agnostics—don't know is whether there's a God that has any kind of power to reverse death without making the universe disintegrate. And so it's understandable that even we Simple Unknowings might find ourselves saying, almost instinctively, “Show me some evidence of a God who could do a resurrection, and I can believe this story”.

And that demand is entirely appropriate at this stage of the project. We'd set aside this “God Question” issue back in the chapter *Beyond Miracles*. At that time, we'd just reached the point of looking into Spiritual Resurrection, and introducing a “God who sometimes intervened in nature” was entirely premature. We simply had no way of knowing back then if the empirical criteria would ever force us to deliberate the Bodily Resurrection Hypothesis (aka the Traditional Christian Hypothesis) with its raw physicality. But now that the data has taken us down this path to this very place, the “God Question” is finally relevant. But quite unexpected.

A Suggestion: You might wish to review the chapter titled *Beyond Miracles* at this time.

It's an irony. We avoided the “God Question”, putting it outside the scope of the quest we chose. But now, *we ourselves* are “outside” of our quest, because our quest itself has ended. And here, at the end, we're confronted by the Monolith asking “Was Jesus *really* raised...?” To move from this spot in any direction other than backtracking, we must pay the toll. We have to answer the Monolith's question, and that requires us to answer the God Question.

For some Simple Unknowings, our answer to the Primary Question itself actually provides “proof” that there is a God who can raise the dead. There could not have been a “risen Christ” to witness *apart from* a resurrection, and yet that's what we've concluded happened: Cephas (et al) witnessed an objectively-real, living-again Jesus. And such a resurrection could only have happened by a Supernatural power (God), because Nature has no “resurrection power” of its own. Simple Unknowings taking this view would choose the “Yes” route, having concluded “it's *true* that there is a God who can do such things, because he *already did*”.

Others might insist on *first* having “proof” of the existence of a resurrection-performing God before answering “Yes”. Consequently, this means that at this point, they'd either take the “No” route, or they'd “punt”. They'd remain in this spot as “true agnostics” until they, or someone else, could “prove” the existence of such a God.

Still others might say "Standing here, right now, I'm deciding that our answer to the Primary Question is wrong, *because dead people stay dead*. Thus, we shouldn't even be asked 'Was Jesus *really* raised from the dead'. But since we are, I'm saying 'No'".

And a few Simple Unknowings may wish to backtrack a bit, not quite prepared to answer the Monolith's question. They may need to review the steps we took to arrive at this place, to be certain nothing was missed.

Now, these aren't the only three possible reactions. I'm just giving a few examples of how some may wish to react at this point.

But it gets down to this: We can forever remain in the spot we're in, perpetually maintaining the "true agnosticism" we agreed on in the beginning. Or, we can remain agnostics and wander back down the path that led us here. But as things now stand, we'll have to decide on a "Yes" or "No" to get anywhere *beyond* this point.

Rest assured, though, that making either of these two choices will lead you on a *new* quest. Choose "No", and you may while away the years bunnytrailing through the wild speculations of Jesus Mythology, Jesus Folklorism, and Pop-Schlock Hypotheses. Answering "Yes" will lead to exploring answers to all the questions posed in *The Quest and The Question*, and *Heading Out the Door*—questions which were outside the scope of this book.

But for now, the quest of the Fellowship of the Simple Unknowings has ended. At this point, we must each decide for ourselves what to do next, and in doing so, our Fellowship itself will be dissolved. This is the point where the members of the Fellowship part ways.

Our final task is to say our "goodbyes". And, as The Bard said, "parting is such sweet sorrow". To all of you Simple Unknowings who joined with me on this adventure, I say "Thank You. May the sun always be at your backs". I do not know if our paths will ever cross again, but I do hope that, if they don't, it's not because you're forever lost in a maze of bunny trails. And with this, I bid you all the fondest of farewells.

APPENDIX A

Apokalypsis

As in Galatians 1:12—“For I neither received [ed.: Gk: *parelabon*] it [ed.: the gospel] of man, neither was I taught [it], but by the APOKALYPSOS of Jesus Christ”.

Apokalypsis comes from *apo-* (away from) and *kalupto* (to cover, conceal, veil). It literally means to take away the veil or covering.

The online Greek/English Interlinear New Testament found at Scripture4All.com shows the “word for word” Greek translation of Galatians 1:12 to be “...but through FROM-COVERING Jesus Christ”.

Paul repeatedly uses *apokalypsis* to describe the physical return of Christ at the end of the age. This is not an internal experience for a believer, but a catastrophic, public, and cosmic unveiling of the risen Jesus to the entire world. (1 Corinthians 1:7: “...as you wait for the revealing (*apokalypsin*) of our Lord Jesus Christ...”.

However, in Galatians 1:16, he uses *apokalypsis* to describe an “internal” event, commonly translated as “...to reveal His Son *in me*”. Here, Paul forces the reader to understand this as an “internal” event by specifying “...in me”.

In Galatians 1:12—“For I neither received it [ed.: the gospel] of man, neither was I taught [it], but by the APOKALYPSEOS of Jesus Christ [ed., “Christou”].

Here, the literal translation to English is “...but through a from-covering of Jesus Christ”. (The words “a” and “of” are implied in the forms of the words following them. For example, in Greek, “Christos” (Christ) is, in this passage, is “Christou”, and this demands the preposition “of”.

Paul is neither forcing nor encouraging an understanding of an “internal” event. As such, it could easily be understood as Paul having experienced “a revealing of” or “from-covering” of an objectively real, risen Jesus, as opposed to his statement found in Galatians 1:16.

(Note: In English, we use similar phrases: “The town gathered for a revealing of the monument dedicated to the fallen soldiers”, or “the gallery hosted a revealing of the artist’s final masterpiece”.

Some translators wish to use “a revelation” instead of “a revealing of” because it leaves open the possibility that the “apokalypseous” to Paul was a “divine vision” rather than a “witnessing with the eyes”.

The translation of “...but through a *revealing* of Jesus Christ” appears in Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible 1902 (EBR) and in Concordant Literal Version (CLV).

In this present book, the translation of “...but through a revealing of Jesus Christ” is being used because it appears to be the most accurate “literal” translation of the passage.

Crucifixion of Jesus–Timeframe

In Paul's Authentic Epistles, he never tells us when Jesus was crucified. Historians generally tend to glean information from the canonical Gospels in their formulation of the time of Jesus' crucifixion. However, even with using information from The Gospels, historians are divided, some asserting Jesus' crucifixion happening in 30 CE, and others, in 33 CE.

This timeline is the "best guess" of the author of this present book, and uses information found only in Paul's Authentic Epistles, and in the writings of Jewish historian Josephus and Roman historian Tacitus. This author is not an professional historian. Therefore, this information should not be taken as "historical fact", but rather, as only the author's estimate.

Tacitus

Writing around 116 CE, Roman historian Tacitus documents the execution of Jesus: “Christus, from whom the name [ed., "Christianity"] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus...” (Annals 15.44)

Encyclopedia Britannica states that Tiberius ruled from 14 to 37 CE, and Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from 26 to 36 CE.

