

## ***Addendum to the Debate on the Resurrection, with Mark Reid***

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I was asked, by the moderator of the “Modern-Day Debate” channel, to participate in a debate with an atheist (secular humanist) from Australia on the topic of *The Resurrection of Christ*. This debate took place on Saturday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024. I have promised my listeners that I would provide a written response to every point made by my opponent, to which time did not allow me to respond during the debate. This is that response.

I would point out that my interlocutor’s name (at least his screen name—I don’t know if it is his real name) is Mark Reid. Since many of the comments made in the debate are about John Mark, the presumed author of the second Gospel, I am going to refer to my opponent by his last name “Reid” rather than his first name, the use of which in some contexts might cause confusion as to whether I am referring to my opponent or to the Gospel writer. Before my responses begin, I will reprint here the contents of the *PowerPoint* slides used in Reid’s presentation.

### **Reid’s PPT slides:**

#### I. Supernatural Claims

Other claimed resurrections:

- o Tammuz, Spring God of Mesopotamia
- o Osiris, Egyptian God of Death and Agriculture
- o Satyavan, a traditional Hindi story about a resurrected Woodsman
- o Bodhidharma, the sage that brought Buddhism to China
- o Odin, in the Havamal died and was reborn

“What happened with these figures was probably the same as what happened with Jesus: A legend was built around them.”

When was this written?

- o Mark was the earliest probably written between 66-70 AD
- o Matthew and Luke probably around 85-90 AD
- o John was written about 90-110 AD

The Identity Problem

- o The gospels are based on oral traditions
- o The collection of stories, parables and sayings have been compiled into what we know now to be the gospels
- o The early church tradition has the authors as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The actual authors are anonymous, and it cannot be established they were written by the presumed authors.

#### II. Contradictions

- o In the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone, while in the Synoptic Gospels Mary was with other women.
- o In the gospel of Mark, the stone covering the tomb was already rolled away while in Matthew the stone was rolled away after the women arrived.

#### III. Altered Documents

#### IV. Fanciful Tales

#### V. Summary

- o There is no corroborating extra-biblical sources for the resurrection.
- o In order for the account to be believed the text has to be reliable
- o We do not know who wrote the gospels-they are anonymous
- o There are flagrant contradictions in the Bible.
- o There have been additions to the Bible by the early church.

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My comments follow in black text; Reid's are in bold green:

**Reid said: "Historians don't take literally supernatural claims"**

Reid does not indicate that he is speaking only of anti-supernaturalist historians. There are many historians that do not bring this prejudice to their studies. The best historians are more interested in knowing whether a historical claim is credible than whether it fits into their arbitrarily-chosen materialist world view. Not all historians are ideologues, such as those to whom Reid refers.

On my shelves are books by many respected historians. As you might think, a respectable historian must not let his prejudices decide in advance what may or may not have occurred. He is more interested in the credibility of sources. If a historian is open to events having an explanation beyond the natural, this does not mean that he blindly accepts every report of allegedly supernatural events. Even convinced Christians do not do this.

I do not have statistics, but I would be willing to wager that there have been more historians who would not rule out the supernatural prior to investigation than there are those who approach their studies with such a bias firmly in place.

**Reid claimed: Any supernatural claim or historical claim should be considered the least likely explanation. The burden of proof is on the person claiming supernatural occurrences to show it happened rather than the person disbelieving them.**

How so? Such a rule cannot be accepted merely upon the prejudicial claim of the materialist. I suppose, if one can first prove that materialism is correct, the rule would carry more authority. Materialism is as much a faith as is theism. Those who doubt the materialist faith cannot be required to accept a rule whose entire basis is the assumption that such an undemonstrated faith is correct.

If an otherwise honest and competent witness says that he saw something, whether the thing is claimed to be supernatural or not, the burden of proof is not upon him to prove that he saw it. He presumably knows what he saw, and we do not.

To disregard the testimony requires demonstrating that the thing is impossible and that the witness either does not know what he saw, or has some motivation to misrepresent what he saw. The only person who would think there is a burden of proof resting on the witness would be one who holds a philosophical prejudice (i.e., a worldview which itself has never been demonstrated to be correct) that the events reported could not have happened.

A man is to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. This defines the burden of proof. I would say the burden of proof lies more heavily upon the materialist, since he is professing a concept that

amounts to nothing but guesswork on his part, and which stands in contrast to the reported experiences of millions of people.

