AN EVALUATION OF BART D. EHRMAN'S TWOFOLD CHALLENGE TO

ESTABLISHING THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

AS A HISTORICAL EVENT

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This thesis is dedicated to my lovely wife Rowena and awesome children Christiana and Aaron James.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Christian religion claims to be grounded in history. It teaches that

God revealed himself to humankind in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who

walked along the shores of Galilee. Jesus' physical death *via* a Roman crucifixion

and bodily resurrection are God's means of saving humanity from its peril. The

apostle Paul declares "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and

so is your faith. . . . you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:14, 17, NIV). Hence, for

the Christian claim to have veracity, the events of the crucifixion and resurrection

must, necessarily, have taken place within the space-time continuum of human

history. As John W. Robbins writes, "Christianity is an historical religion, not in

the sense that its doctrines are based upon historical events, but in the sense that

certain historical events are integral and necessary parts of its doctrine."[1]

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[1]John W. Robbins, foreword to *Historiography: Secular and Religious*, 2nd ed., ed. Gordon H. Clark (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1994), ix-x.

While the crucifixion of Jesus is widely regarded in critical scholarship as one of the most well-established facts in ancient history,[2] the bodily resurrection of Jesus is sharply debated.[3] Nevertheless, lines of historical evidence have been mounted, erecting a strong case for the historicity of the resurrection.[4]

Some critical scholars in the study of the historical Jesus, however, raise serious challenges to establishing the resurrection as a historical event. Among them one prominent voice—both in academic and popular circles—claims historians cannot establish Jesus was raised from the dead: New Testament textual critic Bart D. Ehrman.

In a number of his debates with evangelical Christians, Ehrman tells of his journey from when he placed his trust in Christ until when he renounced that

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[2]The following critical scholars affirm the certainty of Jesus' death by crucifixion. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 145, 154, 196, 201; Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 261-62; Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (NY: Vintage, 1999), 8; Gerd Ludemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), 50.

[3]John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Fortress Press, 2005); Paul Copan, *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig & Gerd Ludemann* (IVP Academic, 2000); Paul Copan, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?: A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Baker Academic, 1999); Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Zondervan, 1996).

[4]William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (IVP Academic, 2010).

faith.[5] He claims he believed everything about the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus with his "whole heart and soul" and "used to preach them and try to convince others that they were true."[6] Ehrman's journey took a dramatic turn when he began to study these matters for himself rather than to accept what his teachers said.

> I learned Greek and started studying the New Testament in the original Greek language. I learned Hebrew to read the Old Testament. I learned Latin, Syriac, and Coptic to be able to study the New Testament manuscripts and the non-canonical traditions of Jesus in their original languages. I immersed myself in the world of the first century, reading non-Christian Jewish and pagan texts from the Roman Empire and before, and I tried to master everything written by a Christian from the first three hundred years of the church. I became a historian of antiquity, and for twenty-five years now I have done my research in this area night and day.[7]

Further, Ehrman says he is not a philosopher but "a historian dedicated to finding the historical truth."[8] After years of study, he arrived at the conclusion that everything he "previously thought about the historical evidence of the resurrection was absolutely wrong."[9]

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[5]William Lane Craig and Bart D. Ehrman, *Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Bart D. Ehrman*, http://www.philvaz.com/apologetics/p96.htm (accessed January 3, 2012); Michael R. Licona and Bart D. Ehrman, *Can Historians Prove that Jesus Rose from the Dead?*, DVD (Charlotte, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009); Michael R. Licona and Bart D. Ehrman, *Is the Resurrection of Christ Provable?*, DVD (Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

[6]Craig and Ehrman, 9.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

Ehrman expressed what "was absolutely wrong" in a number of objections, or challenges, to establishing the resurrection of Jesus as an actual historical event. Michael R. Licona, who participated in a number of dialogues with Ehrman, identifies five such objections.[10] (1) The sources reporting Jesus' resurrection are historically unreliable. (2) Historians attempt to establish what probably occurred, and a miracle by definition is the least probable of events. (3) The hypothesis that Jesus was raised is theological rather than historical. (4) If it were to be accepted that Jesus worked miracles, it must also be conceded in principle that other people in the antiquities did them. (5) The canons of historical research do not allow historians to adjudicate miracle claims. This thesis deals with objections (1), (2), (3), and (5), reorganized as three, herein given the following names: the general unreliability of the Gospels—(1), the intrinsic improbability of miracles—(2), and the absolute inaccessibility to the supernatural—(3) and (5). The primary purpose of the thesis is not to respond to each of the three. Instead, the primary purpose is to respond to the second and third challenge which require a more critical evaluation as they present themselves as real threat to historically establishing the resurrection of Jesus. The first challenge does not present itself challenging and may easily be diffused. In the very words of Ehrman himself, the general unreliability of the Gospels "is really just kind of child's play compared to the real problem of why historians cannot prove the resurrection."[11] For "even if these stories were the best sources

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[10]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 171-74.

[11]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

in the world, there would still be a major obstacle that we simply *cannot*

overcome if we want to approach the question of the resurrection historically."[12]

He then launches his twofold challenge: the intrinsic improbability of miracles

and the absolute inaccessibility to the supernatural.

Motivation and Aim

Before the historical foundation for Christianity can be established, one

must deal with these challenges. For if these questions remain, the consequences

could be devastating. Christianity then would not be unique in its claim of being a

historical religion. Neither could it lay exclusive claim to God's way of salvation.

Rather, it would be one of many unverifiable and unprovable religious truth

claims.

Even if Christianity is true under these conditions, agnosticism would be

the only logical solution, for there would be no way to know the veracity of any

one truth claim among the many. Thus, the ability to establish the resurrection of

Jesus as fact is a necessary precondition to prove the Christian truth claim for

God's revelation to humankind.

Finally, historically establishing the resurrection is a twofold task: provide

positive proof for the case and nullify objections to the case.[13] This thesis aims to

contribute to the task of demonstrating how Ehrman's challenges to historically

establishing the resurrection fail and that the resurrection can indeed be

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[12]Craig and Ehrman, 11-12 (emphasis added).

[13]Nullification of objections maintains strength of the case. If neglected, the integrity of the case would be undermined, and confidence in it may no longer be held.

established as an actual occurrence in history. To that end, a presentation of, and

responses to, these challenges are in order.

CHAPTER 2

THE GENERAL UNRELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS

Introduction

Since the reliability of the Gospels is in question, a few remarks are in
order with respect to the doctrine of biblical inspiration and the practice of
historical investigation. The Bible is recognized in Christianity as divinely
inspired. It reveals certain truths about God and reality. Most certainly, it did not
descend from the clouds to reach human beings. Rather, the conviction of
Christians is that the Bible is a collection of ancient documents meticulously
preserved for people of faith by God's holy men and women through the guidance
of the Holy Spirit. One of the revealed biblical truths is that God raised Jesus
bodily from the dead. Such an act of God is taken on faith largely based on the
assumption of biblical inspiration. Yet it is also the Christian position that the
resurrection is well-established historical fact. In establishing the resurrection, a
number of New Testament books are utilized *not* as inspired writings, but simply
as ordinary first century historical documents. It is then maintained without
assuming biblical inspiration that the historicity of the resurrection holds when
subjected to critical historical investigation.

Turning now to the challenge, of the books utilized, the Gospels of
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are regarded by Ehrman to be the sources for

knowing about the resurrection of Jesus. He writes, "[I]f historians want to know what Jesus said and did they are more or less constrained to use the New Testament Gospels as their principal sources. Let me emphasize that this is not for religious or theological reasons—for instance, that these and these alone can be trusted. It is for historical reasons, pure and simple."[14] Yet he seriously questions the Gospels as historically reliable documents. He regards them as generally unreliable, and, for that reason, the resurrection cannot be established as a historical event. This challenge is called the general unreliability of the gospels (GUG).

The Task of the Historian

One fundamental standard in the canons of historical investigation is historians attempt to establish what most probably happened in the past. Historians work with past events. Ehrman remarks, "We can't really know the past because the past is done with. We think we know that past in some instances because we have such good evidence for what happened in the past, but in other cases we don't know, and in some cases we just have to throw up our hands in despair."[15] He explains that one way to see this is by contrasting how scientists engage in their craft with how historians engage in theirs. Scientists, through repeated observations, determine how events have taken or will take place based on those observations. For example, if one were to show whether several

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[14]Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 199.

[15]Craig and Ehrman, 9.

hundreds of bars of iron and several hundreds of bars of Ivory soap will sink or float in tubs of water, all one has to do is start throwing them in, observing the bars of iron sink and the bars of Ivory soap float. "By tossing the bars of iron and soap into the tubs of water, I could demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that one will sink and the other will float, since the same result will occur in every instance. This does not necessarily prove that in the future every bar of iron thrown into a tub of lukewarm water will sink, but it does provide an extremely high level of what we might call presumptive probability."[16] Scientists are afforded this, yet historians do not have the luxury of observing repeated similar events. Once an event occurs, it is over. That singular event is all the historian can attempt to describe based on the available evidence. "Since historians cannot repeat the past in order to establish what has probably happened, there will always be less certainty in their conclusions" than in scientists' conclusions based on repeated observations.[17] For instance, it "is much harder to convince people that John F. Kennedy was the victim of a lone assassin than to convince them that a bar of Ivory soap will float."[18]

In addition to working with the past, historians utilize whatever evidence is available for investigation to arrive at potential levels of probability. This depends on how far back in history can one go: "[T]he farther back you go in history, the harder it is to mount a convincing case."[19] For example, given the

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[16]Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 242.

[17]Ibid. 243.

[18]Ibid.

sheer amount of available sources, historians can be "relatively certain that Bill Clinton won the election in 1996."[20] Although there is a considerable debate on the matter because it happened hundreds of years ago, it is "pretty clear that Shakespeare wrote his plays."[21] However, this becomes more difficult when it comes to ancient periods: "For events in the ancient world, even events of earth-shattering importance, there is often scant evidence to go on. All the historian can do is work to establish what probably happened on the basis of whatever supporting evidence happens to survive."[22] For example, although he affirms that it is "probable that Caesar crossed the Rubicon," Ehrman says that there is not "a lot of eyewitness testimony" for it.[23] Historians, therefore, "try to establish levels of probability of what happened in the past. Some things are absolutely certain, some are probable, some are possible, some are 'maybe,' some are 'probably not.'"[24]

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[19]Ibid.

[20]Craig and Ehrman, 9.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 243.

[23]Craig and Ehrman, 9.

[24]Ibid.

The Kind of Sources Historians Look For

This leads further to the kind of sources used as evidence when trying to establish probabilities of events. Ehrman asserts that if one does not have a source that goes back to the time period itself, then one does not have a reliable source. "There are only two sources of information for past events: either stories that actually happened based on, ultimately, eyewitness accounts or stories that have been made up. Those are the only two kinds of stories you have from the past – either things that happened or things that were made up."[25] Now, in determining "which things are the things that happened," the evidence would have to be the best kind.[26]

The best kind of evidence for ancient history, continues Ehrman, meets the following criteria. First, "when dealing with ancient periods" the evidence "goes back to the time itself."[27] Less time between the event and the record would increase the reliability of the record. Second, "historians would love to have lots of sources," preferably from the time of the events they narrate.[28] Third, the historian "would like these sources to be independent of one another."[29] If there are twenty sources and all of them derive their story from same person, there are not twenty sources but one. The historian would prefer twenty independent

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[25]Ibid., 10.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid.

sources which attest to the same event. Fourth, the historian wants "these independent sources to be consistent with one another."[30] This means that the sources are not to be contradictory; rather, they are to be corroborative. The sources are "to corroborate one another, without collaborating with one another."[31] Fifth, the historian wants the sources "to be unbiased toward the subject matter."[32] They are not "to be skewing things in light of their own self-interest."[33] These are the kinds of sources historians look for in trying to establish what probably happened in ancient periods.

The Kind of Sources the Gospels Are

Having presented the task of the historian and the manner of sources the historian seeks to establish events in ancient periods, the attention turns to how the Gospels measure up as ancient historical sources. Ehrman contends that the "gospels are our sources for knowing about the resurrection of Jesus. Are they the kind of sources that historians would want when trying to establish what probably happened in the past? I think the answer to that question is no."[34] He says that he is "not questioning whether they're valuable as theological sources or sources for religious information. But how good are they as historical sources? Unfortunately,

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

they're not as good as we would like."[35] The accounts in the Gospels "are not as useful as historians would like as historical sources."[36]

In his public debates, Ehrman highlights several problems historians are confronted with when attempting to use the Gospels as historical sources.[37] First, the Gospels "are not contemporary to the events they narrate."[38] One way Ehrman arrives at this is by evaluating when the Gospels were likely written. Although scholars debate this issue, by far most believe that Mark was written sometime around 65 or 70 A.D., Luke and Matthew around 80 to 85, and John around 90 or 95. If these dates are correct, the earliest account of Jesus' resurrection is forty years after the event. Indeed, Paul was writing before that, and he talks about the resurrection in First Corinthians, written twenty years after the event. Yet still the Gospels give the narrative, and Paul makes a reference to it.

Second, none of the Gospel authors were eyewitnesses, and Paul himself indicates that he was not an eyewitness.[39] The Gospels were called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John "because we don't know wrote these books, and there is no point in calling them Sam, Fred, Jerry, and Harry."[40] The Gospels are all anonymously written in the third person with titles ascribed by later editors. On

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[35]Craig and Ehrman, 10.

[36]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[37]Craig and Ehrman; Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*; Licona and Ehrman, *Is the Resurrection*.