Thus, the upper and lower bounds of Jesus' crucifixion must be 26 CE and 36 CE.

Josephus

Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, writing in 93–94 CE, outlines the administration of Judea. He confirms that Joseph Caiaphas was appointed High Priest before Pilate arrived, and both Pilate and Caiaphas were stripped of their offices simultaneously in the winter of 36 CE (Antiquities 18.4.2).

This places is the absolute end-boundary of the crucifixion to before the winter of 36 CE.

Paul's Authentic Letters

In 2 Corinthians 11:32–33, Paul states "In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city... in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket".

The publication "encyclopedia.com" notes that King Aretas IV died in 40 CE. Paul's escape happened before this date.

In Galatians 1 and 2, Paul give us his timeline leading up to a visit in Jerusalem:

He meets Peter and James (Jesus's brother) 3 years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18-19).
He returns to Jerusalem 14 years later (Galatians 2:1).

Whether these periods run concurrently (14 years total) or consecutively (17 years total), it can be calculated by working backwards from the death of Aretas IV (as the latest possible date) that Paul's (oft-called) "conversion" occurred between 33 CE and 36 CE.

Because Paul states he was a persecutor of the church before his conversion (Galatians 1:13), the crucifixion, the resurrection claims, the initial gathering of the disciples, and the spread of the movement to Damascus all must have taken place before 33-36 CE.

Conclusion

At best, using only Paul's Authentic Epistles, Josephus, and Tacitus, it can only be said that Jesus' crucifixion occurred between 26 CE at the earliest and 36 CE at the latest.

Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypotheses

The Stolen or Moved Body Hypothesis

This theory proposes that the disciples had stolen or moved the body to make it appear that Jesus had been resurrected.

Earliest recorded expression of this kind of Hypothesis: Matthew 28:11-15. Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) is generally credited with being the first "modern" scholar to promote this idea.

Refutations:

"It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment... could have given the disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry". (David Strauss, "The Life of Jesus Critically Examined", 1835-1936).

"...none of these six possibilities [including that the body was stolen or removed by someone unconnected] are likely to be historical". (Geza Vermes, "Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels", 1973).

"They were not making it up. They were not telling a lie to get a movement started. I am not a Christian, but I know that something happened that radically changed their conviction". (Dr

Paula Fredricksen, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", 2000).

The Hallucination/Vision Hypothesis

The hallucination/vision hypotheses assert that all who had purportedly seen the resurrected Jesus "saw" Jesus as having been resurrected through visions in the mind.

David Strauss is generally considered the first "modern" scholar (from about the time of the Enlightenment to the present) to present this kind of hypothesis. ("The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined", 1835).

Refutations:

"The pure 'visionary' or psychological explanation fails to do justice to the sheer dynamism of the early apostolic movement. If the disciples had merely experienced subjective, internal phantoms born of grief, the shock of reality would have eventually broken the spell. Instead, we see an immediate, iron-clad conviction that withstood fierce institutional opposition, something a passing mental delusion rarely achieves. (Dr Geza Vermes, "The Resurrection: History and Myth", 2008).

"I am skeptical that our current psychological categories can easily or cleanly explain what happened. Most bereavement hallucinations are fleeting, individual, and do not lead to a revolutionary new theology. The early Christian texts describe encounters that were interactive, collective, and fundamentally worldview-shattering. Simply labeling them 'hallucinations' covers up a historical puzzle rather than solving it. (Dr Dale Allison, "Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters, 2005).

"Given the Jewish beliefs in the first century about the separation of the soul and body at death, if the disciples had hallucinated they would have simply seen visions of Jesus in Abraham's Bosom or heaven. That would have led them merely to say Jesus had been translated or assumed into heaven, but not resurrected from the dead". (William Lane Craig, formulated from debate transcripts).

"I know in their own terms what they saw was the raised Jesus. That's what they say, and then all the historical evidence we have afterwards attests to their conviction that that's what they saw. I'm not saying that they really did see him raised from the dead... but as a historian, a simple psychological dismissal like 'mass hysteria' or 'hallucination' does not adequately explain the birth of a global movement from a backwater crucifixion". (Dr. Paula Fredriksen, "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians", PBS Frontline, 1998).

Collective Delusion/Group Think Hypothesis and The Cognitive Dissonance Hypothesis

Hypotheses of these types are generally extensions of the Hallucination/Vision Hypotheses. In the Vision/Hallucination Hypotheses, the hallucination (or "vision") experienced directly led to a belief that Jesus had been "raised from the dead". This story was accepted as "true fact" by others. However, in the Collective Delusion/Group Think Hypothesis and The Cognitive Dissonance Hypothesis, the connection between the "experience" and the claim that "Jesus was raised from the dead" is not direct. Rather, a variety of "experiences" may have been reported by members of the group, and eventually, these experiences (probably combined with apocalyptic

expectations) congealed into a belief that “Jesus *must have been* raised from the dead”, and that, then, was expressed publicly as a claim that “Jesus was raised from the dead”.

The hypotheses in this group are tightly related, and it's difficult to establish who the first scholar was to proffer any one of them. However, John G. Gager is arguably the first. Gager wrote “The introduction of the resurrection faith represents a classic example of cognitive dissonance reduction within a disappointed community. Facing the ultimate disconfirmation of their hopes in the crucifixion, the group did not dissolve; instead, through a process of collective rationalization and intense mutual reinforcement, they spiritualized their expectations, transforming a devastating historical defeat into a powerful impulse for aggressive proselytism. (John G. Gager, “Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity”, 1975).

Refutations:

“The cognitive dissonance theory, as applied to early Christianity by Gager and others, breaks down precisely at the point of comparison with other groups. When a messianic leader died, the dissonance was normally resolved either by giving up the movement or by finding another messiah... The one thing they never did, because it was not an available Jewish category for a single individual in the middle of history, was to say that he had been raised from the dead”. (N.T. Wright, “The Resurrection of the Son of God”, 2003).

“To explain the explosion of the resurrection faith by means of 'group psychology' or 'collective delusion' is an anachronistic escape route for modern rationalism. The tight-knit, fiercely monotheistic framework of first-century Palestinian Judaism would have reacted with horror and violent rejection to a group hallucinating an executed criminal into the place of God. Social contagion cannot manufacture a theology that directly violates the bedrock of its own culture”. (Martin Hengel, “The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament”, 1981).

”Cognitive dissonance theory dictates that a group seeks paths of least resistance to rationalize failure. But the early devotion to Jesus as a risen, divine figure did not reduce social friction; it drastically magnified it. Invoking a uniquely isolated bodily resurrection—and offering cultic worship to a crucified man—created a massive new theological and social crisis within Jewish monotheism. It is a total misuse of psychology to claim this was a comfortable defense mechanism”. (Dr Larry Hurtado, “Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity”, 2003).

Faith, The—Galatians 1:23

The phrase “the faith” in Galatians 1:23 is notable because it is somewhat unusual in Paul’s letters.

“The formula contains the term *pistas* ('the faith') in the objective sense ('the religion'). This usage is rare in the undisputed Pauline letters”. (Betz, Hans Dieter. *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia Commentary Series, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, p. 80.)