**Reid claimed: “There is NO extant contemporary record of the execution of Jesus, much less the resurrection.”**

This is a case of “begging the question”. This means arguing by appeal, as if true, to some proposition that is itself under investigation in the debate. The four Gospels claim, and have long been recognized, with some credibility, to be contemporary witnesses to these facts. Their truthfulness or falsity has not yet been demonstrated, and is one of the points in dispute in this very debate. If we allow “contemporary” witnesses to include persons living within a few years of the events (such is the case for very few of all the historical events known to us), we would have to consider within that group both Josephus and the Talmud, and, possibly Josephus, all of which originated in the very region and the general timeframe of events in the Gospels.

### **Other claimed resurrections:**

There once was a group of skeptical scholars, about a century ago, who claimed that the story of Jesus had many parallels to the older myths about “dying and rising gods” in ancient pagan religions. They concluded that the stories of Jesus were likewise myths, which borrowed features from these pagan gods, like Horus, Osiris, Krishna, Mithras Dionysus, etc. This has been consequently debunked by the increase in our knowledge of the allegedly similar cases in paganism. I myself have recorded over two-hours of response debunking such claims. The video to which I responded is called “Zeitgeist” which, depending heavily on outdated and fallacious sources, made many claims of similarities between several ancient gods and the story of Jesus. Not being gullible myself, I researched the religions referred to and found that not one of the alleged similarities existed in these religions.

First, none of the gods in these religions are ever said to have lived in any particular historical setting (because they were mythical). Second, not being tied to any history, none of their myths describe them as having any contact or interaction with any known historical persons. Nor do any of the propagators of their stories make any claim that they, or anyone they knew, ever saw or had contact with these gods. Third, never having lived, these gods obviously never really died. Fourth, their mythologies do not contain resurrection claims for them. Many of them, being gods of vegetation, are perceived as dying every winter and returning to life every spring. Some are never said to return to earth after death, but Osiris, for example, after death and dismemberment, is said to have been made the Lord of the Underworld.

Anyone can do his own research to see what the myths about these gods say. The Encyclopedia Britannica online is a very accessible source. There is not one case among these myths that contains anything resembling a parallel to the narratives about Jesus. The latter tie Him intimately with history, providing His genealogy going back to Adam, mentioning all the surrounding (well-known) rulers of the region and lands farther off. He interacts and converses with well-known historical persons, like Herod Antipas, Pilate, Caiaphas, as well as the disciples who founded the church at a historical time and place.

Reid provides five examples of other alleged resurrections. It is not clear if this is to imply the thesis of “Zeitgeist”—viz., that the story of Jesus was a mere regurgitation of certain pagan myths, or if his only purpose is to show that the story of Jesus rising from the dead is not the only case in literature of persons rising from the dead. If the latter was his purpose, he needn’t have bothered. Even the

Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, relate other examples of people rising from death through the ministries of Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Peter, and Paul. We know that Jesus is not the only person reported to have risen. Though he does not tell us what the significance of these examples to his thesis may be (nor even *what* his thesis may be), Reid provides five examples of people whom (he alleges) were said to have risen from the dead. He apparently merely copied these trustingly from a website, without conducting a personal investigation):

o **Tammuz, Spring God of Mesopotamia**

First, Tammuz never lived, nor died, so rumors of his resurrection are (to plagiarize Mark Twain) “greatly exaggerated.” The myths about Tammuz claim that after his death, he and his sister took turns, alternatively living in the netherworld half the year, and in the world of the living, the other half. These stories were associated with the agricultural cycles with which Tammuz was associated.

Jesus, on the other hand, was a historical person who is known to have lived and died. The claim that He rose from the dead, is a claim about an allegedly witnessed, historical reality. There is no parallel case known to man of a historical character being mythologically deified in the lifetime of those who walked with him. Reid claimed that this happened with Romulus—who is not even known to have been a historical character, nor mythologized in his (alleged) lifetime. There is no reason whatever to compare these cases.

o **Osiris, Egyptian God of Death and Agriculture**

As mentioned above, there are no parallels to Christ in the mythology about Osiris, including no resurrection.

o **Satyavan, a traditional Hindi story about a resurrected Woodsman**

This, probably mythical, exiled prince was said to have died prematurely due to a curse upon him. His loving wife, however, held his head upon her lap until she saw a bright god snatching away his soul, taking it away with him. There is no resurrection of this man’s body in this legend, and it seems, rather, to imply the postmortem survival of the soul, which is a different concept entirely (and much more consistent with Hinduism) from that of resurrection. We have here no parallels to Christ.