[38]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

the one hand, the followers of Jesus, whose native language was Aramaic, were "peasants from Galilee, lower class men who were not educated. In fact, Peter and John in Acts 4:13 are literally said to be illiterate. They couldn't read and write. . . They didn't go to school. The vast majority in ancient world never learned to read, let alone write," while the Gospels "are written in Greek by highly educated, rhetorically trained writers who are skilled in Greek composition. They probably were not disciples and don't claim to be disciples."[41] Hence, what is written in the Gospels are not eyewitness accounts. From where, then, did these authors get their stories? Ehrman suggests that if they were not disciples of Jesus the authors "must have heard the stories from somebody, who heard the stories from somebody, who heard the stories from somebody, who heard them from somebody. Stories about Jesus including his resurrection had been in circulation year after year after year from the time that his disciples knew that he got killed and believed that he got raised from the dead."[42] This leads to a third problem: The Gospel accounts are inconsistent.

According to Ehrman, subsequent to the days of Jesus, "people started telling stories about him in order to convert others to the faith. They were trying to convert both Jews and Gentiles. How do you convert somebody to stop worshipping their God and to start worshipping Jesus? You have to tell stories about Jesus. So you convert somebody on the basis of the stories you tell."[43] In

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[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Craig and Ehrman, 10.

doing so, people sometimes improved and changed the stories: "The stories got

modified in the process of transmission over the course of decade before anybody

wrote the stories down. These stories are based on oral reports that have been in

circulation for decades. What happens to oral reports in circulation year after year,

decade after decade? They get changed. What evidence do we have that the

stories about Jesus' death and resurrection got changed?"[44] The evidence, says

Ehrman, is in the differences amongst the Gospel accounts. He cites several of the

differences surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In terms of the death of Jesus, Ehrman suggests that if one were to simply

read both Mark's and John's accounts, make a list of everything that happens in

both, and then compare the two accounts, one "will find that there are stunning

differences. In fact, there are discrepancies."[45]

> What day did Jesus die on? That's a simple question, and luckily we're
> told in both Mark and John. In Mark's gospel we're told that Jesus died the
> day after the Passover meal was eaten in Jerusalem. John tells us
> explicitly, chapter 19, verse 14, that Jesus died the day before the Passover
> meal was eaten, on the day of preparation for the Passover. That's
> different. He couldn't die both days. What about the time? According to
> Mark, he died at nine in the morning. According to John, he wasn't
> condemned to death until afternoon (John 19:14). These are accounts that
> differ from one another. Did Jesus carry his cross the entire way to
> Golgotha, or did Simon of Cyrene carry it? It depends which Gospel you
> read. Did both robbers mock Jesus, or did only one of them mock him and
> the other come to his defense? It depends which Gospel you read. Did the
> curtain in the temple rip in half before Jesus died, or was it after he died?
> It depends which Gospel you read.[46]

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[44] Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

Further, Ehrman gives examples of the differences in the accounts of the resurrection.

> Who went to the tomb on the third day? Was it Mary alone or was it Mary with other women? If it was Mary with other women, how many other women were there, which ones were they, and what were their names? Was the stone rolled away before they got there or not? What did they see in the tomb? Did they see a man, did they see two men, or did they see an angel? It depends which account you read. What were they told to tell the disciples? Were the disciples supposed to stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus there or were they to go to Galilee and see Jesus there? Did the women tell anyone or not? It depends which Gospel you read. Did the disciples never leave Jerusalem or did they immediately leave Jerusalem and go to Galilee? All of these depend on which account you read.[47]

Ehrman concludes the Gospels are not reliable historical sources because there are too many discrepancies. The Gospels are not contemporary to the events they narrate because nobody present wrote about them. They are not written by eyewitnesses. As the followers of Jesus, the actual the eyewitnesses were Aramaic-speaking, uneducated peasants from Galilee, while the authors of the Gospels were highly educated and skilled Greek writers. Finally, the Gospels are inconsistent with one another. Many of the original accounts were modified. Some of the written accounts were invented. For these reasons, the Gospel accounts are not as useful as historians would like as historical sources.

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[47]Craig and Ehrman, 11.

A Brief Response to the General Unreliability of the Gospels

As mentioned at the beginning, it is not the primary purpose here to respond to the GUG challenge, as it does not present itself to be a serious threat to historically establishing the resurrection. However, a brief response is in order, as it aims to show that this challenge can easily be dispatched. Even if, granting without acceptance, the four Gospels are not generally reliable in the way they are described in the previous pages, the question is: Are they reliable *enough* from which to mine historical data, so as to discover the most probable occurrences surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth? The answer is yes. In his dialogue in 2006 with Ehrman, William Lane Craig points out that the sort of "wish list" for historical sources that Ehrman would offer "is so idealistic as to be practically irrelevant to the work of the practicing historian. The only purpose that it serves is a psychological purpose of a setting the bar so unrealistically high that the Gospels appear to fall short by comparison. In fact, however, no sources for ancient history measure up to this wish list."[48] Moreover, in their second dialogue in 2009, Licona brought up to Ehrman's usage of red herring.[49] Yet, remarkably, in his latest book titled *How Jesus Became God*, Ehrman continues to advance this fallacious argument.[50]

Despite the Gospels' being less than ideal as historical sources, Ehrman relies primarily and heavily on the Gospels to construct his own theory pertaining

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[48]Ibid., 18.

[49] Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[50] Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 133-36.

to the fate of Jesus, namely, that Jesus was an apocalyptic Jewish prophet. Ehrman highlights this in most works and a book, dedicated to make a case for this hypothesis.[51] In *How Jesus Became God*, Ehrman—using the Gospels—asserts the disciples' belief in the resurrection of Jesus is what most probably started the idea that Jesus was God.[52] Indeed, even for Ehrman, the Gospels are sufficiently reliable from which to mine historical data in arriving at his conclusions.

Summary and Conclusion

Ehrman first discusses what historians do and the kind of sources historians seek. He then argues the four Gospels ought to be regarded as too unreliable to be used as historical sources in establishing the resurrection of Jesus as an actual historical event, if one were to legitimately follow the canons of historical inquiry. However, even if these problems exist, they are completely irrelevant to the historian's ability to historically establish the resurrection, if enough historical data can be extracted from the Gospels.

There is a benefit from the GUG challenge, however. Despite being a red herring, the challenge should serve as a sort of caution to historians in their effort to mine historical data from the Gospels and thus discover the most probable happenings surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

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[51]Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[52]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 131-32.

CHAPTER 3

THE INTRINSIC IMPROBABILITY OF MIRACLES

Introduction

The second challenge Ehrman levels against establishing the resurrection of Jesus as an event in history is philosophical. (This is the first part of the twofold challenge evaluated.) Ehrman asserts that the unreliability of the Gospels "is really just kind of child's play compared to the real problem of why historians cannot prove the resurrection."[53] Even if these Gospel stories were the best sources in the world, there would still be a major obstacle that *cannot* be "overcome if we want to approach the question of the resurrection historically."[54] Ehrman contends that historians—*qua* historians—cannot establish the resurrection as a historical event or probable on the following basis: historians try to establish what probably happened in the past; miracles—such as the resurrection of Jesus—are least probable events. How can the least probable be established as probable? Ehrman maintains that even if the resurrection did happen, it cannot be established as a historical event due to the nature of both miracles and historical inquiry. For this reason, at the outset, any historical explanation is more plausible than the explanation that the dead body of Jesus

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[53]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[54]Craig and Ehrman, 11-12.

became alive never to die again. This challenge is called the intrinsic improbability of miracles (IIM).

Historians' Tasks and Assumptions

As discussed earlier, the historians' attempt to establish what probably happened in the past is a fundamental standard in the canons of historical research. Historians evaluate the remaining evidence the past has left behind and do their best to establish levels of probability based on that evidence. This standard is based on the philosophical outlook of the realist historian with which Ehrman appears to begin before taking on the task of the historian.

Licona performed an in-depth survey of the philosophy of history with which historians and New Testament scholars begin their historical investigation. Licona observes that realist historians "maintain that reality exists independently of our knowledge of it and our scientific statements and theories refer to this independent reality."[55] By contrast, to varying degrees, postmodernists "question whether it is even possible to know and describe the past."[56] All historians begin with philosophical assumptions before taking on the task of historical investigation. Licona identifies at least five of those assumptions shared by the majority of historians.[57] (1) The external world is real. (2) People's senses provide a fairly accurate perception of the external world. (3) Logic facilitates people's quest for truth rather than merely functioning as a pragmatic tool that aims at their

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[55]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 71.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid., 156.

survival and quality of life. (4) Natural laws in effect today were in effect in antiquity and that they operated in a similar manner. (5) History is at least partially knowable. Licona observes, "Whereas the vast majority of all historians agree on most of these assumptions, a number of postmodernists take issue with some of them, especially the last."[58] The perspective of a realist historian "recognizes that there is a past that can be known to some extent (realism) and that it is known through an honest questioning of the data in an interdependent relationship, like a spiral, between historian and data and hypothesis and data."[59]

<div align="center">Ehrman's Philosophy of History</div>

Ehrman provides a list of presuppositions he regards as "appropriate" and "not appropriate" in historiography.[60] Among others, here are some of the appropriate presuppositions taken for granted by historians. (1) The past did happen. (2) It is possible to establish with some degree of probability what did happen in the past. (3) Related to (2), evidence for past events exists, so that reconstructing the past is not a matter of pure guesswork. (4) Some evidence is better than other evidence.

On the other hand, some other "presuppositions are decidedly not at all appropriate for historians who want to establish what happened in the past."[61] These presuppositions can be categorized as follows. One category is how a

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., 107.

[60] Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 144-47.

[61] Ibid., 146.

historian ought not to treat evidence in an investigation. It is not appropriate to

presuppose conclusions and to try to locate only the evidence that supports those

presupposed conclusions. The investigation should be conducted without

prejudice regarding its outcome. It is also not appropriate for a historian to treat

certain evidence as irrelevant when it does not happen to be convenient to

personal views.[62]

One other category regarded by Ehrman as decidedly not at all appropriate

in historical research "is where the rubber meets the road—it is not appropriate

for a historian to presuppose a perspective or worldview that is not generally

held."[63] Specifically, it is not appropriate to presuppose extraterrestrial or

theological beliefs in one's historical conclusions.

Extraterrestrial and Theological Beliefs

So-called "historians" who appeal to alien interventions—e.g., in trying to

explain the founding of the United States or the outcome of the First World War

by invoking the visitation of Martians as a major factor of causality—"will not get

a wide hearing from other historians."[64] In fact, they will not "be considered to be

engaging in serious historiography."[65] This is because such "a view presupposes

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[62]Thus far, by all appearance, the philosophy of history Ehrman begins with is more that of a realist than that of a postmodernist. To be sure, there are shades in between the two, and he may fall somewhere there. In his debate with Craig, he indicates that he was a postmodernist.

[63]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 146.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

notions that are not generally held—that there are advanced life-forms outside our experience, that some of them live on another planet within our solar system, that these other beings have sometimes visited the earth, and that their visitations is what determined the outcome of significant historical events."[66] All of these may be true, but there is no way for historians, using the historical approach, to know one way or the other to establish what happened in the past. Because those are presuppositions the vast majority of historians do not share, historical reconstruction cannot be based on them. "Anyone who has these presuppositions has to silence them, sit on them, or otherwise squelch them when engaging in their historical investigations."[67]

So too, anyone who happens to hold theological beliefs has to silence, sit on, or squelch these beliefs when performing their historical investigation. Similar to extraterrestrial beliefs discussed above, these beliefs may be true. Yet they too cannot determine the outcome of historical investigations because historians do not generally share them. For instance, a historian cannot establish that the angel Moroni made revelations to Joseph Smith, as the Mormon tradition says. This presupposes that angels exist, that Moroni is one of them, and that Joseph Smith was chosen to receive revelations from God. These are theological beliefs not based on historical evidence. "Maybe there is an angel Moroni and maybe he did reveal secret truths to Joseph Smith, but there is no way for historians to establish any of that: to do so would require accepting certain theological views that are not

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[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., 147.

held by the majority of other historians—for example, those who are Roman Catholics, Reformed Jews, Buddhists, and nonreligious hard-core atheists. Historical evidence has to be open to examination by everyone of every religious belief."[68]

Further, the belief that a miracle—be it a Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu miracle—happened in the past is rooted in a particular set of theological beliefs. "Without such beliefs, miracles cannot be established as having happened. Since historians cannot assume these beliefs, they cannot demonstrate historically that such miracles happened."[69] To be sure, sometimes there are elements in a miracle narrative that "may be subject to historical inquiry even if the overarching claim that God has done something miraculous cannot possibly be accepted on the basis of historical evidence (since historical evidence precludes any particular set of religious beliefs)."[70] Ehrman provides an illustration to this. His grandmother firmly believed that, through the power of God, Pentecostal evangelist Oral Roberts could heal the sick, the diseased, and the disabled by praying for them. In theory it would be possible for a historian to examine a case where a person had symptoms of a disease before having an encounter with the evangelist and that they disappeared afterwards. The historian could report that, indeed, the person was sick before and was not sick afterwards.