Most often, Paul uses the Greek word *pistis* (“faith”) to describe personal trust or faithfulness—especially trust in Christ—rather than as a proper noun for a movement. Here, though, Paul reports that people recognized a coherent entity called “the faith”, the very thing he had once tried to destroy.

In other words, the early Jesus-followers’ belief was already being understood as a recognizable, named body of trust and allegiance centered on Christ. This usage reflects both an external perception and an internal reality: the movement had begun to coalesce as a distinct community with its own identity, even before Paul had fully articulated its theology or organizational structure.

In Galatians 1:23, Paul speaks of “the faith” (note the use of the definite article) which he preached. Since we learn elsewhere that the apostle preached “the gospel” (1 Corinthians 15:1), it is reasonable to conclude that “the faith” refers to the doctrine of the gospel. There are several New Testament references in which the expression is used in this fashion. (Galatians 1:23—The Faith, Wayne Jackson, Christian Courier)

The faith.—Not quite, as yet, “the body of Christian doctrine”, which was in process of forming rather than already formed, but the one cardinal doctrine of faith in Christ. (Elliot's Commentary for English Readers)

[Paul] had been a persecutor of those which professed the doctrine of the gospel, which he here calleth the faith, it being the object and the means of faith. (Matthew Poole's Commentary)

The use of the term “faith” is the same as in Acts 6:7, “Were obedient to the faith”, which is equivalent to the “obeying the gospel” mentioned Romans 10:16. The object to the verb *euangelizomai* is always something which is announced, never a thing which is required (cf. e.g. Luke 2:10; Acts 5:42; Acts 10:36; Ephesians 2:17; Ephesians 3:8); so that “faith” here cannot mean the faith which men are to render to Jesus, but the doctrine which they are to believe, to wit, that Jesus is Christ the Saviour. (Pulpit Commentary)

Flesh and Blood

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“In late Judaism, the phrase *basar wadam* [‘flesh and blood’] became a fixed idiom for humanity in its weakness, ignorance, and mortality, as distinct from God”.— Eduard Schweizer, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume VII (Eerdmans Publishing).

“Jesus’ contrast between ‘flesh and blood’ and ‘my Father in heaven’ employs a standard Jewish idiom. In rabbinic parables, a king of ‘flesh and blood’ (*melek basar va-dam*) is routinely contrasted with the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One”.— Craig S. Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Eerdmans Publishing).

“In Hebrew the idea of ‘body’ is expressed by the term ‘basar’... and hence the general state or condition of man, or man as a creature of flesh...”. Rabbinic literature frequently couples this with blood (*basar va-dam*) to create a standard formula denoting human limitation. “The idiom

occurs in rabbinic literature frequently and is usually translated 'mortal'.— The Jewish Encyclopedia, “Body in Jewish Theology”.

“The phrase 'flesh and blood' (= Hebr. *basar we-dam*) is a Semitic idiom, meaning a human being, as opposed to an angel or to God”.— Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible Series, Vol. 33, Yale University Press).

Hallucinations and Lookalikes (Illusions)

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Note: This Appendix entry is intended as a general commentary on Hallucinations and Lookalike Illusions as they relate to certain Hypothesis regarding the resurrection of Jesus. As such, this entry is not intended to provide in-depth explanations of either phenomenon.

Bereavement Hallucinations

A bereavement hallucination occurs when a person has an apparent sensory perception of the deceased in the absolute absence of an external stimulus. These can be visual, auditory (hearing their voice), olfactory (smelling their perfume), or a “sense of presence”.

Common Verbal Descriptions

Matter-of-fact comfort: “I woke up and saw him sitting at the edge of the bed, just looking at me”.

Acoustic clarity: “I heard her distinctly say my name from the kitchen”.

Hesitant disclosure: “I know this sounds crazy, but I felt her hand on my shoulder”.

Research and Prevalence

High Prevalence Rates: Studies indicate that between 30% and 60% of grieving individuals experience PBHEs. A classic, foundational study by Dr. W. Dewi Rees published in the *British Medical Journal* revealed that roughly 47% of widowed individuals experienced hallucinations of their dead spouse.

The “Sense of Presence”: Research shows the most frequent manifestation is not a full-body visual ghost, but a profound “sense of presence” (felt by roughly 39% of participants).

Anecdotal Observations:

Drs Bart Ehrman and Gerd Ludemann each present hypotheses for the origin of the claim of Jesus' resurrection (in “How Jesus Became God” and “What Really Happened to Jesus”, respectively). Their hypotheses are quite different, but in both cases, have a reliance on grievance hallucinations. Both Ehrman and Ludemann emphasize the “realness” of hallucinations, offering examples of the “realness” being expressed by individuals in case studies.

What's absent from both authors' writings are any accounts from clinical studies of individuals

who asserted, on the basis of their hallucination(s), that the deceased person whom they hallucinated was bodily alive again and out of the grave.

From my own studies, I have been unable to find any accounts of anyone who experienced one or more grievance hallucinations then claiming the deceased person (the subject of the hallucination) was indeed alive again and out of the grave. However, I have found that it is this very thing that lies behind the “pushback” from other scholars who engage in New Testament-related history: There are no known instances of anyone who has had a grievance hallucination of a deceased person then claiming the deceased was, in fact, alive again and out of the grave.

Scholarly Comments:

“I am sure that the first disciples had visions of Jesus after his death... But visions of the deceased, which are common enough, do not normally lead to the claim that the deceased has been resurrected, that his body has been raised from the dead. Usually, they lead to the conclusion that the person's spirit is alive in the afterlife or that they are a ghost. The Christian proclamation was something else entirely”. (Dr Dale Allison, “Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters”).

“Modern studies of bereavement hallucinations show that they are fleeting, highly subjective, and above all, do not lead the recipient to believe the deceased person has come back to physical life... There is no clinical parallel in psychiatric literature where a grief-induced hallucination caused a group of people to completely redefine their worldview...”. (Dr John J. Johnson, “Were the Resurrection Appearances Hallucinations?”)

“The differences between [bereavement hallucinations] and the New Testament appearances are too vast to justify the so-called 'hallucination hypothesis'... The clinical parallel simply does not exist”. (Dr Gerald O'Collins, *Irish Theological Quarterly*)

Anecdotal, personal observation of the author:

I recall three different people who have told me they'd “seen” a loved one after the loved one's death. Upon hearing the accounts of the first two people, it never occurred to me that the person telling me the story might have been saying they'd “literally” seen the deceased as an embodied, living-again person. I just took it as meaning some type of “spiritual” encounter. However, the third individual told me her story, I actually asked about it. A woman told me (enthusiastically) that she'd “seen” her deceased father on three occasions. I then said, “I'm just asking this for clarity, so bear with me. Do you mean to say your father came back to life, left his grave, and came to see you?” She responded quickly, “Oh, no! I don't mean *that!*”

Seeing a Lookalike (Grief Illusions)

Seeing a stranger and briefly recognizing them as a deceased loved one is technically a grief illusion. An illusion occurs when a real, physical stimulus (i.e., a stranger with a similar jacket, hair color, or gait) is misidentified by the brain. In acute grief, the brain is in a state of hyper-vigilance, actively seeking out the lost person, and may easily mistake a “lookalike” for the real person.