o **Bodhidharma, the sage that brought Buddhism to China**

I could find no confirmation that this man was ever said to have arisen from the dead. He was not regarded to be a god, but a monk, so even if he was said to be raised from the dead, his case would be more parallel to some of the other biblical resurrections (e.g., Lazarus) than to Christ. His story was first written and circulated in the seventh century after Christ, and he is thought, by some, to have lived about a century earlier, in the 500s AD. It is clear then, that the stories of Christ’s resurrection could not have been influenced by a myth which did not exist until 600 years after the writing of the Gospels.

o **Odin, in the Havamal died and was reborn**

One legend says that Odin went to Valhalla. His spirit, however, would remain with Thor and all Asgardians to impart wisdom and help them on their future journeys. Another account mentions Odin dying and rising. This Norse mythology did not arise or take shape until the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> centuries after Christ, and could obviously have had no influence upon the Christian records. In fact, it may have been influenced by the well-known, more ancient accounts of Christ’s resurrection.

**Reid speculated:**

**“What happened with these figures was probably the same as what happened with Jesus: A legend was built around them.”**

The word “probably” would seemingly require justification. What exactly is the “probability” that these cases, which bear almost no resemblance to the history of Jesus, arose in the same manner as did His? Reid is making a historical claim, but seems to require no evidence of any kind—something he insists we need to have before we believe historical claims.

**Reid’s claim: These four Gospels are not contemporary, dating from 35 to 40 years after the events.**

If Reid were to study ancient history, he would learn that almost no “contemporary” historical records exist of the events they record, if “contemporary” is taken to mean “written while the events were actually transpiring before their eyes.” It is uncommonly fortunate to have any ancient records written about events that occurred even as recently as a generation or two before the historian’s time. Even if the Gospels were written, as Reid affirms, 35 to 40 years after the events (and there is good internal evidence of their being written earlier), this means they were written by persons who were almost certainly alive during the latter part of Jesus’ lifetime (the very period they report), and written to an audience, many of whom were contemporary with the period reported. Most historians of ancient history would kill to get records so nearly proximate to their subject matter.

**“Consider how much a story can change in 30 years. For comparison, Trump had an attempted assassination two months ago. There are already people claiming that there was supernatural intervention that saved him. This is in the modern era.”**

This is a silly comparison. If some people claim to have seen angels at Trump’s speech protecting him from bullets, they claim to have seen something that hundreds of other witnesses, within a few feet of the candidate, did not see. If they were not claiming to have actually seen the angels, as I suspect to be the case, then they were saying that angels invisibly protected Trump. This would be an expression of their theological opinion, not of something they claimed to witness.

There is exactly zero parallel to the stories in the Gospels. The whole story is of events witnessed by believers and unbelievers alike, leading to the conversion of many who were unbelievers prior to seeing the events. When one claims to have seen a leper healed with a touch, he is not claiming to be witnessing invisible spiritual realities, but the visible, public recovery of a sick man from his condition. It is claiming that something happened that any sighted person present could equally have witnessed. The report may lead to a religious conclusion about Christ, but the conclusion is supplied by the event, not the event by the religious beliefs.

As for how much a story about a publicly witnessed event can be changed in thirty years’ time, I would not overestimate this. First, it is easy to vividly remember in detail important events that one has experienced 30, 40, or 60 years ago. This is especially true if you, and your fellow witnesses, have reviewed the event and revisited it together on a regular, possibly daily, basis. This would be the case with the early Gospel preachers. They spent their days retelling these stories to anyone who would listen, and fellowshiping with each other. The suggestion that their memories would fail them in the accurate recollection is a pipedream of the skeptics out of touch with real human experiences. After seventy years of marriage, both of my parents could still recall the details of their first meeting.

Of course, if, as Reid suspects, these witnesses had dark and nefarious intentions of reshaping the stories for the deception of their audiences, we still must ask two questions:

- 1) *To what end?* What could they hope to gain for themselves by such a ruse. Their own religious convictions, for which most of them died as martyrs, would condemn lying and deceiving others. We would have to find a credible motive as to why they would so thoroughly violate their own principles.
- 2) *How could they pull it off?* These stories were first preached in Jerusalem for several years before they spilled over to other environs. Would not the local population, who had spent their lives in the regions where Jesus allegedly lived, catch on to the ruse? If a non-miraculous life suddenly began to be imbued in the retelling with fabulous and sensational elements which never occurred, would not some of the thousands of people who had seen Jesus in their youth remember, 30 years later, that no such things had occurred in their neighborhood?