> But what the historian *cannot* report—if she is acting as a historian—is that Oral Roberts healed the person *through the power of God*. Other

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[68]Ibid.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid., 147-48.

explanations are possible that are open to examination by scholars without any theological presuppositions required for the "divine solution"—for example, that it was a kind of psychosomatic healing (that is, the person believed so thoroughly that he would be healed that the mind healed the ailment); or that the person was only apparently healed (the next day he was again sick as a dog); or that he was not really sick in the first place; or that it was a hoax, or, well, lots of other explanations. These other "explanations" can explain the same data. The supernatural explanation, on the other hand, cannot be appealed to as a historical response because (1) historians have no access to the supernatural realm, and (2) it requires a set of theological beliefs that are not generally held by all historians doing this kind of investigation.[71]

"The Past" and "History"

Some remarks are in order as to how Ehrman uses "the past" and "history." The two terms are not to be confused. "The past is everything that has happened before; history is what we can establish as having happened before, using historical forms of evidence."[72] There are scores of events in the past that historians cannot establish as having happened.[73] "Sometimes, this is because our sources are so paltry. (And so, for example, it is impossible to establish what my grandfather had for lunch on May 5, 1954.) Other times, it is because history, as established by historians, is based only on *shared* presuppositions."[74] To be clear, Ehrman is not necessarily saying that divine revelations or miraculous events from different religions did not happen in the past. (In fact, he is allowing

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[71]Ibid., 148 (emphases added).

[72]Ibid., 150.

[73]From the works of Ehrman, it can be derived that what is established by historians as "having happened" with certain levels of probability is equivalent to "history," "event in history," "historical event," "fact of history," and "historical fact."

[74]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 150 (emphasis in original).

arguendo that those events may very well have happened.) He is only saying that, since majority of historians do not factor in any theological beliefs to their historical investigations, miraculous events can only be relegated to "the past" and never to "history."[75]

Historians and Methodological Naturalism

The methodological constraint imposed by the majority amounts to a grid called methodological naturalism (MN). This standard grid in conventional historiography is taken for granted before one begins historical research. MN comes in different forms, and to fairly assess it, it is important to define the type that Ehrman subscribes to as precisely as possible. In broad terms, MN says that God does not exist (atheism), or if he exists, he does not care enough about the world to perform miracles (deism). In either case, the historian excludes the possibility of a divine intervention in the natural world.

Further, as a methodology, MN is not to be confused with ontological naturalism (ON), which says that God does not exist, and there is absolutely no way that a historian or anyone else can take into account anything about God. Given atheism, the idea of investigating an act of God in the world would be intrinsically impossible as there is no God to intervene in the world. Ehrman may or may not be committed to ON, in view of his metaphysical outlook.[76] Even if he

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[75]Ibid., 148.

[76]In his talk in 2014 at Freedom from Religion Foundation, Ehrman claims to be an atheist when it comes to the God of the Bible and an agnostic when it comes to "a greater power in the universe." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAsQULGs1kU (accessed October 1, 2014).

is committed to ON, this commitment is irrelevant as it is not his basis for arguing against the possibility of historically establishing miracles. In fact he is granting, for the sake of argument, that God does perform miracles in the world.[77] This leads further to a specific type of MN that Ehrman appears to be using as an approach.

This Ehrmanian MN says that God may very well care enough about the world to perform miracles. But since historians have no access to God—due to the underlying reason that they generally do not presuppose any theological beliefs— they cannot account for the theological dimension of miracles. Hence, the possibility of *acknowledging* a divine intervention is ruled out in advance.[78]

Miracles as Least Probable Events

What are Miracles?

The issue pertaining to miracles as "least probable" immediately raises the question of their nature. Miracles can be defined in many ways, but for the purpose of this thesis, within the worldview of theism, they are to be understood as follows. God is the creator and sustainer of the natural world. He set things in motion such that nature operates with regularity. This regularity is commonly called the law of nature or the natural law. For instance, he set earth's gravity so

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See Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

[77]Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 241; Craig and Ehrman, 12.

[78]From here on the term "methodological naturalism," or in short "MN," is used synonymously and interchangeably with the sort of MN Ehrman uses dubbed here as "Ehrmanian MN."

that when physical objects are let go they are pulled by gravity towards the ground.

There are times God intervenes within the natural law. He does so by way of performing miracles. (As pointed out, Ehrman does grant that, for the sake of argument, miracles do happen.) Miracles are generally to be understood ontologically and epistemologically. The former has to do with the *definition* of miracles, while the latter with their *identification*; that is, it is one thing to define—and another to identify—miracles. Ontologically, miracles are events that occur in the natural world. They are a temporary and extremely rare divine intervention in the way nature regularly operates. Again, taking gravity for instance, if an object is let go and God intervenes by making gravity ineffectual, the object would not be pulled to the ground by gravity. This is a miraculous event. In contrast to the occurrence of miraculous events, the regularity of nature's operation is extremely consistent. Miracles, then, are temporary and extremely rare from the standpoint of *not* being a part of the regular operation of nature or the natural law.

Turning to epistemology, how are miracles to be identified? This question can potentially go in many directions. For the purpose of this thesis, miracles may be identified as follows. An event is a miracle when (a) it is extremely unlikely to have occurred given the circumstances and/or natural law and (b) it occurs in an

environment or context charged with religious significance.[79] This requires further specificity regarding the relationship between miracles and MN.

Miracles and Methodological Naturalism

If the historian were to use a grid that is open to the possibility of acknowledging a divine intervention in the natural world, then both (a) and (b) would be useful in identifying miracles. If the historian uses MN as a grid when looking at a purported miraculous event, it would not matter if the event in question occurs within a significantly religiously charged context or environment. In this case, the historian would merely view the event as extremely unlikely to have occurred given the circumstances and/or natural law, even if God had something to do with the event. This is because the historian has no access to God or to what he does in the world. For this reason miracles are, methodologically speaking, devoid of divine significance. That is not to say that miracles are ontologically without divine significance, but epistemologically, historians cannot see such a significance given the limitation with which they are faced.

Miracles Having Lowest Prior Probability

According to Ehrman, miracles are not impossible, but they are highly improbable—"so highly improbable that they're the least possible occurrence in any given instance."[80] In other words, in any given situation, miracles possess

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[79]Michael R. Licona, "Historians and Miracle Claims," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12 (2014): 119.

[80]Craig and Ehrman, 12.

lowest initial or *prior probability of occurring*.[81]

In establishing that miracles are least probable, Ehrman begins by saying

that "everything that happened is to some extent improbable."[82] The chances of

certain events, for instance, being involved in a minor car accident last night,

"were probably not very great."[83] If one were to verify what happened on the

night in question fifteen years from now, all he would need to do is review

evidence, such as newspaper articles, police reports, or eyewitness accounts.

"They could do this because there is nothing improbable about the event itself.

People have accidents all the time."[84] The only issue would be whether that

person had one on the particular night in question.

Some events were probably not so noticeably great but not so unlikely as

to defy the imagination. Miracles "by their very nature are the least probable

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[81]The term *initial* or *prior probability* in reference to an event is to be understood as follows. The prior probability of any purported event, whether or not it is regarded as a miracle, is the probability of the event's occurring, given the background knowledge of the world alone—that is, *before* looking at the evidence in conjunction with other factors relevant to the event [P(O/B)]. Other factors relevant to an event's occurring are: the *explanatory power* of the occurrence of the event [P(E/B&O)], which tells how probable the evidence is given the background knowledge of the world and if the event did occur; the *prior probability* of the nonoccurrence of the event [P(~O/B)], which tells how probable the nonoccurrence of the event is given only the background knowledge of the world; and the *explanatory power* of the nonoccurrence of the event [P(E/B&~O)], which tells how probable the evidence is given the background knowledge of the world and if the event did not occur.

[82]Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 242.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Ibid.

occurrence."[85] This is from the standpoint of looking at how frequently supposed

miracles happen—if ever they do happen. Suppose a hypothetical miraculous

event of a person walking on water. Out of six billion people alive today that

someone could walk across the surface of a lukewarm water on a swimming

pool—"that would be a miracle."[86] The chances of this event happening "would

be infinitesimally remote," since nobody has ever been able to do it.[87] It would

defy imagination because nature does not normally work this way. What if

someone could do it? The chances would remain "infinitesimally remote."[88] If

miracles do happen in any given situation they would only amount to having the

lowest prior probability of occurring.

This becomes apparent when the initial probability of miracles [P(M/B)] is

compared to the priors of all others that have historical precedents. Even if there

are witnesses of someone walking on water, it is far more likely that the witnesses

"have been mistaken about what they thought they saw, or have been misquoted,

or have exaggerated, or have flat out lied" than that the person has actually

walked on water.[89] This is because people are known to be misquoted, make

mistakes, exaggerate, or lie; and not a single person has ever been observed to

walk on water, rendering the probability of someone walking on water

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[85]Craig and Ehrman, 13.

[86]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 244.

infinitesimal.[90]

The Historian's Dilemma:
How Can the Least Probable Be Established as Probable?

To review, historians—*qua* historians—have tasks and assumptions. They work with the past and try to establish what probably happened. The past is not history; history is what historians try to establish as having happened. Historians assume the past did happen and it is possible to establish what probably happened with some degree of certainty using evidence, and so reconstructing the past is not a matter of pure speculation. According to Ehrman, historians exclude the possibility of acknowledging that God is at work in the natural world because historians have no access to God, and the majority of them do not presuppose any theological beliefs in their conclusions.

Miracles are, ontologically, a temporary and extremely rare divine intervention, in contrast to the regularity of the laws by which nature operates. Epistemologically, assuming *arguendo* the Ehrmanian methodological naturalism as the working grid, miracles are identified merely as events extremely unlikely to have occurred given the circumstances and/or natural law. Miracles are so highly unlikely that they have the lowest prior probability in any given situation. As such, even if miracles happened, when P(M/B) is compared to the priors of all others that have historical precedents, P(M/B) remains ever to be the lowest.

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[90]It is to be kept in mind that the grid at work is methodological naturalism—so that even if certain events are regarded by some as miraculous (that is, their occurrence is attributed to God as the causal agent), the events' initial probability does not go up at all but remains to be lowest. For this reason, P(M/B) is lowest no matter what.

The discussion now turns to the final and pivotal segment of the IIM challenge to establishing the resurrection of Jesus as an event in history. Historians try to establish what probably happened in the past; whereas miracles are least probable events; therefore, historians cannot establish miracles as probable. This is true in the case of the resurrection of Jesus, contends Ehrman. How are historians able to establish as probable that which is intrinsically least probable?

<center>A Natural Resurrection of Jesus</center>

The resurrection of Jesus is simply the hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead." A more specific articulation of this theory contends, "God raised Jesus from the dead into immortal life." This is what Ehrman seeks to show as historically unprovable. It is a supernatural explanation of what happened to Jesus after he died. However, given MN, the theory would have to be viewed by historians as follows: Jesus' dead body came back to life to never die again *naturally*. This is because historians would know nothing, methodologically speaking, about the supernatural dimension of the event, despite the belief of the disciples of Jesus in his transformed physicality, "a heavenly body, not just an earthly body."[91]

To be clear, this is not resuscitation; Jesus did not return to life only to die again, as did Lazarus in the Gospel of John (John 11:44).[92] In this paradigm, the

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[91]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 206.

[92]Ibid., 205.

theory is reduced to a natural resurrection, as the instant supernaturalism becomes

disavowed, naturalism stands unopposed. This is "the historical approach" which

Ehrman contends is the only way with which historians can assess the

resurrection. Even if it happened, the event would be "a violation of what

naturally happens, every day, time after time, millions of times a year. What are

the chances of that happening? Well, it'd be a miracle. In other words, it'd be so

highly improbable that we can't account for it by natural means."[93] Hence, having

been reduced to a naturalistic sort, the resurrection of Jesus is an event that is—at

the outset—initially extremely improbable.[94]

Further, the resurrection is so improbable that it has the lowest prior

probability compared to all other probabilities that have historical precedents.

This makes the resurrection as a hypothesis initially, extremely implausible. Any

historical explanation—no matter how initially implausible—is more plausible

than the explanation that a truly dead man became alive and never to die again.

Two examples of such historical explanations come to mind. First, the theory that

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[93]Craig and Ehrman, 12.

[94]From here on, unless the supernatural dimension is factored in, the term "resurrection" is interchangeably used with the term "natural resurrection." This is not a claim for the ontology of the resurrection; it is merely a claim for its epistemology, given MN. Now, Ehrman does allow that in theory it is possible to say that Jesus was crucified, buried, and seen alive bodily afterwards, without appealing to God as the causal agent. This is because there are instances when someone apparently dies and then wakes up again to tell the tale. "Did Jesus have that kind of experience? I doubt it, but it is at least a plausible historical conclusion. What is not a plausible *historical* conclusion is that God raised Jesus into an immortal body and took him up to heaven where he sits on a throne at his right hand" (Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 149-50). Here, it appears that Ehrman is willing *in theory* to grant that Jesus became alive after being dead, but he is not willing to grant that God raised Jesus because God is outside the reach of the historian.

Jesus had a twin brother, Jesus actually died, and people thought he was alive

upon seeing his brother.[95] This explains why the disciples might have thought

they saw Jesus alive. Since twins occur quite often and not a single person has

become alive (to never die again), the twin brother theory is more initially

plausible than the resurrection.[96] A second implausible theory is a particular

version of the stolen body of Jesus Ehrman had in mind.[97] It is a better

explanation for why the tomb was found empty (assuming that there really was an

empty tomb) than the idea Jesus reanimated and vacated the tomb. This theory

suggests Jesus' two family members steal his body in an attempt to bury it

themselves. The Roman soldiers on the lookout catch and kill them on the spot

and then throw the three bodies into a common burial plot. Within three days their

bodies decompose beyond recognition. Others later find the tomb empty. This is a

highly unlikely scenario, but it is more plausible than the resurrection of Jesus, as

people did steal bodies and Roman soldiers did kill and bury civilians on the least

pretext.