Common Verbal Descriptions

Initial shock/disbelief: “Oh my God, my heart stopped—I thought I just saw...”.

The double-take: “I saw someone at the grocery store who looked exactly like them from behind”.

Rationalized letdown: “For a second, I forgot they were gone and almost called out their name”.

Research and Psychological Context

Psychologists note that the grieving brain operates on a heavy “perceptual set” or expectation. Because the neural pathways associated with the loved one are still highly active, the brain aggressively fits ambiguous sensory data into the familiar mold of the deceased.

Scholarly Comments:

“When we see someone who bears a striking resemblance to a deceased loved one, our immediate psychological reflex is to recognize it as a poignant trick of the eye or a coincidental stranger. There is absolutely no documentation in psychological or historical literature of a lookalike sighting causing anyone—let alone a group of people—to conclude that a corpse has reanimated and vacated its tomb”. (Dr Michael Licona, “The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach”).

“If the disciples had simply run into someone who looked like Jesus, this would never have produced the belief in his resurrection. If you see a lookalike of a dead friend, you don't think he has risen from the dead; you think it's a twin, an impostor, or a mistake. The lookalike hypothesis has no clinical or rational parallel that leads to an empty-tomb proclamation”. (Dr William Lane Craig, spoken in his widely cited 1995 debate with atheist philosopher Dr. Michael Antony at the University of Birmingham).

“The 'Impostor' or 'Lookalike' theory died out in nineteenth-century critical scholarship for a reason: it lacks any psychological verisimilitude. No one sees a lookalike of a deceased person and leaps to the conclusion that the grave is empty. The psychological distance between 'that man looks like my dead friend' and 'my dead friend has physically conquered death' is a chasm that psychology cannot bridge”. (Dr Gary Habermas, “The Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence of Naturalistic Responses to Jesus’ Resurrection”).

“Ancient people knew about lookalikes, just as they knew about ghosts. If someone resembling Jesus had appeared in Jerusalem, the very last thing the disciples would have said was that the localized physical resurrection of the end times had begun in this one individual. They would have known it was someone else, or they would have checked the tomb”. (N.T. Wright, “The Resurrection of the Son of God”).

Hypotheses We'll Avoid

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Jesus Folklorism is the belief that Jesus was a fictional construct, a Folklore character who, as far as anyone could have known in the 1st century, existed only in stories. In other words, he was

kind of like Paul Bunyan or John Henry in American Folklore. Maybe there was a real person, somewhere way, way back in history, that the Folklore Jesus was based on. But maybe not. Or, maybe the Folklore Jesus was really an amalgam of many prior “Messiah-types” that got conflated into one “Jesus”. But in any case, the “Jesus” that people in the 1st century believed in simply did not exist. That “Jesus” was the product of Folklore. And, of course, stories of the Folklore Jesus performing amazing miracles were just “tall tales” (that grew in the telling)—as was the story of Jesus being raised from the dead. Eventually, the stories became more focused, turning into stories of the (supposedly) “real Jesus” we see in The Gospels.

Jesus Legendism is an odd category, the brainchild of people who say, “I don't believe Jesus existed. I think he was a legend”. But what they really mean is that they don't believe that the miracle-working, faith-healing, “Jesus of The Gospels” ever existed. The Legendist would concur that there was an historical Jesus who was crucified, but after Jesus died, “legends” about him developed. “I heard he fed 5000 people with a couple of fish” one ancient rumormonger might say. Another says “Oh, I heard he could walk on water and calm storms”, and a third says “Well, I heard he was even raised from the dead”. These “rumors” were believed by some, and eventually written down in The Gospels. Thus, for the Legendist, the “Gospel Jesus” is the quintessential example of a glorified, 'legend-ized' version of an otherwise real but ordinary man.

The Legendist seems to be content with merely “blowing off” the “Gospel Jesus” along with the idea that he'd been bodily raised from the dead. But the Legendist doesn't attempt to provide any new idea of what gave rise to the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. They'll happily “borrow” an Ersatz Bodily Resurrection Hypothesis or a Modal Resurrection Hypothesis for their own use. (The Legendist's approach is quite lazy).

Limited-Scope Hypotheses are limited in plausibility, designed only for the purpose of saying “This is more plausible than a miracle”. These are easy to make up on the fly, and wildly popular in modern cultures.

For example: Jesus was an extraterrestrial alien in a “Jesus exosuit” (à la Men in Black) who came to Earth in the 1st century—specifically to the place called Galilee. There, he became known as a teacher and miracle worker. He gathered a following. But eventually, he was unjustly crucified by “the powers that be”. Of course, that didn't affect the alien inside the exosuit; he was just fine. But after the “exosuit Jesus” hung on the cross for a while, the alien shut down the power, making it appear that “Jesus” was dead. Once placed in a tomb, the alien turned the suit back on, “transported” himself (Star Trek-style) to wherever his disciples were, and they believed Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead, and thus arose the resurrection claim. And this is “more probable than a miracle”, because (supposedly) “anything's more probable than a miracle”.

Pop-Schlock Hypotheses are theories that complicate the resurrection story without offering any real explanatory benefit. Take, for example, the idea that after Jesus died, his *spirit* was “raised up” and then given an entirely new, ex nihilo-created, fully physical body. This doesn't simplify the story—it merely trades one miracle for another. The corpse-affecting miracle of Traditional Christianity is swapped for the miracle of a newly created, fully physical body. And if, on top of that, the corpse is made to disappear (leaving an Empty Tomb), then we've just tacked on yet another miracle—two for the price of one. And yet, we're still stuck with depending on “miracles”.

Countless books exist that offer other ideas serving only to complicate the origin of the resurrection claim. Works such as *The Passover Plot* (Hugh J. Schonfield), *Caesar's Messiah: The Roman Conspiracy to Invent Jesus* (David Atwill), and *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the 'Original Jesus' a Pagan God?* (Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy) fall into this category—and they sell well. There's clearly an audience for them. People enjoy a good Pop-Schlock Hypothesis as much as they enjoy a good vampire novel. But, like the Alien-in-an-Exosuit Hypothesis, while these ideas are entertaining, they offer either nothing new or nothing of greater plausibility than do existing hypotheses.

Never-Dead Jesus Hypotheses include proposals such as the Swoon Hypothesis, the Twin or Substitute Hypotheses, and related variations in which Jesus did not, in fact, die on the cross. At their core, these hypotheses suggest that the resurrection claim arose not because a dead man was believed to have been raised, but because a man who was still alive was later claimed to have been raised from the dead.

For example, in one version of the Swoon Hypothesis, Jesus is understood to have survived crucifixion, then gotten out of his tomb and made his way to see his disciples. And instead of them thinking “he survived”, they thought “he’s been raised from the dead”. And in one version of the Twin Hypothesis, Jesus isn’t crucified at all. Rather, his secret “twin brother”, whom the disciples never knew, was crucified. And, they thought it was Jesus that had been crucified. So, upon seeing Jesus a couple of days later, they thought he’d been raised from the dead.