In fact, there is no evidence of any kind that would support the (allegedly historical) claim that Reid is wishing to promote about these people. He himself clearly accepts his thesis on the basis of pure faith, without evidence.

**With reference to the traditional identities of the Gospel authors: “There is absolutely no certainty among scholars” that they were the persons alleged by tradition.**

Almost nothing that happened hundreds of years ago is known to us with “absolute certainty.” We can only know of them from historical records—that is, reports of people who wrote about them. Do we have absolute certainty as to who these people were (e.g., Did Shakespeare really write the plays attributed to him?) or of the veracity of their records?

The case is made stronger if there are multiple, essentially-contemporary, witnesses as to the facts we are desiring to ascertain. A good witness would be someone who is in the best possible position to know the facts of the matter, who has a record of good character, is never known to have lied, and has nothing to gain by misleading others. Even so, we might retain some doubts even then, but they would not be reasonable doubts. If we could not accept historical facts on the basis of such sources, we might as well profess complete ignorance of anything that may have occurred before we were born, or even in our lifetimes, in places we have not been.

If we cannot gain absolute certainty (and we never can) about ancient reports, we can at least do what scientists do, and make an “inference to the best conclusion” based on the evidence available. On this score, we have the most excellent reasons to accept the traditional authorship of the four Gospels—there being no evidence for any contrary theory of their authorship. We have testimony from Papias and others (e.g., Polycarp) who were in the Christian Church at the end of the first generation, about the time the Gospels are believed to have been written. If the Gospels were written before the births of Polycarp and Papias (that is, before AD 70), then they were still in the possession of the people who first received them from the pens of the authors. The likelihood that anyone, at that time, would have forgotten or mistaken the origin of the recently-written books they read regularly in their churches is vanishingly small.

Within a century of the composition of the four Gospels, all four of them, and the identities of their authors, were universally recognized by the churches throughout the known world. This fact was stated by Irenaeus (AD 170). Now think of a scenario when churches as far from each other as Rome, Turkey, Syria and Egypt had all received these writings along with the knowledge of their

authorship. This knowledge must already have been universal prior to the time these churches were scattered from Judea, since it was universally known, and no competing theories vied for favor among them.

Besides, if the four traditional authors were not the real authors, who were the real authors, and how did the knowledge of their identities become lost so quickly after their books had come into universal use in the churches?

Of course, Reid doesn't think the early church actually knew of the origins of these books. He suggested that they simply "found" scraps and partial manuscripts laying around (from who knows where?) and decided to attribute false authorship to them. Besides the fact that no biblical scholar, including Bart Ehrman, could believe such a bizarre theory, it leaves unanswered the most crucial question of why these particular names would have been ascribed to these documents.

One might well see reasons to attribute two of the books to such eye-witnesses as Matthew and John, though this leaves completely unexplained (and unexplainable) how two of them would have been attributed to such obscure men as Mark and Luke. Neither Mark nor Luke were apostles, or eye-witnesses, or particularly important figures in the biblical record or the early church. Their only claim to fame was that, at a later time, Mark traveled with Peter and Luke traveled with Paul.

If one wished to falsely ascribe the authorship of these anonymous books, to imbue them with a faux credibility, why would they not just skip the middle-men and claim Peter and Paul as the authors? There is literally no conceivable reason why these two books would be falsely ascribed to such obscure men, other than that they were known to be their true authors.

Ah, but we do not have absolute certainty about it! Well, those who associated with these men apparently had absolute certainty about it, and if we are to "infer from the evidence to the best conclusions," it seems clear that acceptance of these authors would be our required conclusions. Does Reid, or anyone else, have a better suggestion of who the authors were?

**The author of Mark shows misunderstanding of Jewish customs, the geography of Judea, and completely misunderstands the Hebrew Bible, and was very likely a Gentile Christian outside of Palestine.**

How does one calculate this "very likelihood"? Certainly not by appeal to any historical data. Mark's knowledge of Jewish customs was very considerable, and any claim that the Jews did not wash in the manner that Mark says they did would itself require documentation from contemporary history—at least from sources known to be as early and as geographically near the scene as was Mark.