Finally, Ehrman asserts historians can only establish what probably

happened in the past, and by definition a miracle such as the resurrection of Jesus

has the lowest prior probability of occurrences. Hence, "by the very nature of the

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[95]Craig and Ehrman, 25-26.

[96]To be sure, Ehrman is not saying that the twin brother theory or any other implausible theory one can imagine should be accepted as what probably happened. His point is that one does not necessarily have to come up with a specific theory that is historical in order to show how implausible the resurrection theory is. To come back to this by saying there is no evidence for the twin brother (or that other theories are implausible for different reasons) is to miss the important point Ehrman is making.

[97]Craig and Ehrman, 13.

canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did."[98] Notice here that Ehrman's use of the phrases "by the very nature" and "by definition" indicates that the IIM challenge is primarily a matter of principle. The question behind the historian's ability to establish the resurrection of Jesus as probable requires a clarification.

The IIM Challenge: A Matter of Principle Not Practice

The question is not about whether historians can *in practice* establish the natural resurrection of Jesus.[99] Rather, it is about whether historians can *in principle* establish the resurrection. The former deals with the *actual* evidence that is currently available, which probably would not be strong enough. Can historians establish the resurrection with this evidence in view of the competing alternative explanation(s)?[100] The latter deals with the *potential* evidence that may become available someday which may be indeed strong enough. Can historians establish the resurrection—with that evidence, in view of the competing alternative explanation(s)? Granting MN, could the historicity of Jesus' resurrection be

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[98]Ibid.

[99]Whether historians can establish the natural resurrection in practice is another matter. It is not the purpose of the thesis to get into this.

[100]For instance, Craig typically argues that there are three lines of evidence in any adequate hypothesis must account for: the discovery of the empty tomb by a group of Jesus' women followers, Jesus' post-mortem appearances to his disciples, and the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. He uses these lines to argue for a supernatural—not natural—resurrection, namely, that "God raised Jesus from the dead" [William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 360-400].

granted in principle? This is the challenge to be evaluated.

The resurrection of Jesus posits that God raised Jesus from the dead. This is not what Ehrman is arguing against. Rather, he is arguing against the idea that God raised Jesus from the dead never to die again. It is the contention of this thesis that even in this bold articulation of the theory, historians can establish the resurrection as an actual event in history.

A Response to the Intrinsic Improbability of Miracles

In response, the following addresses the issues the IIM challenge brings upon the historian's ability to establish the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event. From the works of Ehrman the argument behind the IIM challenge can be framed deductively.[101]

> P1: Historians try to establish what probably happened in the past.
> P2: Miracles are least probable events.
> C: Therefore, historians cannot establish miracles as probable.

A deductive argument is tested for success in terms of *truth* and *validity*.[102] If P1 and P2 are true, and at the same time the form of the argument is

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[101]The premises and the conclusion are almost verbatim found in Ehrman's works. By all appearance the argument behind the IIM challenge is more of deductive than inductive. Inductive arguments have probabilistic conclusions, while deductive arguments have categorical conclusions. The conclusion "historians cannot establish miracles as probable" is not probabilistic, but categorical. If Ehrman meant the challenge to be inductive, then he can get around any formal analysis that identifies formal fallacies.

[102]Truth refers to the truth of the premises in an attempt to establish the truth of the conclusion. To be sure, the truth of the premises is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the soundness of the argument. What would sufficiently establish the truth of the conclusion—as deduced from the truth of the premises—is the validity of the argument. Validity refers to the proper structure or form of the argument. An argument is formally valid if it abides by the rules of categorical syllogisms; stated negatively, it is invalid if it violates at least one of

valid, then necessarily C is true, and the argument is sound and, hence, successful. Further, if indeed the argument is a success, and since the resurrection of Jesus is a miracle, it would follow necessarily that historians cannot establish the resurrection as probable. Is the IIM argument successful? To answer this, an examination of the argument is in order.

Are the Premises True?

P1: Historians Try to Establish What Probably Happened in the Past

It is unquestionably true in the realist view of history that the past is assumed to have happened and that parts of the past can be established with some degree of certainty using evidence. For that matter, historians try to establish what probably happened in the past. But there is an aspect in P1 that is in question as having been established: Ehrman's exclusion of the possibility of the historian's acknowledging God's workings in the natural world. In addressing the IIM challenge, this thesis will assume *arguendo* this aspect as having been established (it will, however, contest it when addressing the final challenge to establishing the

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those rules. Further, at least four other principles in deductive logic are to be kept in mind. (1) The truth of the premises is inductively established from what can be known and experienced in the world. (2) If the premises are true and the form of the argument is valid, then the argument is sound, or good, and successful. The conclusion necessarily follows from the premises, and hence it is necessarily true. (3) Assuming that the argument is valid, first, if at least one premise is false, then the conclusion would be false and the argument unsound; second, if one premise is true, while the truth of the other is undertermined, or if the truth of both is undetermined, then the conclusion would be undetermined and the argument unsound. The form of the argument may be valid, but, because at least one of the premises is defective in its truth claim, the argument cannot yield a conclusion that is true. (4) If the premises are true while the form of the argument is invalid, then the argument does not go through because there is something wrong with the way at least one premise is framed.

resurrection as an event in history, namely, the absolute inaccessibility to the supernatural). For the purpose of the present discussion, P1 is granted as true, entailing all the above features imputed to it.

P2: Miracles are Least Probable Events

Although ontologically, miracles are a temporary and extremely rare divine intervention within the way nature regularly operates, epistemologically—given the kind of methodological naturalism Ehrman espouses—miracles are identified merely as extremely unlikely to have occurred, given the circumstances and the regularity of nature. Miracles have the lowest prior probability to begin with; this becomes clear when compared to the priors of all others that have historical precedents. However, before P2 is incorporated into the IIM argument, an important issue needs to be addressed. Ehrman is not precisely clear what he means by miracles being "least probable" or "most improbable". At times, it is as though he means miracles are impossible and, at other times, not that miracles are impossible, but only that they have the lowest prior probability of occurring.

<div align="center">Are Miracles Impossible?</div>

First, *miracles are impossible*. This interpretation of P2 can be derived from Ehrman's assertion that miracles "defy *all* probability."[103] If miracles defy *all* probability, there could be no probability, only an absence of probability. If an event has zero probability, there exists no probability the event will occur. Necessarily then, the event can never occur.

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[103]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 173 (emphasis in original).

If P2 is taken to mean the impossibility of miracles, it would merely be an assertion, since Ehrman provides no justification. Worse yet, it would contradict what he claims to be granting. In a debate with Craig in 2006, Ehrman declares, "Miracles are not impossible. I won't say they're impossible."[104] Delivering a stronger message in a textbook for college students, he writes: "For the sake of the argument, I'm willing to grant that miracles—that is, events that we cannot explain within our concepts of how 'nature' normally works—can and do happen."[105] If Ehrman were to be consistent in claiming to grant that miracles can (possibility) and do (actuality) happen, even only for the sake of argument while trying to maintain that they are least likely to happen, he must drop the term "defy *all* probability." Otherwise, his argument is self-defeating and cannot support his conclusion that historians cannot establish miracles—such as the resurrection of Jesus—as probable.

Perhaps, Ehrman is using "defy all probability" hyperbolically, not literally. But the hyperbole *smuggles* the impossibility of miracles in to P2 in an attempt to show that historians cannot establish miracles as probable. This amounts to begging the question in favor of his conclusion. Nevertheless, to be charitable to Ehrman, he may *say* that miracles defy all probability (which is equivalent to the impossibility of miracles), but he really does not *mean* that they are impossible. For this reason, P2 is not to be regarded as suggesting miracles are impossible.

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[104]Craig and Ehrman, 12.

[105]Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 241.

Miracles as Having the Lowest Prior Probability

If miracles are not impossible, they can only be regarded as *having the lowest prior probability of occurring* in relation to how often supposed miracles happen. According to Ehrman, the chances of one walking on the surface of water on a swimming pool would be "virtually zero because in fact humans can't do that."[106] However, it is to be kept in mind that, although the probability of a miracle like this happening may be "virtually zero," it does not follow that the probability is zero, as established previously. If the probability is "virtually zero," the event would, nevertheless, still have a *positive* probability—however low that may be.

Does the Conclusion Follow from the Premises?

C: Historians Cannot Establish Miracles as Probable

To review, the IIM argument states:

P1: Historians try to establish what probably happened in the past.
P2: Miracles are least probable events.
C: Therefore, historians cannot establish miracles as probable.

P1 is granted prudentially as true. P2 is established as true with a qualification. From these, the argument is attempting to deduce that C is true. It is to be kept in mind that the truths of the premises do not guarantee the truth of the conclusion. For this to happen, the form of the argument would need to be valid. Validity has to do with how the premises and the conclusion relate to one another in the way they are framed as either affirmative or negative statements,

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[106]Craig and Ehrman, 36.

considering also their subject and predicate.[107] So, if the relationship with one another is right (that is, if it accords with the rules of categorical syllogisms), given the truths of the premises, then the argument would be valid, which in turn would yield the truth of the conclusion. Otherwise, despite the truths of the premises, the argument would be invalid, which would not yield the truth of the conclusion.[108] So, do the truths of P1 and P2 establish the truth of C? The argument is formally invalid and as such cannot establish the conclusion.

<div align="center">Invalidity of the IIM Argument</div>

An argument is formally valid if it abides by the rules of categorical syllogisms; stated negatively, it is invalid if it violates at least one of them. By all appearance the IIM argument is guilty of breaking not just one but three rules.

The first broken rule states: *a valid categorical syllogism must have exactly three terms*—namely, the major term, the minor term, and the middle term, and there can only be one of each. Strictly, if an argument has more or less than three terms, it would not be a categorical syllogism; at the outset, it would be invalidated. For this reason, the IIM argument is automatically invalidated because it has four terms—one major, one minor, and two middle. "Historians" is the major term. "Miracles" is the minor term. The predicate in P1 "try to establish what probably happened in the past" is one middle term. Last, the predicate in P2

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[107]This is because statements, functioning as premises or conclusions, that are true or that claim to be true are framed in either negative or affirmative sentences.

[108]To be sure, the conclusion may be true, but that truth is not deduced from the given premises. In this case, the truth of the conclusion would be undetermined.

"least probable events" is the other middle term. It is imperative that the two

predicates have the same exact meaning; otherwise, the argument is invalidated.

Do they mean the same? In P1 the predicate tells something about the historian's

task—an attempt to establish what probably happened in the past, while in P2 the

predicate tells something about miracles—as least probable events.

Both predicates are concerned with probability of occurrences. However,

"try to establish what probably happened in the past" is not similar to "least

probable events." The former pertains to what one *does* with a goal in mind in

terms of *posterior* probability, while the latter pertains to what *is* in terms of its

prior probability. The job of the middle term is to *link* the minor term and the

major term. The predicates at hand, however, cannot serve as the middle term

because they do not mean the same. Therefore, the link cannot be made between

"historians" and "miracles"—so as to arrive at the conclusion: "Historians cannot

establish miracles as probable." For this reason, the IIM argument is invalid. Even

if the predicates are similar in meaning, there is yet another violated rule.[109]

The rule states: *the middle term must be distributed in at least one*

premise, a violation of which is called the fallacy of *undistributed middle*. A term

is distributed when it applies to all or none of the members of its class. The

middle term is required to be distributed at least once in order to make a

connection between the minor and the major terms. Even if the predicates are

somehow similar in meaning—so that there are no two terms, but only one, which

serves as the middle term—the IIM argument would still be invalid because none

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[109]There seems to be no possible way to make the P1 and P2 predicates
similar to link "historians" and "miracles" in order to arrive at C.

of the predicates is distributed. The premises in the argument are universal affirmative, whose subjects are distributed and predicates undistributed. In P1 "historians" is distributed, and "try to establish what probably happened in the past" is undistributed. In P2 "miracles" is distributed, and "least probable events" is undistributed. For this reason, the middle term (supposing 'try to establish what probably happened in the past' is similar in meaning as 'least probable events') does not establish a connection between the major term ('historians') and the minor term ('miracles').

It may be the case that "historians cannot establish miracles as probable." This is prevented by the missing link between "historians" and "miracles"— namely, a middle term that is distributed at least once. So, even assuming *arguendo* that the predicates mean the same, the affirmations made in the premises have no bearing on the historian's inability to establish miracles as probable. Hence, even if it meets the criteria of having three terms, the IIM argument remains invalid for having an undistributed middle term.

The final violated rule that is identified states: *no negative conclusion follows from two affirmative premises*; relating to this, another one states: *the conclusion always has to follow the weaker premise*. A violation of this twofold rule is called the fallacy of the *weaker premise*. If the premises are positive, then the weakest possible conclusion is positive, not negative. Simply put, "yes, yes" cannot be promised in the premises and then "no" be delivered in the conclusion. Does the IIM argument meet this condition? There is no issue in P1 as positive: historians try to establish what probably happened in the past. But the argument

may regard P2 as possessing an element of negativity: miracles are *least* probable

events; it would then have to regard P2 as negative, in order to arrive at a negative

conclusion. In response, miracles may be probable in the least possible way, but

they still possess a probability of nonzero positive value, no matter how small. P2,

then, is simply affirming that miracles possess a least nonzero positive

probability; yet there is nothing negative about that. For this reason, P2 cannot be

regarded as a negative proposition. Hence, the IIM argument does have positive

premises and a negative conclusion. This renders the argument invalid, for there

simply is no way to smuggle a negative in to the conclusion, if it was not in the

premises to begin with.