In all such cases, the common thread is clear: Jesus didn’t actually die prior to any alleged “rising”. Rather, the Never-Dead Jesus Hypotheses shift the subject of inquiry. They do not explain why a dead man would be proclaimed alive again; they attempt instead to reframe the situation so that a living person would be declared raised from the dead. But that’s a different explanatory target altogether.

James, the brother of the Lord

The Necessity of a Unique Identifier

In Galatians 1:19, Paul said he met with “James, the Lord’s brother”. It was necessary for Paul to include an “identifier” to distinguish this particular James from other men named James, as “James” (Ya'akov) was a very common name. If Paul had merely said “I met with James”, the reader would wonder “which one”?

See Ehrman, Bart, “Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth” (HarperOne, 2012).

See Meier, John P., “A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person” (Anchor Bible Reference Library, 1991)

“The Brother of The Lord”

“As for James, 'the brother of the Lord', there is no basis for taking the expression as indicating anything but a family relative & most likely a sibling. (And let's not wander off into semantic possibilities of the bare term, but stay with the uses of the term in sentences in Paul. Sound linguistic method.)” (Hurtado, Larry. “The 'Did Jesus Exist' Controversy-Encore”. (Larry Hurtado's Blog, July 27, 2012).

“In the light of the papyri, the primary sense of *adelphos* as a blood-brother remains entirely unshaken. While extensions to members of a guild or a community are well attested, the exact syntax found when identifying a specific individual by his direct family connection—where a person is described as 'the brother of someone—invariably marks a distinct, literal, biological kinship in everyday Hellenistic documents”. (Moulton, James Hope, and Milligan, George. *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1930).

“When the genitive modifier follows *adelphos* to specify relationship to a singular individual ruler or figure rather than a collective group, the grammar functions strictly as a biological specifier. The phrase acts to anchor the subject to a specific genealogy rather than a vague title of office or communal affinity”. (Porter, Stanley E. *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*. Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

“In the domain of kinship, when the definite article (*ton*) isolates the noun (*adelphos*) in direct relation to a single entity (*tou kyriou*), it shifts out of any possible associative or metaphorical domain. The text is grammatically bound to a definition of immediate familial lineage”. (Louw, J. P. and Nida, Eugene A. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. United Bible Societies, 1988).

Miracles and Probability

It's often claimed—sometimes with great confidence—that this-or-that naturalistic explanation for the resurrection of Jesus is “more probable than a miracle” (as posited by Traditional Christianity). At first glance, that sounds reasonable. But when it comes to actually calculating the probability of a miracle, the ground gets shaky fast.

Philosophers have debated this for centuries. David Hume, in his famous essay *Of Miracles*, argued that miracles are violations of the laws of nature, and that our belief in them should be proportioned to the strength of the evidence. But critics quickly pointed out a central problem: how exactly do you measure the probability of a miracle? How do you assign numbers to unique, unrepeatable events that—by definition—lie outside the normal course of experience?

Philosopher John Earman, in his work *Hume's Abject Failure*, takes Hume to task for his

handling of the topic. Earman believes Hume overstated his case against miracles, but Earman also makes it clear that trying to apply formal probability theory to miraculous claims faces insurmountable obstacles. Without repeatable data or well-defined reference classes, there's no reliable, objective way to calculate those probabilities. Earman concludes that most arguments dismissing miracles as "improbable" end up resting more on personal or philosophical assumptions than on measurable facts.

The same basic concern shows up across the scholarly spectrum. Philosopher Richard Swinburne, for example, is often cited for applying probability theory to religious belief, including miracles. But even Swinburne's defenders admit that his calculations rely heavily on background assumptions—about God, about nature, about the reliability of testimony—that are themselves impossible to quantify with objective precision.

In short, anyone claiming that their explanation is "more probable than a miracle" is leaning on a philosophical preference, not a demonstrable calculation. That doesn't mean they're wrong—but it does mean that the supposed "probability advantage" isn't as clear-cut or scientific as it might sound.

Suggested Reading

Hume, David. "Of Miracles", in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Many editions available; see especially the accessible version at Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, entry titled "David Hume on Miracles".

Earman, John. *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Swinburne, Richard. *The Concept of Miracle*. Macmillan, 1970.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, entry titled "Miracles". A general, accessible overview of the philosophical debates.

Ophthe

There is an ongoing debate how the Greek word "*ophthe*", in 1 Corinthians 3-5, should be understood in English. *Ophthe* is the verb that is translated sometimes in the context of the aforementioned scripture as "was seen by", and sometimes as "appeared to". So, we'll see (paraphrased) that "Christ died, was buried, was raised, and (a) was seen by Cephas, then by The Twelve, or (b) appeared to Cephas and The Twelve.

I can't unravel that debate. But, it must be understood that the debate is how English readers should understand *opthe* in that context. The ancient speakers of Koine Greek had no problem understanding it. We English speakers just aren't sure how they understood it. For me, the most confusing part of the debate over the translation was "how a single verb can mean opposite things"? We can't imagine the English phrase "he spoke" sometimes being understood as "he heard".

This is a translation issue. And translation is not always a straight-ahead, word-for-word thing. Let's say that in Koine Greek, a perfectly acceptable sentence is "He went to court and was *seen by* the judge". But in English, we don't really say it that way. We'd more likely say "He went to court and *appeared before* the judge". However, in translating in this fashion, we changed not only the one actively doing something, but also, what was done. ("The judge saw" became "the man appeared").

I've chosen to stick with it's "base meaning" of "seen by", not the more metaphoric understanding of "appeared to". The reason is quite simple. In 1 Corinthians 9:1, Paul asks rhetorically, "have I not seen the Lord?", and in that context, there is no debate; this verse cannot be translated as "Has the Lord not appeared to me?" The grammatical structure does not allow for it. The verb Paul uses in this sentence is "*horao*" ("to see"), and "*opthe*" is a form of "*horao*". It's the same verb, but different tenses. So, Paul is clearly using "*horao*" to mean "to see" in one instance, and it's difficult (without stepping into the debate) to say he's using the same verb in a different sentence to mean "he appeared".

This might be confusing, but we have the same kind of thing in English. We have (for example) the verb "to go". So, I can say "I have to go now", or "you need to go outside". But I can also say "yesterday, I went to the store". "Went" is a form of the verb "to go", but it doesn't sound a thing like "go". And that's the relation of *opthe* to *horao*. *Ophthe* doesn't sound at all like *horao*, but, it's the same verb.

In short, I've chosen to use "was seen by" in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 simply because it's consistent with "Have I not seen the Lord" in 1 Corinthians 9:1. If Paul had said "Has Jesus not appeared to me", then I would go with the "appeared" translation. The deciding factor, though, is that the reference in 1 Corinthians 9:1 cannot be translated any other way than "Have I not seen the Lord".

My decision also aligns with the translation of the New Testament from Greek to Latin, done by Jerome in the 4th century. In that translation, Jerome translates 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 to read (paraphrased) "Jesus died, was buried, was raised, and was seen...", not "...and appeared to". He uses the Latin verb "video" ("to see"), and not the Latin verb "appareo" ("to appear").