**Reid says, "If these books were not written by the disciples that were attributed to them, they are not eye-witness accounts at all."**

Well, that certainly is a leap. The traditional authors, Matthew and John, were certainly not the only persons on the planet who were eye-witnesses of Christ's life (Nobody claimed this for Mark or Luke). Even if, for some reason, we concluded that the traditional authors had not really written these books, this does not tell us that the actual authors were not eye-witnesses. It would simply throw the question open to new candidates, some of which could have been other eye-witnesses. Since Reid has no theories (and certainly no knowledge) of who the real authors were, it seems presumptuous to say, "Well, whoever they were (and I do not have a clue), I at least can affirm they were not eye-witnesses."

One of the most respected New Testament scholars alive today is Richard Bauckham. He wrote two academic books about the authorship of the Gospels—called *“Jesus and the Eyewitnesses”* (2006) and *“The Testimony of the Fourth Gospel”* (2007). These are regarded by the academic world as peerless in their scholarship. In them, while not insisting on the traditional authorship of the Gospels (nor denying it), he presents massive evidence from geographical, cultural and historical references in the Gospels that the very best inference from all the evidence is that they reveal the evidence of preserving eye-witness testimony. The simplest conclusion from the evidence would be that, whoever wrote them, they preserve events from the testimony of those who were there. Reid seems to think otherwise, though he has not hinted what evidence he may have for his thesis.

## VI. Contradictions

The issue of alleged contradictions in the Gospel is a fascinating study—and one in which I have been deeply engaged with special interest for over fifty years. Because many people approach the Gospels as unassailable or untouchable holy books, almost magically produced by divine inspiration, skeptics often apply criteria of criticism to them that are not generally applied in the study of other historical records. I would recommend analyzing them from the standpoint of what they claim to be—namely, four historical documents. We do not need to impute to them any magical aura that they do not claim for themselves. What some people stumble over as perceived contradictions would not be counted as problematic if discovered in any other set of historical records.

In identifying alleged contradictions between the Gospel accounts, we must bear in mind that the presence of different details in two passages on the same subject does not itself constitute a contradiction, unless both accounts cannot be true. When a plausible explanation can be provided as to how two distinctive reports may both be telling the truth, then we are confronted with a decision. We can either do with this information what our minds would normally do, concluding that we have two reliable accounts, each providing details absent from the other, or we can be skeptical and say, “I still think someone is lying.” Our decision about such matters will be determined, not by the evidence before us, but by our choice either to be reasonable or to be gratuitously hostile toward the witnesses.

The skeptic’s perception of what the Gospels claim to be, and what the proper scholarly approach is to testing them, may be the fault of certain Christians, who have often taken a somewhat superstitious approach to the documents. This invites the skeptic to examine them as magical documents and to apply a canon of criticism that a more sensible approach would never elicit.

Suppose a group of your friends made a trip to Northern California, and afterward one of them told you, “I went to San Francisco last month.”

Later, you overhear the same person, in a different conversation saying, “Three of my friends and I recently made a road trip along the California Coast and had we had lunch at the cutest café in Monterey.”

What does your mind do here? Since the reports have few details in common, do you conclude that the two reports were mutually contradictory? One report mentioned one traveler, while the other includes four. One mentioned San Francisco, while the other only mentioned the California Coast



and Monterey. In one there is a café, which is absent from the other. You are faced with three possible conclusions: 1) you are hearing reports about two different trips; 2) you are hearing, in the first case, an abbreviated report, followed by a second, fuller account of the same trip; or 3) your friend is a liar. There being nothing intrinsically unlikely about either of the first two alternatives, only a prior malicious assessment of your friend would lead you to take the third option.

The four Gospels were written and circulated as separate historical accounts, until (centuries later) they became bound together with other Christian documents into what we call the Bible. Their presence today in this collection should not prevent us from treating them, individually and in comparison with each other, as we would any similar set of available documents from the past. We should approach them for what they claim to be (not necessarily what Christians have claimed them to be), namely, straightforward accounts of historical events.

When this is done, there is nothing in them that raises suspicions in a reasonable mind about their basic accuracy. As Prof. Clark Pinnock noted, “While insisting on their right to treat the Bible, ‘like any other book,’ some critics proceed to treat it like no other book by bathing it in the acid solution of their skepticism and historical pessimism.”