In fairness, Ehrman does, at times, use a negative statement pertaining to

the nature of miracles. For Ehrman, the statement "miracles are least probable

events" is tantamount to the statement "miracles probably did not happen." In this

case, the IIM argument can be revised as follows.

> P1: Historians try to establish what probably happened in the past.
> P2*: Miracles probably did not happen.
> C: Historians cannot establish miracles as probable.

This revision does have a positive premise, a negative premise, and a negative

conclusion. Does it escape the fallacy of the weaker premise? Bear in mind the

twofold rule: (1) *no negative conclusion follows from two affirmative premises*;

(2) *the conclusion always has to follow the weaker premise*. The argument does

not violate the first part of the rule, but it appears to violate the second part: the

negative in P2* is not strong enough to support the negative in C. Or, conversely,

the negative in C is too strong to be supported by the negative in P2* (it claims

too much): C is a stronger negative than P2*. Specifically, the fact that "miracles probably *did not* happen" is not strong enough to produce the conclusion that "historians *cannot* establish miracles." This is because the claim *did not* is weaker than the claim *cannot*. P2* goes by probability, whereas C goes by possibility; however, although impossibility does imply improbability, improbability does not necessarily imply impossibility. Simply put, *cannot* implies *did not*, but *did not* does not imply *cannot*. For if something cannot be done, it only implies that it is not done, but if something is not done, it does not necessarily imply that it cannot be done.

A rebuttal might be that the negative in P2* by itself would not yield C, but the negative in P2* combined with a contrast found in between P1 and P2* would yield C. This says that the task of the historian (i.e., try to establish what probably happened in the past)—when *contrasted* to the nature of miracles (i.e., probably *did not* occur) would yield the conclusion that historian cannot establish miracles. Unfortunately, this would not work. The contrast serves to inform just that—a contrast, not a contradiction, and combining this to *did not* in P2* would still not be strong enough to produce *cannot* in C. For this reason, the IIM argument, in its revised version, still suffers the fallacy of the weaker premise and hence is rendered invalid.[110]

In summary, an argument is formally invalid if it violates at least one of the rules of categorical syllogisms. The IIM argument is found to be guilty of

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[110]The way to escape the fallacy is to revise the conclusion to: historians *do not* establish miracles as probable occurrences. But in this case just because historians do not establish miracles as probable it does not follow historians cannot establish miracles as probable. Besides it is not Ehrman's position.

violating three rules. There may be others, but these violations are more than sufficient to demonstrate that the argument is invalid. Even in its revised form, the argument remains invalid. For this reason, the premises cannot yield the conclusion the argument is designed to produce.

It may be the case that historians cannot establish miracles as probable (C). As has been shown though, this cannot be validly drawn from the truth that historians try to establish what probably happened in the past (P1) and that miracles are least probable events (P2) (or that they probably did not happen (P2*)). In order to arrive at C, one or both premises would have to be replaced. This can be done as will be shown, but the question concerns the truth of the premises used. To explain, assuming that the argument is valid, first, if at least one premise is false, then the conclusion would be false. Second, if one premise is true, while the truth of the other is undertermined, or if the truth of both is undetermined, then the conclusion would be undetermined. In either case the argument would be unsound.

A Valid Form of the IIM Argument

Despite the invalidity of the IIM argument from the propositions discussed, its conclusion can still be reached through the use of a valid argument. The issue concerns the truth of the premises.

P1*: Historians cannot establish least probable events as probable.

First, P1 is modified as P1* to make the argument as follows.

> P1*: Historians cannot establish least probable events as probable.
> P2: Miracles are least probable events.
> C: Historians cannot establish miracles as probable.

Since the resurrection of Jesus is a miracle, it follows that historians cannot establish it as probable.

P1* is inductively established as follows. First, it is a statement about a general principle, namely, what historians *cannot* do. According to Ehrman, given that "by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence" and that "by the very nature of the canons of historical research"—it follows that historians cannot "claim historically that a miracle probably happened."[111]

Further, P1* pertains to least probable events in general; that is, historians cannot establish *any* least probable event as probable. If P1* is true, the logical consequence is miracles are necessarily rendered as not having happened as historical events. Is P1* true?

Putting aside the truth claim of P1*, this is a valid argument, since it accords with the rules of categorical syllogism. Further, it is not guilty of the three fallacies found within the original and the revised IIM arguments. Specifically, first, the argument has three terms, not four—namely, (1) "Historians" (major term), (2) "Miracles" (minor term), and (3) "cannot establish *least probable events* as probable" (in P1*) and "*least probable events*" (in P2) (middle term). Second, the middle term is distributed in P1* because it is a negative proposition (which makes both the subject and the predicate distributed). Third, the argument meets the required strong negative in C (Historians *cannot* establish miracles as

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[111]Craig and Ehrman, 12.

probable), which is found in P1* (Historians *cannot* establish least probable events as probable).

Given the validity of the argument, if P1* and P2 are true, the conclusion would be true and the argument sound. The truth claim of P2 is not disputed. As has been qualified early on, P2 is established as true. The dispute concerns the truth claim of P1*. This premise is either true or false, which may or may not be determined. Again, if P1* is shown to be false, then the conclusion would be false, and if its truth or falsehood is undetermined, then the truth of the conclusion would be undetermined; either way, the argument would be unsound. It is the contention of this thesis—even given the MN grid—that this second revision of the IIM argument is unsound because P1* is false, for historians can indeed establish least probable events as probable.

<div align="center">An Unsound Argument</div>

To set the stage, there are basic principles in historiography to consider. First, as Ehrman asserts, historians assign historicity to historical claims by establishing levels, or grades, of certainty based on available evidence. In his debate with Craig, Ehrman suggests that for historians some historical claims "are absolutely certain, some are probable, some are possible, some are 'maybe,' some are 'probably not.'"[112] Recently, in his latest book, he details a more nuanced list of grades: "Historians maintain that some of the things in the past (almost)

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[112]Ibid., 9.

certainly happened, other things very probably happened, others somewhat

probably happened, others possibly happened, others probably did not happen,

others almost certainly did not happen, and so on."[113]

A second principle to consider is that grades of historical certainty are

expressed often in words and sometimes in numbers. This is because grades of

certainty necessarily involve mathematics. "More probable than not" involves

mathematics and is expressed both in words and roughly in numbers. Scientists

regularly utilize numerical expressions in determining probabilities. Historians

regularly express grades of certainty as estimates in terms of quality, rather than

quantity, "ranging from highly improbable through to highly probable."[114] Yet,

according to philosopher of history C. Behan McCullagh, these grade estimates—

although possessing an element of subjectivity and arbitrariness—"are generally

based upon some acquaintance with actual frequencies. The grades they

[historians] use, like the grades given for students' essays, can often be related to

a range of numbers."[115] McCullagh suggests that for most people the equivalents

to the grades of certainty would roughly be what follows.[116]

Extremely probable = in 100–95% of cases
Very probable = in 95–80% of cases
Quite or fairly probable = in 80–65% of cases
More probable than not = in 65–50% of cases
Hardly or scarcely probable = in 50–35% of cases

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[113]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 145.

[114]C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 52.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Ibid.

Fairly improbable = in 35–20% of cases
Very improbable = in 20–5% of cases
Extremely improbable = in 5–0% of cases

The last step in setting the stage is the two-step process: determining and accounting for levels of certainty. Determining the levels of certainty entails paring the grades to four and assigning numerical values to each. The result is the following grading system.

Almost certainly happened = 99.9999% or 0.999999
More probable than not = from $< 50\%$ to 65% or from < 0.50 to 0.65
Even odds = 50% or 0.50
Almost certainly did not happen = 0.0001% or 0.000001

This grading system is for the purpose of illustration throughout the rest of this thesis. It has four parts. In between the worded probabilities, there are many other expressions (such as the ones given by Ehrman and McCullagh), and in between the numbered probabilities, the numbers could be vast.

Further, the system has two extreme opposite poles of certainty: at the side of probability—"almost certainly happened"; at the side of improbability—"almost certainly did not happen." Respectively, they are equivalent to a chance of 1 in 1,000,000 (or 0.999999) of not happening and 1 in 1,000,000 of happening. In one direction, the "almost certainly happened" is Ehrman's highest grade. In the opposite, "almost certainly did not happen" is closest to Ehrman's lowest grade. Generous to Ehrman's contention is that least probable events, such as R, will be given this grade in terms of its prior probability. The grading system also uses "even odds," a fifty-fifty chance of happening. This is a middle of the road level of certainty.

Finally, the system uses "more probable than not = from < 50% to 65% or from < 0.50 to 0.65." This is almost the same as McCullagh's grading of "more probable than not = in 65–50% of cases." It is roughly similar to Ehrman's "somewhat probably happened." If a historical event claim is "somewhat probably happened" (given that the one below this grade within Ehrman's gradation is 'possibly happened,' which appears to be less than fifty percent chance of happening), the chances of that event happening would be somewhere in between < 50% to 65%.

The discussion now turns to the second step: accounting for what has been determined as levels of probability. To begin, probability theorists have developed a formula for calculating probabilities as reliable as can be. This formula is called Bayes' theorem (BT), named after Thomas Bayes, a statistician and a Presbyterian minister who lived in the 1700s. An important benefit of using BT is that it forces one to account for all the relevant factors, which has a heuristic value in illustrating the fact that historians can establish any least probable event, and what better example to use than the resurrection of Jesus? An application of the calculus is in order, letting R = resurrection of Jesus, B = background knowledge, and E = general historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

$$P(R/B\&E) = \frac{P(R/B) \times P(E/B\&R)}{[P(R/B) \times P(E/B\&R)] + [P(\sim R/B) \times P(E/B\&\sim R)]}$$

This is the *explicit form*, taken from the list of eight forms of BT, put together by

an expert in the field, Tim McGrew.[117] This is useful for the purpose of

illustration because it allows one to assign levels of certainty using numbers.

P(R/B&E) is the *posterior probability* of the occurrence of R. It tells how

probable the resurrection is given the value of P(R/B), P(E/B&R), P(~R/B), and

P(E/B&~ R).

P(R/B) is the *prior probability* of the occurrence of R. It tells how

probable the occurrence of the resurrection is given the background information.

P(E/B&R) is the *explanatory power* of the occurrence of R. It tells how

probable the evidence is given the background information and if the resurrection

did occur.

P(~R/B) is the *prior probability* of the nonoccurrence of R. It tells how

probable the nonoccurrence of the resurrection is given the background

information.

P(E/B&~R) is the *explanatory power* of the nonoccurrence of R. It tells

how probable the evidence is given the background information and if the

resurrection did not occur.

Falsehood of P1*

Having set the stage, how then are historians able to establish R, a least

probable event, as probable? Granting P(R/B) = 0.000001,[118] what if P(E/B&R) =

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[117]Tim McGrew, *Eight Versions of Bayes's Theorem*,
http://homepages.wmich.edu/~mcgrew/Bayes8.pdf (accessed 11/6/2014).

[118]This automatically makes P(~R/B) 0.999999.

0.999999 and P(E/B&~R) = 0.0000005?[119] P(R/B&E) would yield 0.666666.

Here, despite P(R/B) being 0.000001—which is almost certainly did not happen,

P(R/B&E) is raised to 0.666666. This value is at the level of more probable than

not, reaching Ehrman's "somewhat probably happened."[120] This fact renders P1*

necessarily false. In practical terms, it shows that no matter how small the prior

probability of the resurrection of Jesus may be, the historical evidence could be so

strong that the resurrection hypothesis fares well.

If historians can establish the resurrection as probable, precisely what is

wrong with Ehrman's argument? Again, as Ehrman argues: "Historians can only

establish what probably happened in the past [posterior probability], and by

definition a miracle [as R] is the least probable occurrence [prior probability].

And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim

historically that a miracle [as R] probably happened [posterior probability]. By

definition, it probably didn't [prior probability]."[121] In effect, Ehrman says that

P(R/B) is so low that P(R/B&E) must necessarily remain that low yet ignores the

potential value of P(E/B&R) and P(E/B&~R), and thereby committing the error of

ignoring the explanatory power. Ehrman says that since P(R/B) is 0.000001, it

must necessarily follow that P(R/B&E) is 0.000001, regardless how high

P(E/B&R) and how low P(E/B&~R) may be. In his attempt to show that

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[119] 0.0000005 is equal to 1 in 2,000,000 chances of happening.

[120] This could get better for the resurrection and worse for Ehrman. Again granting P(R/B) = 0.000001, what if again P(E/B&R) = 0.999999 and P(E/B&~R) = 0.00000001 (that is, 1 in 100 million chances of happening)? P(R/B&E) is raised to 0.99.

[121]Craig and Ehrman, 12.

P(R/B&E) is 0.000001, Ehrman ignores the value of P(E/B&R) and P(E/B&~R), which can actually be 0.999999 and 0.0000005, respectively. This is not to say that the two explanatory powers do *actually* have such values, only that they *potentially* can have those values.[122]

Further, Ehrman commits another error: *a conflation of two different aspects in the probability calculus*—namely, the prior probability and the posterior probability of the hypothesis in question. He reasons, "Since historians can establish only what *probably* happened in the past, they cannot show that miracles happened, since this would involve a contradiction—that the most improbable event is the most probable."[123] No doubt "the most improbable event [R] is the most probable [R]" is contradictory. This, however, is an unqualified articulation of the case for establishing R as probable. A qualified articulation may be formed as "although an event, as R, may start out as the most improbable [P(R/B)], it can turn out to be the most probable [P(R/B&E)]." Therefore, contrary to what Ehrman claims, establishing least probable events as probable does not involve a contradiction at all.