It also aligns with the translation common to all English-language bibles done before 1901. In that year, the American Standard Bible came out, and used the "appeared to" translation.

Paul's Timeline

Pre-Transformation Identity & Heritage

Everything Paul explicitly says about his life before his transformation:

Ancestry: Born a circumcised Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, of the seed of Abraham (Philippians 3:5, Romans 11:1).

Cultural Affinity: Identifies strictly as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5).

Theological Affiliation: Lived his life as a strict Pharisee under the ancestral law (Philippians 3:5, Galatians 1:14).

Persecutory Zeal: Advanced in Judaism far beyond his peers, violently persecuting the church of God in an attempt to systematically destroy it (Galatians 1:13-14, Philippians 3:6, 1 Corinthians 15:9).

The Two Separate Experiences

Event A (External Witness of the Resurrection): Paul describes an external, objective visual sighting of the physically resurrected Jesus. He uses explicit verbs of physical sight—“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Corinthians 9:1) and “he was also seen by me” (1 Corinthians 15:8). This external manifestation placed him in the same eyewitness category as Cephas (Peter) and the Twelve, providing the raw objective data of “the gospel”: that Christ died for sins and was raised on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This event appears to be reflected in Galatians 1:12, where Paul writes that he learned the gospel (that Jesus was raised from the dead), “...through a revealing of Jesus Christ”.

Event B (Internal Mystical Indwelling): Chronologically and conceptually distinct from the external sighting, Paul describes an interior, spiritual disclosure where God was pleased “to reveal his Son in me (*en emoi*)” so he might preach him among the Gentiles (Galatians 1:16). This mystical, internal indwelling—which he later calls “Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20)—served as his prophetic commission to non-Jews, independent of any human teaching.

Chronological Timeline Points

NOTE: These timeline points are estimates based solely on information from Paul’s Authentic Epistles, Josephus (Antiquities 18), and Tacitus. There is “overlap” in some of the “year ranges” presented. This is because of the limited sources being used. Historians generally seem to use information found in The Gospels and Acts in order to determine more accurate timeline information, but in this present book, neither The Gospels or Acts are being used as reference material.

c. 9-14 CE — Estimated Birth Window: Inferred strictly from his self-description as an “old man” (presbytes) by the time he drafts Philemon (Philemon 1:9).

c. 33-36 CE — The Two Revelations: He experiences the external sighting of the risen Jesus, halting his persecution, followed by the distinct internal revelation of Christ in him. He immediately retreats to Arabia, then returns to Damascus without visiting Jerusalem (1 Cor 15:8, Gal 1:12-17).

c. 36-39 CE — First Jerusalem Visit: “After three years” (measured from his transformation/return to Damascus), he travels to Jerusalem for 15 days exclusively to visit Cephas (Peter). He also sees James, the Lord's brother, but no other apostles (Galatians 1:18-19).

c. 37-40 CE — Escape from Nabataean Rule: The ethnarch under King Aretas IV guards Damascus to arrest Paul. He escapes by being lowered in a basket through a window in the wall (2 Corinthians 11:32-33). This provides our absolute temporal limit, as Aretas IV died in 40 CE.

c. 37-50 CE — The Silent Years: Paul travels through the regions of Syria and Cilicia, remaining entirely unknown by face to the Judean churches (Galatians 1:21-22).

c. 50-51 CE — Second Jerusalem Visit (Council): “After fourteen years”, Paul returns to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus due to a revelation. He defends his uncircumcised Gentile mission before the “pillars” (James, Cephas, John), who grant him the right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:1-10).

c. 51 CE — The Antioch Incident: Paul openly opposes Peter to his face in Antioch because Peter withdrew from eating with Gentiles under pressure from James' emissaries (Galatians 2:11-14).

c. 51-57 CE — Independent Western Mission & Letters: Active missionary travel, writing his undisputed letters while supporting himself entirely through manual labor with his own hands to maintain financial independence (1 Thess 2:9, 1 Cor 4:12, Romans 15:25-28).

Lived Physical Realities & Personal Disclosures

The Thorn: Suffered from an ongoing, agonizing physical “thorn in the flesh” (*skolops te sarki*), which he calls a messenger of Satan sent to torment him (2 Corinthians 12:7). Physical Deficiencies: Openly acknowledges that his critics mock his presence, saying “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (2 Corinthians 10:10).

Bodily Brands: Carries the physical scars or “marks (*stigmata*) of Jesus” branded directly into his flesh (Galatians 6:17). Judicial Trauma: He was beaten with rods 3 times, stoned once, shipwrecked 3 times, and received the maximum judicial lashing of “forty stripes less one” five separate times (195 total lashes) from Jewish authorities (2 Corinthians 11:24-25).

Final Fate (Non-Biblical External Source)

1 Clement (c. 95-96 CE): Confirms Paul was imprisoned seven times, exiled, stoned, reached the “extreme limit of the West” (Spain), and finally bore his testimony before imperial rulers before being removed from the world.

Received and Handed Down

Note: Information below is considered non-controversial, and therefore, no specific references are necessarily offered)

The phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:3 where Paul speaks of "receiving" and "handing down" is commonly understood by biblical scholars and historians to refer to the Jewish tradition of oral transmission. This process was a well-established method by which teachings and traditions were passed along, especially in Jewish rabbinic culture, and it would have been familiar to Paul's audience. Here's a breakdown of the context and significance of these terms:

The Greek verbs *paredOka*, ("I handed down") and *parelabon*, ("I received") reflect a technical language used for transmitting authoritative teachings or traditions. These terms were often used in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts to describe a formal process of tradition being passed from one person or generation to another.

In Jewish rabbinic tradition, a key way of preserving the law and teachings was through oral transmission from teacher to student, who would then become a teacher themselves and pass it on to others. This process was considered highly reliable in ancient Jewish culture.

This idea of "receiving and handing on" is also a rabbinic principle, exemplified by the phrase in Pirkei Avot (a section of the Mishnah), where it says, "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and handed it down to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly".

The idea of receiving and transmitting traditions is central to the way Jewish law and teaching were passed down from generation to generation in a largely oral culture. The Mishnah, particularly in Pirkei Avot, emphasizes this process: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and he transmitted it to Joshua...” (Pirkei Avot 1:1).

This kind of phrasing reflects the importance of faithful transmission of religious or legal teaching without alteration, ensuring that what was taught by one generation was faithfully passed down to the next.

The terms “received” and “handed down” were not exclusive to Jewish usage but were also found in Greco-Roman contexts. In schools of philosophy, students were said to "receive" the

teachings of their master and "hand them down" to others. This resonates with how Paul presents his role in the transmission of Christian teaching, not as its originator but as a faithful recipient and transmitter.

References to Paul's Use of the Tradition Language

F. F. Bruce, in his work *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, explains that the phrases "received" and "handed down" reflect the early Christian practice of passing on authoritative traditions, likely rooted in Jewish rabbinic tradition.

Richard B. Hays, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians in the Interpretation series, points out that this passage (1 Corinthians 15:3-7) likely preserves one of the earliest Christian creeds. The use of "received" and "handed down" suggests Paul is functioning in the same capacity as a tradent (a transmitter of tradition), passing along what he has learned from others.