To put it plainly, the authors wrote from a combination of their experiences and their research. The latter is a feature of all historical writing, though, in the best of cases, the author may also have seen the events recorded. This research included consultation with other people who also had first-hand knowledge of things. Many scholars believe that Matthew and Luke slavishly used Mark as one of their sources, though, if this were true, it renders inexplicable how so many alleged “discrepancies” managed to find their way into the texts. Critics can’t seem to make up their minds, either these authors colluded together to tell the same doctored story (which accounts for their high degree of mutual confirmation), or they hopelessly contradict each other (reasonably suggesting they worked independently without knowledge or much consultation of each other’s documents). Which is it?

If Matthew was copying from Mark, why did Mark only mention one demon possessed man in the tombs, while Matthew mentions two? Both statements, of course, can be true, but Matthew could not have received his knowledge of this detail from Mark, who didn’t mention it. If Luke depended on Mark, why did Mark and Matthew mention only one angel at the tomb, while Luke (in agreement with John) mentions there were two? Again, nothing precludes the conclusion that all the accounts are correct, but Luke (and John, being the last written) could not have learned of a second angel from either Mark or Matthew, who did not mention it. And if they depended on Mark, why would they provide different information?

It is clear that the writers of all four Gospels had some of the same sources of their knowledge—in many cases, their source was their personal experience with Jesus Himself. They also lived in the community of others who knew Jesus and who must have been fond of repeating the stories of their experiences with Him. This scenario is the best that scholarship can suggest for the origins of these writings. Did some people remember some details differently than did others who were there? We should be surprised if that were not the case, since it is common to human experience and memory.

For example, how long was the time between the meeting at Caesarea Philippi and the Mount of Transfiguration? Luke says it was “*about eight days.*” Matthew (who was there) and Mark, whose source was Peter (who was also there), both describe the interval as “*after six days.*” Is this a problem to the historical reliability of any of the records? No historical scholar would blink an eye at such a thing, if found in secular histories. After all, an event that occurred “after six days” would,

presumably, be happening on the seventh day following. Is not “seven” just “about eight”? There is no reason why a statement that says one thing happened “after six days” (i.e., on the seventh) might not, with less exactness be said to have happened “about eight days later”? The number is not affirmed to be “eight,” but very close to it. What would be very hard to explain would be why Luke, having only Mark (and possibly Matthew) as his source, would gratuitously choose such a different phrase, and not simply repeat what the others said. These authors give every evidence of working independently (hence the peculiar differences), and have thus provided four independent records of the events they report.

Since there are ten or more recorded post-resurrection appearances of Christ, and no one writer includes them all, to get a complete picture of all that transpired after Christ’s tomb became vacant, we seek to weave together details from all four Gospels. This can be done without great difficulty. But suppose one of the reporters remembered the order of events wrongly (I know of no evidence that demands such a conclusion)? Would this raise serious doubts about the events themselves? The point is, historians expect and find many differences between independent accounts of certain historical events. Too many exact similarities between accounts naturally raises suspicions of collusion. The presence of inconsequential differences does not lead any rational scholar to conclude that the event must have been fabricated. We find in the Gospels, and in their juxtaposition with each other, just the characteristics that we expect to find in various historical records treating the same subject matter. Such things provide no challenge to their essential reliability.

**o In the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone, while in the Synoptic Gospels Mary was with other women.**

This comment confuses two separate arrivals of Mary. She first approached the scene with the other women (as per the Synoptics), but upon seeing the stone removed, she ran back to report the empty tomb to the disciples (as per John’s account). She then followed Peter and John back to the tomb at a distance. She had been running, and so she naturally trailed behind them. The men arrived at the tomb ahead of her, saw what they saw, and left before she arrived a second time to the tomb alone, as John records. Where, exactly, is the contradiction here?

**o In the gospel of Mark, the stone covering the tomb was already rolled away while in Matthew the stone was rolled away after the women arrived.**

If Matthew’s account really disagrees with Mark’s, how can Reid, elsewhere, claim that Matthew copied from Mark?

Matthew, Mark and Luke all have the women arriving early Sunday morning to the tomb. Mark says that, before arriving there, they were wondering how they would remove the stone. When they arrived, they saw that the stone had already been removed, and they were given a message by an angel. They no doubt presumed, reasonably enough, that it was this angel who had moved the stone. Matthew, making the same rational assumption, parenthetically mentions (in verses 2-4) the fact of the angel’s moving the stone, along with an earthquake and the terror of the guards. Matthew inserts this parenthesis after having initiated the narrative, in verse 1. He had previously, in 27:52-53, similarly inserted some out-of-sequence details between his report of Jesus’ death and the comment of the centurion that Jesus was the son of God.