Having established the content and the falsehood of P1*, it is time to discuss its relationship with P2 and C within the context of the IIM argument. In terms of P2, it is to be kept in mind that miracles are assessed as least probable events through the grid of Ehrmanian MN. As explained at the beginning, the IIM argument in this revised form is valid, and for it to be sound, P1* and P2 must be

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[122]This point ties in to the IIM challenge as a matter of *principle* not *practice*.

[123]Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 244 (emphasis in original).

true. If it is true that historians cannot establish least probable events as probable (P1*) and that miracles are least probable events (P2), it would necessarily follow that historians cannot establish miracles as probable (C). But since P1* is false, although P2 is true, C does not follow: C is rendered false by the falsehood of P1*. This results in the unsoundness of the IIM argument.

Summary and Conclusion

The IIM challenge attempts to reach one specific conclusion: Historians cannot establish miracles, such as the resurrection of Jesus, as probable or as historical events. This challenge can be framed as a deductive argument—a deduction that has been shown to be invalid, although its premises are true. Hence, the argument for the challenge fails. Yet with the goal in mind to arrive at the challenge's specific conclusion, an attempt is made to salvage the argument by framing it validly. Here too the argument fails because of a false premise, namely, historians cannot establish least probable events as probable, for the opposite is true. This renders the conclusion false and in turn shows that miracles—such as the resurrection of Jesus—despite having the lowest prior probability, can be established by historians as having occurred.

At this juncture, historians can establish the resurrection *given* the paradigm that excludes the possibility of acknowledging—without denying the ontology of—a divine intervention on the basis of one assumption: historians have no access to God. To be clear, this assumption does not necessarily prevent the historian from establishing the resurrection as a historical event using

historical evidence; it only prevents *appealing* to a supernatural explanation in establishing the resurrection. This assumption is evaluated presently.

CHAPTER 4

THE ABSOLUTE INACCESSIBILITY TO THE SUPERNATURAL

Introduction

Ehrman deems the third challenge an insuperable methodological

constraint in historical research: historians have absolutely no access to the

supernatural realm. (This is the second part of Ehrman's twofold challenge

evaluated.) Assuming the IIM challenge holds, the only way to establish the

resurrection of Jesus is to show that God did it. Here, the event would no longer

be a natural, but a supernatural, resurrection. However, historians cannot establish

the resurrection in this way as they have no access to the realm of the

supernatural. Any historical explanation is thereby more *historically* plausible

than the supernatural explanation that God raised Jesus from the dead. This

challenge is called the absolute inaccessibility to the supernatural (AIS).

The Need for God

The AIS challenge contends that, since historians cannot establish the

resurrection as a historical event, the only way to establish the resurrection is to

appeal to the supernatural.[124] As a historical hypothesis, the resurrection's being

the least probable event makes it initially extremely implausible that—to make it

plausible—one would have to appeal to a supernatural intervention. Any

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[124]Craig and Ehrman, 25.

historical explanation—no matter how initially implausible—is more plausible

than the supernatural explanation that a truly dead man became alive never to die

again. For example, the theory that Jesus had a twin brother is initially

implausible.[125] Yet this theory is more plausible than the resurrection theory

because people often have twins and no person has become corporeally immortal.

Another implausible theory is the stolen body of Jesus.[126] This is a better

explanation for why the tomb was discovered empty (assuming that there really

was a discovered empty tomb) than the idea the dead body of Jesus returned back

to life to vacate the tomb. This hypothesis is not likely, but it is more likely than a

miracle, which is so unlikely, that one must appeal to supernatural intervention to

make it work. The problem, claims Ehrman, is that historians have no access to

God. "Discussions about what God has done are theological in nature, they're not

historical. Historians, I'm sorry to say, have no access to God."[127]

Ehrman does recognize that the resurrection of Jesus makes sense for a

believer in God. It is rational to think that "God can act in the world. Why not?

God does things all the time, and so there's nothing implausible at all about God

raising Jesus from the dead. Well, that presupposes a belief in God. Historians

can't presuppose belief in God. Historians can only work with what we've got

here among us."[128] He does not object to the way of thinking that the resurrection

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[125]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[126]Craig and Ehrman, 13.

[127]Ibid., 13.

[128]Ibid., 25.

hypothesis requires a person to believe in God, but he objects to this "as a way of historical thinking, because it's not history, it's theology."[129]

According to Ehrman, historians can say something about elements surrounding a theological claim. The historian can say that Jesus died on the cross but cannot say that God accepted his death as an atonement. The historian can say that the apostle Paul claimed to have a vision of Jesus after his death but cannot say that God raised Jesus from the dead. The historian can examine some aspects of the tradition surrounding the resurrection claim and can inquire whether Jesus was buried in a known tomb which three days later was discovered empty. What the historian—*qua* historian—cannot conclude "is that God therefore must have raised the body and taken it up to heaven. The historian has no access to information like that."[130] So, reasons Ehrman, "Even if we want to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, that belief is a theological belief. You can't prove the resurrection. It's not susceptible to historical evidence. It's faith. Believers believe it and take it on faith, and history cannot prove it."[131]

Meaning of "No Access to God"

Precisely what does Ehrman mean by saying that historians have "*no access* to God"? A good understanding of what he means is critical to avoid misrepresenting his position. Recall Ehrman's illustration about a miracle narrative that may be subject to historical inquiry even if the overarching claim

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[129]Ibid.

[130]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 148.

[131]Craig and Ehrman, 27.

that God has done something miraculous cannot be accepted on the basis of

historical evidence. His grandmother firmly believed that, through the power of

God, Oral Roberts could heal people by praying for them. A historian could

examine and report a case of a person with symptoms of a disease before

encountering Roberts and the symptoms' disappearance afterwards. However,

what the historian cannot claim is that the evangelist healed the person through

the power of God. Ehrman further asserts that the supernatural explanation

"cannot be appealed to as a historical response" and provides two reasons.[132] (1)

Historians have no access to the supernatural realm. (2) This explanation requires

a set of theological beliefs that are not generally held by all historians doing this

kind of investigation. On the surface, it is not clear if Ehrman meant these two to

be independent of one another. A closer look at the discussion thus far would

reveal the former reason is actually dependent on the latter. There are two ways to

see this.

One way is to analyze how Ehrman uses the term "*no access* to the

supernatural realm." He uses the term metaphorically to mean that historians, by

the very nature of the canons of historical research, have no say on matters about

theology. These canons are "restricted to what happens here on this earthly

plane."[133] Ehrman expounds on this.

> They do not and cannot presuppose any set beliefs about the natural realm.
> I'm not saying this is good or bad. It's simply the way historical research
> works. Let me give you an analogy. It's not bad that there can be no
> mathematical proof for the existence of an anti-Semitic polemic in The

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[132]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 148.

[133]Craig and Ehrman, 13.

Merchant of Venice. Mathematics is simply irrelevant to purely literary questions. So too, historical research cannot lead to theological claims about what God has done.[134]

How is it that the "canons of historical research are by their very nature *restricted* to what happens here on this earthly plane" and hence "*cannot* lead to theological claims about what God has done"?

Historians can't presuppose belief in God. Historians can only work with what we've got here among us. People who are historians can be of any theological persuasion. They can be Buddhists, they can be Hindus, they can be Muslims, they can be Christians, they can be Jews, they can be agnostics, they can be atheists, and the theory behind the canons in historical research is that people of every persuasion can look at the evidence and draw the same conclusions.[135]

The canons of historical research are such that the majority of historians do not presuppose any set of theological views in their historical conclusions, so people of every persuasion, theological or otherwise, may view the evidence and draw the same conclusions. The restriction amounts to a *methodological* constraint imposed by the *majority*. This is Ehrman's stance during his debate with Licona on the radio show *Unbelievable?* when asked by Justin Brierley, the moderator of the show. The debate was about whether there was biblical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Brierley asks why a divine conclusion in a historical setting cannot be drawn. Ehrman responds with a rhetorical question. Here is an excerpt of the exchange.

Ehrman: Let me ask this. Suppose we bracket the resurrection and just ask about miracle in general. So, Mike you and I are both located in the United States where most research historians teach at major research universities, and so can you think of any instance in which secular or Christian

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[134]Ibid. (emphasis in original).

[135]Ibid., 25.

historians teaching at major research universities in the United States
agree on any event in the past they would label a miracle?
Licona: No, I can't. But that would require. . .
Ehrman: And it doesn't matter whether they're Christian or non-Christian.
Licona: That's right.
Ehrman: They don't invoke miracle because they can't.
Licona: Bart, how would that be because you would have to have pretty
much a consensus of people who would acknowledge that God exists, and
we don't have that. So, I think you'd have some folks who would say
"Well, this is a really interesting thing. It's an anomaly. Perhaps, we don't
know the cause. But we can't think of a naturalistic explanation.
Ehrman: It would be a matter of faith. It's not a matter of history. And
that's the point about the resurrection.
Licona: No, I think it's a matter of worldview.
Ehrman: No, you have to have faith for it to be a miracle. And so the
resurrection is not subject to historiographic proof.[136]

Ehrman is saying that the resurrection or any other miracle is not subject to

historiographic proof because a historian would have to have faith—that is, a

particular set of theological beliefs—for the resurrection to be a miracle. Since the

majority of historians do not presuppose any theological beliefs, a historian

cannot legitimately be engaging in serious historiography while presupposing

faith.

The other way to see that historians' having no access to God is dependent

on the majority consensus is to consider the following illustration. Suppose

extraterrestrial beings appear at the doorstep of all the members of the Islamic

terrorist group Isis, exterminating the Isis members instantly? The following day

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[136]Bart D. Ehrman and Michael R. Licona, *Biblical Evidence for the
Resurrection*,
http://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/U
nbelievable-16-Apr-2011-Biblical-evidence-for-the-Resurrection-Bart-Ehrman-
Mike-Licona (accessed December 6, 2014). It is to be recalled that Ehrman is
willing to grant that Jesus did die and was seen alive again bodily because there
are instances similar to this. But Ehrman is not willing to grant that the historian is
able to assess whether God was involved in raising Jesus or not.

the aliens are interviewed and declare how, after watching and waiting for three and half million years from their own planet, they were compelled to get rid our world of injustice and cruelty, starting with Isis. The evidence of this intervention is overwhelming: eyewitness' testimonies, video recordings, and pictures. The majority of historians would then believe in extraterrestrial intervention. What once was regarded as impossible to know using the historical approach would then be regarded as possible and the alien intervention be what determined the outcome of such a significant historical event. One may apply the same principle to theological beliefs. If at some time, however it may come about, the majority of historians come to hold a set of theological beliefs which confirm miraculous events in the natural world, historians would then be considered as having access to God. While highly unlikely, this illustration demonstrates that historians' lack of access to God is dependent on the majority consensus.

A Response to the Absolute Inaccessibility to the Supernatural

Briefly reviewed, the AIS challenge assumes that the IIM challenge is successful. The IIM challenge says that P(R/B) is super low that P(R/B&E) must necessarily remain super low no matter what. With this assumption in mind, the only way to raise P(R/B&E) is to show that God had something to do with the resurrection. Indeed, factoring God in the equation would potentially raise P(R/B&E) high enough to establish the resurrection as an event that really happened. However, since historians have no access to God, they cannot appeal to him in trying to establish the resurrection. For this reason, any historical

explanation is, at the outset, more historically plausible than the idea that a supernatural being had something to do with raising Jesus from the dead.

No Need for God

The problem the AIS challenge poses to the resurrection can easily be solved by the fact that the IIM challenge does not hold. As a matter of fundamental principle in probability theory, historians can establish the resurrection, no matter how initially improbable or implausible it may be, even when compared to other initially implausible theories that are more initially plausible that it. That is, even if $P(R/B)$ is "virtually impossible to happen," $P(R/B\&E)$ can still be raised to "more probable than not" which gives the resurrection "historical" status, depending on the threshold values assigned to $P(E/B\&R)$ and $P(E/B\&{\sim}R)$. For this reason, the theological aspect of the resurrection need not be factored into the equation to establish that it is a historical event. It would, therefore, be wrongheaded to claim that the only way to establish the resurrection is to show that God had something to do with it.

One clarification is in order. The position taken here is, as a matter of *principle* and independent of an appeal to God, the resurrection can be established no matter how initially improbable. This depends on how much evidence is available and how it behaves in relation to the resurrection and to other competing hypotheses. What is not taken here is the position that, as a matter of *practice* and independent of an appeal to God, the event can be established using the historical data found in the New Testament. Licona takes this position, persuaded that the

data is sufficient to establish the resurrection.[137] He also takes the position that

historians should be agnostic about God when approaching the resurrection as a

historical hypothesis.[138] He contends that historians should approach the historical

"data neither presupposing nor a priori excluding the possibility of God's acting

in raising Jesus. They should instead form and weigh hypotheses for the best

explanation."[139] Licona argues as follows.

> What if a god exists who wanted to raise Jesus from the dead? That would
> be a game changer. In that case, a miracle such as Jesus' resurrection may
> actually be the most probable explanation. The challenge for historians, of
> course, is that they cannot know ahead of time whether such a god exists.
> Instead of presupposing or a priori excluding it, which a priori renders
> one's hypothesis as *worldview dependent*, historians ought to adopt a
> position of openness and let the facts speak for themselves through the
> weighing of hypotheses according to proper criteria. To do otherwise
> places historians in a dangerous position in which they invite their
> horizons to guide them throughout their investigations; and bad
> philosophy corrupts good history.[140]

Licona's points will be revisited, as they play an important role in some areas of

the discussion at hand.