James D. G. Dunn, in his work *The Evidence for Jesus*, argues that this passage reflects Paul's deep connection with the apostolic tradition, and that the language he uses is characteristic of the way Jewish oral traditions were carefully passed down.

N. T. Wright on "Received and Handed Down": Wright, particularly in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and his commentaries on 1 Corinthians, notes that Paul's use of "received" (*parelabon*) and "handed down" (*paredoka*) is indicative of a formal tradition. This reflects the idea that Paul was not inventing new ideas, but rather passing on a pre-existing creedal tradition that was already established in the early Christian community.

Wright, like other scholars, recognizes the Jewish roots of this phrase. He points out that the language of receiving and handing down is deeply embedded in rabbinic tradition, where oral transmission of teachings was critical to preserving religious truth. This would have been a familiar concept both to Paul's Jewish and Gentile audience.

Bart Ehrman: Ehrman emphasizes that when Paul speaks of "receiving" and "handing down," he is likely referring to a pre-Pauline tradition—that is, a set of beliefs about Jesus' death and resurrection that predated Paul's conversion and was already formulated within the early Christian community.

Ehrman notes that the language of "receiving" and "handing down" in Paul's letters reflects the broader Jewish practice of oral transmission of teachings. By using this language, Paul shows himself as part of this Jewish tradition of transmitting teachings, although the content he is transmitting is specifically related to the Christian message about Jesus.

In "Did Jesus Exist?", Ehrman argues that the language of "receiving" and "handing down" suggests that this tradition could date back to just a few years after Jesus' death. Since Paul is writing 1 Corinthians around 55 CE, and he likely received this tradition when he first visited Jerusalem

(which could have been around 35-38 CE), this means that belief in Jesus' resurrection was being articulated very soon after the events themselves.

Scholarly Consensus

This entry is merely an informal overview of Scholarly Consensus and how such consensus is reached.

Scholarly Consensus isn't a vote tally. It's not like 51% of scholars agree, so we call it settled. In historical disciplines—especially ancient history, where the evidence is limited and fragmentary—a consensus usually means that something has been studied, debated, challenged, and re-examined so thoroughly and over such a long period of time that the vast majority of qualified scholars now accept it as simply true. The matter is considered settled—not because it's been declared so, but because there's just nothing left to say against it that hasn't already been said (and answered).

To put it another way, a Scholarly Consensus forms when a particular view becomes so widely accepted that it no longer even comes up for debate among serious researchers. At that point, any dissenting views are typically regarded as fringe—held by only a few outliers whose work is not representative of the field.

A good example is the question of whether Jesus of Nazareth was a real, historical person. Among scholars of antiquity—whether secular, Christian, Jewish, atheist, or otherwise—there is overwhelming agreement that Jesus did exist as a human being in first-century Judea. This isn't based on theological commitments, but on a wide range of historical sources and rigorous cross-examination over decades. Even scholars who reject the idea of Jesus' resurrection (such as Bart Ehrman) and those who defend it (such as Mike Licona) agree on this foundational point. In public debates between scholars like these, the historical existence of Jesus isn't even on the table—it's simply assumed. That's Scholarly Consensus.

Contrast that with something like the question of the empty tomb. Many scholars think the story reflects a historical memory; many others think it's a later theological construction. The debate is active, the arguments are ongoing, and no clear consensus has been reached. In this case, the scholarly landscape is better described as “divided opinion” rather than “consensus”.

So, to sum up: Scholarly Consensus doesn't mean “literally everyone” agrees. It means the specialists have argued the matter into the ground, and the result is now broadly accepted as the most reasonable conclusion, based on the available evidence. It's an organic process—not official, not binding, and always open to revision if new evidence comes to light—but it's how historians build a reliable picture of the past from the scattered fragments we have.

The Waking Dead

(This information is provided only anecdotally. Therefore, references are limited, and provided only to confirm the fact that in each case, the individual was confirmed dead. Information about specific reactions of others was gleaned from numerous sources, and I'd encourage independent confirmation).

Watson Franklin Mandujano Doroteo - Peru (<https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/man-wakes-up-funeral-open-casket-mourners-family-members-watson-franklin-mandujano-doroteo-peru-tingo-maria-a8021851.html>)

Walter Williams - declared dead in February 26 2014, Mississippi (<https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/us/mississippi-walter-williams-dead>)

Fagilyu Mukhametzyanov - 2011, Kazan, Russia (<https://theweek.com/articles/483648/woman-who-died-funeral>)

Janina Kolkiewicz - 2014, Ostrow Lubelski, Poland (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30048087>)

Mett Kamil - 2016, Kamienna Góra, Poland (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/mett-kamil-polish-guy-drank-202043564.html>)

Ali Abdel-Rahim Mohammad - 1999, Alexandria, Egypt (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/416727.stm)

Paul Mutoru - 2014, Naivasha District Hospital in Kenya (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25681048>)

Carlos Camejo - 2007, Venezuela (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-sep-15-fg-briefs15.s5-story.html>)

The initial reactions of the first witnesses to these incidents are overwhelmingly categorized by severe fright, intense shock, or panicked flight. In no documented case were the witnesses "calm and casual".

Watson Franklin Mandujano Doroteo (2017, Peru)

The Reaction: Severe Distress and Agitation.

Details: During his open-casket wake, family members noticed his chest rising and falling. The mourners immediately halted the service in a state of deep emotional distress and panicked confusion, rushing to find a doctor to check the casket and confirm if he was still alive.

Walter Williams (2014, Mississippi)

The Reaction: Paralyzed Shock followed by Disbelief.

Details: When Williams began kicking his legs inside his body bag at the funeral home, the workers immediately called his family in the middle of the night. His family described the initial

phone call stating "Daddy is still here" as an absolute, paralyzing shock that left them completely stunned before they could process the news and begin rejoicing.

Fagilyu Mukhametzyanov (2011, Kazan, Russia)

The Reaction: Mutual Terror and Medical Shock.

Details: Mukhametzyanov woke up inside an open coffin surrounded by sobbing relatives. Upon realizing she was at her own funeral, she began screaming in absolute horror. The shock of her awakening was so universally terrifying to the gathered mourners that it threw the entire funeral into chaos. Tragically, the sheer intensity of the shock caused her to collapse immediately back into the coffin, triggering a second, permanently fatal heart attack.

Janina Kolkiewicz (2014, Ostrow Lubelski, Poland)

The Reaction: Profound Astonishment and Ongoing Disbelief.

Details: After spending 11 hours in a cold storage body bag, an undertaker moving another corpse noticed the bag moving. The mortuary staff were completely astonished and shocked when they unzipped the bag and found her alive. The family doctor who had signed her death certificate hours prior was reported to be in a state of severe psychological shock and total disbelief over the error.

Kamil (2016, Kamienna Góra, Poland)

The Reaction: Extreme Fear and Bodily Trembling.

Details: A hospital security guard heard strange noises and thumping coming from inside one of the refrigerated mortuary coolboxes. The guard later recounted that he opened the door "with shaking hands" out of pure fear, only to find a naked Kamil alive inside asking for a blanket.