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[137]One caveat is the difference between the resurrection Licona is
defending and the resurrection Ehrman has in mind. What Licona is defending
may be reduced to resuscitation of the dead body of Jesus. What Ehrman has in
mind is termed here as natural resurrection. It does not appear that Licona is
defending the natural resurrection.

[138]This appears to be Licona's solution to overcoming the grid (namely,
MN) that excludes the possibility of acknowledging God in to one's historical
investigation.

[139]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 177.

[140]Ibid., 175 (emphasis in original).

An Insuperable Methodological Constraint

While there is no question that, without appealing to God the resurrection can be established, there is a problematic element in the AIS challenge. Can historians appeal to God in order to *further* raise the value of P(R/B&E)?[141] This question is framed in the AIS challenge in a way that assumes a specific paradigm in conventional historiography (CH). Since the vast majority of historians do not hold to a set of theological beliefs, they cannot be expected to appeal to God. They are bound by MN which excludes the possibility of acknowledging the act of a supernatural being. With this grid in place historians *cannot* appeal to the supernatural for the purpose of further raising P(R/B&E).

This raises the question: is the effort to factor theology into a historical case for the resurrection doomed to fail? It is the contention of this thesis that such an effort is not doomed to fail. While there is a place for CH, the discipline can be modified in a way which acknowledges a supernatural, miraculous intervention in the natural world and opens the door to raising P(P/B&E).

A Place for the Conventional Historiography

There is a place for CH as a methodology for historians under three considerations. First, CH is a tool used to establish what happened in the past on earth without necessarily trying to discover answers about the ultimate reality.

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[141]When appealing to God, one way to raise the value of P(R/B&E) is by raising the value of P(R/B). Taking the example given early on [namely, given P(R/B) = 0.000001, P(E/B&R) = 0.99999, and P(E/B&~R) = 0.000001 — P(R/B&E) would yield 0.50], an appeal to God may raise P(R/B) up to 0.999999, depending on the strength of the case for it, which in turn would also raise P(R/B&E).

This consideration may be gleaned from Ehrman's own words. "The canons of historical research are by their very nature restricted to what happens here on this earthly plane."[142] "God can do anything he wants, and there would be no way for us to know. We don't have criteria by which to evaluate the way that the Almighty works in this world."[143] As a caution, there are historians who do believe that the natural world is *the* ultimate reality, and there is nothing beyond it. However, this view is not MN, but ON. ON makes such a bold claim, for which a justification is required. One must always be mindful of historians who may be masking or confusing ON with MN, whether or not this is intentional.[144]

Second, CH is a system that works for the vast majority of historians who have different perspectives and, at times, disagree sharply on theological matters of reality. Some historians are theists (e.g., Christians, Muslims, and Jews), others are atheists (e.g., Buddhists and the nonreligious folks), and still others are agnostics. Before they even come to the table, a "metaphysical gridlock" forms amongst them. This leads to one further consideration.

If historical research were to be performed with theological presuppositions, a question naturally arises: which, or whose, theological presuppositions should be in place? "[A]ppeals to the supernatural are not accepted in the historical community as being valid criteria on which to evaluate a

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[142]Craig and Ehrman, 13.

[143]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

[144]If Ehrman happens to believe that the natural world is all there is (and perhaps he is masking ON with MN), it would be irrelevant in the discussion because he claims to use ON as a grid when arguing against the possibility of historically establishing the resurrection.

past event. Part of the reason for that is because one could come up with alternative theological explanations."[145] In his debate with Craig, Ehrman suggests that the four purported facts (used by Craig that show that God raised Jesus from the dead) can be explained with a different theological view.

> Suppose, for example, to explain those four facts that the God Zulu sent Jesus into the 12th dimension, and in that 12th dimension he was periodically released for return to Earth for a brief respite from his eternal tormentors. But he can't tell his followers about this because Zulu told him that if he does, he'll increase his eternal agonies. So that's another theological explanation for what happened. It would explain the empty tomb, it would explain Jesus appearances. Is it as likely as God raised Jesus from the dead and made him sit at his right hand; that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has interceded in history and vindicated his name by raising his Messiah? Well, you might think no, that in fact the first explanation of the God Zulu is crazy. Well, yeah, O.K., it's crazy; but it's theologically crazy. It's not historically crazy. It's no less likely as an explanation for what happened than the explanation that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob raised Jesus from the dead because they're both theological explanations; they're not historical explanations. So within the realm of theology, I certainly think that theology is a legitimate mode of knowledge. But the criteria for evaluating theological knowledge are theological; they are not historical.[146]

How, then, do historians manage to function *as* historians in the midst of the metaphysical gridlock? Bearing in mind that CH does not involve finding answers about reality, historians would have to put aside theological differences and focus their aim to establish what probably happened in the past. For this reason, Ehrman maintains:

> Historians can't presuppose belief in God. Historians can only work with what we've got here among us. People who are historians can be of any theological persuasion. They can be Buddhists, they can be Hindus, they can be Muslims, they can be Christians, they can be Jews, they can be agnostics, they can be atheists, and the theory behind the canons in

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[145]Craig and Ehrman, 30.

[146]Ibid., 31-32

> historical research is that people of every persuasion can look at the evidence and draw the same conclusions.[147]

To be clear, not presupposing belief in God is merely methodological (epistemology), not metaphysical (ontology or ultimate reality). If a historian were to utilize CH to show that God does not intervene in the affairs of the world, then the historian is doing so metaphysically, not methodologically. This runs contrary to a fundamental principle of the discipline. It is one thing to exclude the possibility of *acknowledging* a supernatural intervention; it is quite another to exclude the possibility of a supernatural intervention. The former makes a claim of epistemology while the latter of ontology.

Limitations of the Conventional Historiography

While CH has a place, it has limitations. Two come to mind in view of the considerations above. First, what if God is involved with events, including miracles, in the natural world? What if such an involvement would someday solve all the problems humanity faces, such as the moral degradation of societies, evil and suffering in the world, and human mortality? What if for humans to be a part of that program, they would need to commit their lives to the sovereign power and will of this God? If CH were to be regarded as the proper tool to discover these possibilities, the result would be devastating: humanity would never experience God's solution for its predicament.

The second limitation is that historians would confuse *rarity* of a miracle with its *probability*: the former being the *frequency* of occurrence of the miracle

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[147]Ibid.

event; the latter being the *likelihood* of the miracle event to occur. Keeping in mind that Ehrman grants *arguendo* that miracles do happen, their being extremely rare (as contrasted to the regular operation of natural law, which is far more frequent) would inevitably be confused with their being extremely improbable. So, unbeknownst to the historian that miracles are actually extremely infrequent—he could and likely would think of them only as initially extremely improbable.[148] This problem becomes more acute when tied to the previous set of questions that pertain to God's involvement with events in nature. What if the performance of miracles is God's way of rousing humanity's attention precisely *because they are extremely rare* in order to reveal the solution to the human predicament? There would be no way to know if CH were used to determine this. As Ehrman rightly observes, "God can do anything he wants, and there would be no way for us to know. We don't have criteria by which to evaluate the way that the Almighty works in this world."[149]

Towards a Modified Historiography

Having discussed the place for CH and considered its limitations, a discussion is now in order regarding modifying the historiographical discipline in a way which allows for acknowledgement of the supernatural. The aim is to show

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[148]This is the tendency even when it comes to dealing with non-miraculous events that are extremely rare but regarded as extremely improbable until proven as actually extremely rare through the use of evidence. But, as shown early on, miracles (despite their extreme improbability) can still be established through evidence as having happened, even without factoring theology in to the equation. What cannot be shown within the framework of CH is that miracles are caused by God—specifically, due to MN being used as the working grid—and this is a problem with the use of CH.

[149]Licona and Ehrman, *Can Historians*.

that within a modified historiography (MH) theology can be factored into a historical case for the resurrection of Jesus for the purpose of allowing the opportunity to raise P(R/B&E). To that end MH is constructed with three characteristics: a philosophical basis in historical research, a worldview about the ultimate reality, and a specific goal in mind.

Philosophical Basis in Historical Research

The philosophical basis in historical research within the framework of MH is *historical realism*, a historiographical perspective shared by the majority of historians which consists of a number of philosophical assumptions. MH adopts the assumptions found in the lists provided by Licona and Ehrman. Licona's list is as follows: the external world is real; people's senses provide a fairly accurate perception of the external world; logic facilitates people's quest for truth rather than merely functioning as a pragmatic tool that aims at their survival and quality of life; natural laws in effect today were in effect in antiquity and operated in a similar manner; history is at least partially knowable.[150] Ehrman's list of assumptions includes: the past did happen; it is possible to establish with some degree of probability what did happen in the past; related to the second, evidence for past events exists, so that reconstructing the past is not a matter of pure guesswork; some evidence is better than other evidence.[151] Ehrman regards these

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[150]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 156.

[151]Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 144-46.

assumptions as "appropriate" and regards other assumptions not shared by the majority of historians as "decidedly not at all appropriate for historians."[152]

MH also adopts a part of what Ehrman regards as inappropriate assumptions for historians. MH adopts these assumptions not because they are shared by the majority, but for the following reasons. It is not appropriate to presuppose conclusions and to seek out only the evidence which supports those presupposed conclusions. The investigation should be conducted without prejudice regarding its outcome. Additionally, it is not appropriate for a historian to regard certain evidence as irrelevant merely because it is inconvenient towards a personal view.

Some final remarks are in order pertaining to why MH would take historical realism as a given. Indeed, the majority of historians do share historical realism as their philosophical starting point before launching their historical inquiries. The historian starts with this historiographical perspective, not because it is shared by the majority; the majority merely happens to share this perspective. (There were times that majority of people was wrong.[153]) Why then would the historian assume historical realism as a starting point? The answer to this question may diverge in relation to the debate amongst three major historiographical perspectives: naïve realism, postmodernism, and historical realism. Having surveyed the three and found the last to be the best, Licona provides a brief overview.

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[152]Ibid., 144, 146.

[153]There was a time most people thought the earth was flat. There was also a time people thought the universe revolved around the earth.

> The first is a naïve realism which holds that accurate historical judgments always result when correct method, theory and evidence are employed consistently. This view can no longer be maintained, and there are few who embrace it at least publicly, in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The second is a postmodernist view that holds that responsible method cannot lead us to accurate historical knowledge. This view has attracted few followers. The third view is a realism which maintains that the accuracy of historical descriptions may be held with varying degrees of certainty. This is by far how the overwhelming majority of historians view their practice.[154]

Briefly, MH finds the following. Naïve realism is untenable. In order to always achieve accurate historical judgments there would have to be a complete human objectivity. But no human is completely objective. Postmodernism is for the most part self-refuting and fails as a good working historiography.[155] Historical realism has the least problems of the three.[156] This is by far a better reasoning than "the majority says so," as Ehrman's reasoning implies. This point is of paramount importance in the next discussion.

Worldview about the Ultimate Reality

A quick review about the effect of MN is in order. It is to be kept in mind that MN plays a big role in what *is* and *is not* the goal of CH, respectively: to establish what probably happened in the past on this earthly plane, and to find answers about the ultimate reality. This is attainable when historians set aside

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[154]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 89.

[155]William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 218-42; Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1976, 2013), 319-41.

[156]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 79-89; C. Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History: Putting Postmodernism in Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 43-69.

their theological differences. For this reason, CH is necessarily limiting when determining what the ultimate reality may truly entail. For all the historian knows, there is a supernatural being who is involved with the events that take place within the natural world. Some of these events can only be regarded by historians as extremely *unlikely*, when these events may, in fact, be extremely *rare*. What if they have something to do with God's solution to the human problem of evil, suffering, moral degradation, and death? Historians cannot determine one way or the other through the MN grid because it excludes supernaturalism *a priori*. This is not the fault of MN as a grid, nor the fault of CH (given its set goal), nor the fault of the historian or anyone else, but merely the character of the case. The fault lies with one who presses for CH as the only legitimate historiography in discovering the true nature of reality.[157]

What shuts the door to the acknowledgement of God within the framework of CH is MN. Note that it is not CH itself that shuts the door but rather the type of grid used within the discipline that shuts the door. In order to open that door, the grid must be removed. The moment MN is removed, however, another grid—methodological agnosticism (MA)—succeeds the first grid. But, as will be explained, MA would not allow the historian to acknowledge God in historical research. Yet another grid—methodological supernaturalism (MS)—must succeed the second grid (MA). Whereas CH does not claim a particular worldview about

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[157]Pressing for CH as such would require a justification for a form of atheism, namely, ontological naturalism, which says that the natural world is all there is. By all appearance, Ehrman is not pressing for the CH as such.

the ultimate reality (given MN), MH (given MS) does claim a particular worldview.

Methodological agnosticism

MA is an approach that allows historians to acknowledge that God may or may not exist and, if he does exist, he may or may not care enough about the world to perform miracles The historian is allowed to be agnostic about such things, but that the extent to which the historian may proceed. The moment the historian acknowledges theism and incorporates it into historical research, the historian necessarily transcends MA. This approach resembles the one used by Licona in establishing the resurrection. He raises one perennial question: "What if a god exists who wanted to raise Jesus from the dead? That would be a game changer. In that case, a miracle such as Jesus' resurrection may actually be the most probable explanation."[158] However, Licona recognizes the challenge for historians is that they cannot know ahead of time whether such a god exists. He suggests instead that "historians ought to adopt a position of openness and let the facts speak for themselves through the weighing of hypotheses according to proper criteria."[159] Assuming through the weighing of hypotheses the resurrection is established as having happened, Licona offers two proposals how historians might approach the question of the cause of the resurrection. He asserts historians

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[158]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 175.

[159]Ibid.

could either "posit a theoretical entity for its cause" or "leave its cause undetermined."[160] Does MA permit these approaches?

Positing a theoretical entity for the cause of the resurrection is derived as follows. Since time travel is not possible, historians do not have direct access to any of the objects of their study. This is because the past is over, never to be recovered. "Historians only have remnants from the past, and they infer past entities and events on the basis of the evidence that has come to them."[161] Physicists often "posit numerous entities to which scientists have no direct access, such as black holes, quarks, strings and gluons. These entities have never been observed and probably never will be. But at the moment, they do a good job of explaining the phenomena."[162] This practice, suggests Licona, is tantamount "to the move made by historians who posit 'God' as the theoretical entity responsible for the resurrection of Jesus."[163] In response, it is true that positing a theoretical entity is not a problem in MA. While this is the case, that entity cannot be "God" or any entity outside the knowledge the approach allows. Again, this is because the moment God is introduced as an entity, the grid is no longer methodological *agnosticism* but some kind of theistic methodology.

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[160]Licona, "Historians and Miracle Claims," 129.

[161]Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 169.

[162]Ibid., 168.

[163]Ibid.

In terms of the second proposal, Licona calls leaving the cause of the resurrection undetermined "a form of methodological naturalism."[164] According to Licona, "Historians can offer a positive verdict pertaining to the historicity of an event while leaving its cause undetermined. This is a common practice of historians outside the guild of biblical scholars."[165] He gives the example of the three possible causes of death of Scipio Africanus, found in Plutarch's writing. He may have died of natural causes, he may have committed suicide, or he may have been smothered by thugs while asleep.[166] Another example Licona gives is the cause of death of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Scholars agree that he died on either June 13 or 14, 1886, but the manner of Ludwig's "death is shrouded in mystery and conflicting reports exist pertaining to whether he and his attending physician were already dead or showed weak signs of life when they were discovered floating in Starnberg Lake outside of his Berg castle."[167] In response, leaving the cause of the resurrection undetermined is indeed permitted by MA, since the historian does not make a knowledge claim whether or not a deity is involved with the event. For this reason, the second proposal is more in keeping with MA. The drawback, however, is that the historian *as a historian* would never be able to go beyond saying that the resurrection did happen and could never be able to say whether God had anything at all to do with it.

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[164]Licona, "Historians and Miracle Claims, 129.

[165]Ibid. 122.

[166]Ibid.

[167]Ibid.

Finally, for some it may sound as though MA is theologically neutral. Far from being neutral, MA is actually methodologically atheistic. When MA replaces MN, MA does not add any knowledge about God to the historiographical discipline that is being modified. Adding knowledge about God transcends agnosticism into a kind of theistic methodology. In order to live up to its name, MA must be methodologically atheistic and cannot be theologically neutral. For this reason, MA is functionally similar to MN, although Ehrman claims that "historians cannot presuppose belief or disbelief in God, when making their conclusions. Discussions about what God has done are theological in nature, they're not historical."[168] Aside from Ehrman's false claim, his assertion is self-refuting. When historians make their conclusions, the way to *not* include God in the discussion is precisely, as a matter of methodology, by presupposing *only* disbelief—not either belief or disbelief—in God.

To be sure, replacing MN with MA as a temporary grid, as it were, is a significant step in the process. However, for all practical purpose, if the process of modifying the discipline were stopped at this point, MH would be no better than CH. Such a modified historiography would not allow the historian to factor theology in to a historical case for the resurrection and could not thereby raise P(R/B&E) through an appeal to God.

Methodological supernaturalism

Having defined MA and dealt with its problems, the discussion now turns to a tenable grid: methodological supernaturalism. MS is an approach that

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[168]Craig and Ehrman, 13.

acknowledges God's existence and his caring enough about the natural world to perform miracles allowing historians to employ that knowledge in raising P(R/B&E).[169] Such a worldview about ultimate reality within the framework of MH is called theism.[170] Briefly, theism is here defined as the view that a morally perfect, personal, intelligent, powerful, immaterial, spaceless, and timeless being exists. This being, God, is the creator and sustainer of the universe. The first miracle God has performed is the creation of the universe from nothing a finite time ago. Another miracle is the beginning of life from non-life on Earth in the past. Yet another miracle is the beginning of human rationality from non-rationality.[171]

There are good arguments for theism both philosophical and scientific, including the moral argument, the contingency argument, the teleological argument, the ontological argument, and the cosmological argument. These will not be presented here as they have been discussed in detail elsewhere.[172] Assuming the arguments are sound, it is highly likely that theism corresponds to

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[169]To be sure, the acknowledgement of a supernatural intervention does not automatically raise P(R/B&E). It only allows the possibility of raising P(R/B&E). Actually raising such a posterior probability is a separate step altogether.

[170]God's caring about the world enough to perform miracles is called theism, as opposed to deism, which is the view that God did create the world but does not care enough about it to perform miracles.

[171]With this background alone, raising Jesus from the dead to never die again would be a child's play to such a being, but it does not mean that he would raise Jesus. God's tendency to raise Jesus is another step further.

[172]See Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 93-196. See also *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (The Atrium, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

the ultimate reality. Such a knowledge, about reality although partial, is sufficient

to provide historians a good working background in an attempt to help raise

P(R/B&E), the specific goal of MH, which is the third and final aspect of the

discipline.

Specific Goal in Mind

Thus far, the two aspects in MH have been combined: historical realism

and theism. The attention is now focused on the specific goal in mind set within

the framework of MH, namely, to further raise the value of P(R/B&E) given

theism in the background. To begin, as a reminder, P(R/B&E) can still turn out to

be high enough to grant "historical" status to the resurrection, despite how low

P(R/B) may be, for as long as P(E/B&R) and P(E/B&~R) are of certain values.

For this reason, theism as a background knowledge is not required in order to

establish the resurrection as a historical event.

Further, putting aside P(E/B&R) and P(E/B&~R), the goal narrows to

raising the value of P(R/B), which in turn raises the value of P(R/B&E).[173] The

strategy in raising P(R/B) requires a good deal of background information. First,

the religiously charged context of Jesus' life is already part of P(R/B). It is almost

universally accepted amongst New Testament scholars who study the historical

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[173]P(E/B&R) and P(E/B&~R) are put aside for the moment, although they could potentially raise P(R/B&E) given theism, which another topic altogether. These two have something to do with the direct evidence (e.g., the post-mortem appearances of Jesus to his disciples). One might contend that, if the resurrection did happen without the use of theism, the probability of God's existence is raised. But given MN or MA as the grid in place, no knowledge about theism can ever be gained merely by using historical evidence. In fact, no amount of historical evidence for the resurrection can yield knowledge about God simply because the grid in place blocks any of it.

Jesus that he lived a remarkable, religiously charged life. The following are agreed upon historical facts about Jesus. He led a ministry of wondrous works viewed by his contemporaries as genuine miracles and demon-casting powers. He preached love for one's fellowman by turning the other cheek when persecuted. What is more, Jesus proclaimed to be God's emissary who would usher God's people into God's kingdom on Earth. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate on the charge of treason by claiming to be the King of the Jews. Finally, a few days after he died of crucifixion, Jesus' disciples claimed to see him alive, helping to form the disciples' belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead by God.

Second, when the religiously charged context of the life of Jesus is combined with theism—that is, with the existence of a God who cares enough about the world to perform miracles—the value of P(R/B) increases. It is to be remembered that, given MN (or MA) as a working grid—that is, in the absence of theism—P(R/B) is "almost certainly did not happen." Both grids block the very possibility of acknowledging the supernatural because they are methodologically atheistic. There is no way to raise P(R/B) by appealing to the supernatural because there is nothing to appeal to. However, given MS—that is, with theism permitted—P(R/B) would be raised from "almost certainly did not happen" *at least* slightly higher. How high might that value be? It is not for certain. Assuming that theism is true, it does not follow that God would likely raise Jesus from the dead. This statement requires a qualification. First, theism by itself without the context of Jesus' life would not raise P(R/B). The resurrection in this case would be like any other miracle claim without context. Yet the stronger the

religious context the higher the likelihood that God may be involved and the

higher the prior probability of that miracle would be. Further, there are different

levels within the likelihood of God's raising Jesus. If the statement means God

would "almost certainly" raise Jesus, this is a bold claim this thesis does not

make. If the statement means the likelihood of God's raising Jesus is "more

probable than not," this too is not the claim here. The claim is rather modest: it is

at least slightly higher than "almost certainly did not happen" that God would

raise Jesus, whatever the level of likelihood may be. If this assessment is accurate,

it may potentially raise P(R/B) even higher than what has been established thus

far by way of an appeal to the supernatural.

Finally, other information may assist in raising P(R/B) further. First,

consider the absolute goodness of God. God is morally perfect and would desire

the greatest good for humankind. Second, humanity is mired in immorality and

imperfection, and God would want to rescue humanity from its peril. It seems

more reasonable than not that the greatest good for humans is that they would

blissfully spend eternity with their creator. Third, God would want to use

extremely rare events, i.e., miracles, to rouse humanity's attention. When

combined with theism and the religiously charged context of the life of Jesus,

these assist in raising the prior probability of the resurrection of Jesus much

higher than initially determined. As these concepts have been extensively

developed elsewhere, this thesis will not detail them further.[174] Assuming the

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[174]See R. Douglas Geivett, "David Hume and a Cumulative Case Argument," in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press,

validity of these concepts, P(R/B) becomes much higher than "almost certainly did not happen." How much higher P(R/B) becomes at least "more probable than not," but this is difficult to pinpoint exactly. Would it go slightly or greatly above "more probable than not" and thereby closer to "almost certainly happened"? Perhaps, it would be somewhere in between, but this is not for certain. What is for certain is that the resurrection of Jesus is rendered more plausible (in terms of prior probability) than competing hypotheses. For example, consider the twin brother theory. That Jesus had a twin brother is initially much more plausible than the idea that he was dead and returned to life never to die again. This is because people having twins has been observed far more frequently than a man returning back to life to never die again, which has never been observed in the history of human mortality.[175] Yet when the life of Jesus, theism, and the additional information above are factored into the initial plausibility of the resurrection, that plausibility becomes much higher than the plausibility of the twin brother theory. At this juncture, it is no longer correct to say that any other initially implausible hypothesis (e.g., the hallucination theory or the stolen body) should be regarded as more *historically* plausible that the resurrection. The resurrection hypothesis should be considered alongside any initially implausible hypotheses.

2005), 297-329. See also Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim: A Philosophical and Critical Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984).

[175]To say that the twin brother is problematic because there is no evidence for it is to miss the point. Even if there is no evidence for Jesus' having a twin brother (which makes the theory initially implausible), it is still initially more plausible that he had a twin brother (because people have twins quite often) than the idea that the dead Jesus returned back to life to never die again (because this has never been observed in the history of human mortality).

A few remaining remarks are in order pertaining to how P(R/B&E) would reach given what has been factored into P(R/B). To this end, consider the following illustration in Bayesian terms. P(R/B&E) can be "almost certainly happened" or 0.999999 for what follows. At this juncture, assume that P(R/B) is established as "even odds" or 0.50 from being "almost certainly did not happen" or 0.000001. Assume the evidence is very strong for the occurrence of the resurrection (P(E/B&R) = 0.999999) and very weak for the non-occurrence of the resurrection (P(E/B&~R) = 0.000001). The result is P(R/B&E) = 0.999999, which is equivalent to almost certainly happened.

Summary and Conclusion

The AIS challenge assumes the success of the IIM challenge. Therefore, the only way to establish the resurrection of Jesus is to show that God did it. Historians, however, cannot establish the resurrection in this way because they have no access to God. For this reason, any historical explanation is more historically plausible than the resurrection. Contrary to what is assumed, even without appealing to God, the resurrection can still be established no matter how improbable using historical evidence.

Further, the challenge does pose a problem which cannot be overcome. Due to MN, historians cannot appeal to the supernatural to further raise P(R/B&E). Even so, the effort to raise P(R/B&E) is not doomed to failure because CH (given MN) has its place (with limitations) and the discipline can be modified such that miracles are acknowledged as acts of God. The end result is MH, given

MS. This opens the door to raise P(R/B&E) by way of an appeal to the supernatural.

CHAPTER 5

CLOSING REMARKS

It is the Christian stance that the resurrection of Jesus can be established as an event in history. The resurrection as a historical claim is the hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead." Ehrman argues against a specific articulation of this hypothesis: "God raised Jesus from the dead never to die again." He levels a twofold challenge to this: the intrinsic improbability of miracles; the absolute inaccessibility to the supernatural.

This thesis aimed to demonstrate that, even with this bold articulation of the theory, Ehrman's challenge fails and that the resurrection can be established as a historical event through the utility of a modified historiography that allows the acknowledgement of God, who performs miracles in the natural world. If the response provided in these pages are sound, then what the thesis had set out to do is accomplished. For this reason, the historiographical precondition—the ability to establish the resurrection of Jesus as a historical fact—is met, even for an attempt to prove such a bold truth claim as part of God's revelation. The door is flung open to verify this claim.

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