Ali Abdel-Rahim Mohammad (1999, Alexandria, Egypt)

The Reaction: Panicked Flight and Screaming.

Details: After being declared dead from a swimming accident, Mohammad woke up inside a mortuary refrigerator. He managed to draw attention to himself by reaching out and physically grabbing the hand of a mortuary attendant who was attempting to close the fridge door. The terrified attendant screamed "help us!" and fled the room in a panic. His frantic escape caused an entire visiting family, who were there to identify a completely different body, to run out of the building in a panic alongside him.

Paul Mutoru (2014, Naivasha District Hospital, Kenya)

The Reaction: Terrified Flight and Hysteria.

Details: Staff at the hospital morgue heard noises coming from Mutoru's concrete table after he had been presumed dead from an insecticide poisoning. Upon seeing the "corpse" stir and begin breathing, the mortuary attendants bolted from the room screaming in terror. They locked the door behind them and refused to re-enter, initially convincing themselves that a phantom or a violent thief had broken into the morgue.

Carlos Camejo (2007, Venezuela)

The Reaction: Medical Panic and Severe Distress.

Details: Examiners realized Camejo was alive only after they made a surgical incision on his face for an autopsy and he began heavily bleeding. The medical examiners entered a state of sheer panic and astonishment. They scrambled to hastily stitch the wound back up while Camejo woke up screaming in excruciating pain. His wife, who arrived at the facility shortly after to identify his

dead body, experienced profound shock when she walked in to find him sitting up in a corridor waiting for her.

APPENDIX B

The “Bob, Lost at Sea” Survey

Note: A discussion of when the survey was done, and the methodologies, can be found further below under the sub-heading of “**Discussion of Survey**”.

Following is the actual text that was presented to anonymous participants:

In this Hypothetical Scenario, you have a brother, who we’ll call “Bob”, and a family consisting of yourself, your mother, and your siblings (including Bob).

Your brother Bob was lost at sea when his ship sank in the Pacific. Bob was not among the survivors in the lifeboats, nor was his body found among the victims that were recovered. Search operations continued for months, looking for survivors that may have landed on nearby, uninhabited islands and atolls. But, the search efforts ended, and Bob was declared dead, his body having never been found. It is a time of deep grief for the family, and Bob is (symbolically) “laid to rest” in a memorial service.

A few weeks later, you are in San Francisco on business, and on a crowded street, you see a man who strikingly appears to be Bob. But, the man is quickly lost in the crowd.

You then realize it is possible that Bob might still be alive: maybe he was mis-identified by rescuers. Maybe he gave them a wrong name (to fake his own death). Maybe he was picked up from an island by someone besides the rescue team. There are many possibilities, and many questions, so you decide to investigate.

You must decide the level of evidence you would require in order to tell your family (mother and siblings) that your brother Bob is still alive.

You must also consider the consequences of having told the family that Bob is alive, if it turns out that you were wrong, and Bob is actually dead.

Question: What level of evidence would you need in order to be certain that Bob is alive, so that you can tell your family?

Choose an option from the list (further below) to fill in the blank in this sentence: **I would tell my family that I am certain that Bob is alive _____.**

- a. as a joke, and without considering any negative consequences at all.
- b. Based solely on the initial sighting in San Francisco.
- c. only if I had additional (one or more) sightings of Bob.
- d. only if I had one or more additional sightings of Bob, corroborated by another witness that also knew Bob.
- e. only if I had a conversation with Bob. [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob].

- f. only if I had a conversation with Bob [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob] witnessed by someone that also knew Bob.
- g. only if I had a conversation with Bob [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob] and physical interaction with Bob, such as a handshake or a touch on the arm.
- h. only if I had a conversation with Bob [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob] and physical interaction with Bob, such as a handshake or a touch on the arm, in the presence of another witness who also knew Bob.
- i. only if I had additional evidence other than what is shown in the previous options, such as DNA or fingerprint analysis.

>>> END OF SURVEY

TABLE OF SURVEY RESULTS

as a joke, and without considering any negative consequences at all	2	N/A **
based solely on the initial sighting in San Francisco	7	1.61%
only if I had additional (one or more) sightings of Bob	10	2.3%
only if I had one or more additional sightings of Bob, corroborated by another witness that also knew Bob	11	2.53%
only if I had a conversation with Bob. [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob]	220	50.69%
only if I had a conversation with Bob [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob] witnessed by someone that also knew Bob	43	9.91%
only if I had a conversation with Bob [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob] and physical interaction with Bob, such as a handshake or a touch on the arm	27	6.22%
only if I had a conversation with Bob [an in-person conversation that convinced you that this was Bob] and physical interaction with Bob, such as a handshake or a touch on the arm, in the presence of another witness who also knew Bob	37	8.53%
only if I had additional evidence other than what is shown in the previous options, such as DNA or fingerprint analysis	79	18.2%

Discussion of Survey

Total Respondents: 442

Eliminations: 8

Total Responses Show in Table: 436

Total Responses Used in Calculations: 434 (see Eliminations and Also Eliminated)

Explanation of the Table: There were 442 responses collected. However, as shown above, there were eight (8) eliminations. It would appear, then, that there should be only four hundred thirty four (434) responses in the table, yet there are four hundred thirty six (436). This is because two (2) of the eliminations are recorded in the table, but they are not calculated in the percentage results. (see Eliminations below)

Eliminations: Eight (8) responses were eliminated from being calculated in the table above. Six (6) of these responses were eliminated based on Comments left by the respondent that showed the respondent's answer to the Survey's Question was not reliable. For example, one respondent left a Comment saying "I would have told my family what I had seen, but not said I knew for certain that he was alive" and another said "I would not need certainty to share the possibility of having seen Bob, and would do so to devise with the rest of the family the possible actions to take following the event".

****Also Eliminated:** Responses of "as a joke, and without considering any negative consequences at all". These responses were eliminated from the calculations, but still shown in the chart above. This response was the "throw-away" response; a common practice in online surveys which gives the respondent who ventured to the site the opportunity to choose this first, "flippant" answer if they find they have no interest in considering the other options.

Calculations: Survey results show as percentages are calculated on a basis of 434 respondents.

Survey Execution: Four hundred and two (402) responses to the survey were acquired in 2019-2020. The remaining 42 were acquired in 2023.

Survey Formulation: The survey was created on surveymonkey.com. The author was not identified in the survey presentation, either by name or by any other identification such as an email address.

Survey Presentation: The survey was presented online only, and in the following venues: Reddit, Nextdoor, Quora. The results collected from Nextdoor were collected mainly from neighborhoods in the Greater Austin, TX area, using several different Nextdoor accounts. The responses collected from Reddit and Quora may have come from (virtually) any geographic location.

Respondents: All respondents were anonymous. They were not asked for any identification information, and no such information was collected by the author through any means.

Data Acquisition: The survey respondents were presented only with a link to the survey, which resided on surveymonkey.com. Their responses were collected solely at that website. The author of the survey was, of course, given access to the Data.