The presence of parenthetical pericopes in historical writings is so commonplace as to elicit no special curiosity and require no special explanation. Scholars are all familiar with such cases. Matthew is certainly not affirming that all these things occurred with the women present.

### **“The gospels cannot even agree on the date of the crucifixion. John says it was the day before Passover, the others say the day after Passover.”**

This claim would not be made by an objective critic familiar with the Jewish festal calendar. The Synoptics state unambiguously that Jesus ate the Passover meal with His disciples before He was arrested (Matt.26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7, 15). The next morning, Jesus stood on trial before Pilate. At that time, John tells us, the Jews accusing Jews did not wish to enter Pilate’s quarters lest they should be defiled (i.e., by entering a Gentile’s house) and be thus prevented from “eating” the Passover (John 18:28).

Reid’s sources (I do not imagine that he has conducted any personal investigation into the matter) think that John’s statement suggests the Passover meal had not yet been celebrated, thus contradicting the Synoptics, which say the meal had been eaten the previous night. What Reid did not apparently know is that “Passover” was the term applied to the whole week of festivities, also called the days of unleavened bread (2 Chron.35:17; Ezek.45:21). When Jesus was on trial, the Paschal meal had already been eaten the night before, but the remaining seven days of “Passover” (i.e., the week of unleavened bread) remained to be kept. This is a simple and artless solution to the confusion—though Reid, for some reason, seemed to hear this obvious solution as a case of special pleading.

### **Was there an angel, two angels, or none?**

There were two. We are informed of this by two independent sources (Luke and John). Mark and Matthew, reasonably enough, only mention the angel who spoke to the women, but these sources do not deny that another angel was a present, but said nothing. This is like the case of the “trip to San Francisco” story, mentioned above.

### **Did the women tell anyone or not?**

Of course they did. How would one expect them to keep such things a secret all their lives? We are informed that they told no one, at least prior to accomplishing their errand, which was to bring a report to the disciples (Matt.28:7-8). Mark also mentions their commission to tell the disciples, and their leaving the tomb on that assignment. In saying, “*they said nothing to anyone*” (Mark 7), he is not saying they failed to obey the angel’s instructions. We have explicit parallel reports, in both Matthew and Luke, of their fulfilling their errand. Mark’s statement certainly must mean that, in the course of fulfilling their assignment, they spoke to no one they encountered *en route*, thus avoiding delay or distraction. His account, according to “the short ending” of Mark) ends abruptly after this statement, so he does not tell us anything that transpired afterward. We are certainly left to assume that they did what they were told.

This is similar to Jesus’ healing the leper and telling him, “*See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest...*” (Matt.8:4). The priest served, in such cases, as the public health official (Lev.13 and 14). Surely Jesus is not forbidding patient to speak to the priest about this—nor to others after seeing the priest. Jesus is telling him to go present himself as healed to the priest without delay, and to not be distracted by opportunities to discuss the matter with other people along the way.

### **Did Jesus appear to them in Galilee (Matt.28:16-17; John 21:1-14) or in Jerusalem (Luke 24:13-49; John 20:19-29)?**

Both. Notice that Matthew records Galilee, Luke records Jerusalem, and John mentions both, so there is no mystery about this. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus and the disciples make frequent trips between the two places (as most Galileans did, in order to observe the festal calendar). The trip between the two places, on foot, would require about a week. There were almost six weeks between the first and the last of these post-resurrection appearances. Some of them happened in Jerusalem and its environs on the day of the resurrection. At some point after the Passover season, as promised, Jesus met with His disciples back in Galilee, where they, and the vast majority of His followers, lived. Then, with Pentecost approaching, His disciples naturally returned to Jerusalem. It is there that the final appearances, including His ascension occurred. There is not the slightest difficulty in harmonizing all these accounts.

**Matthew is the only gospel that claims guards were posted. The author would have no knowledge of the conversation between the guards and the Sanhedrin.**

As I mentioned in the debate, there were members of the Sanhedrin (e.g., Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea) as well as many priests (Acts 6:7), who became believers, and were thus part of the Christian fellowship when the authors were researching for their books (e.g., Luke 1:1-2). Any serious historian, in researching his subject, would certainly interview any available insiders concerning things that had been said among them in secret concerning their subject. To think that these stories would not be told by those who knew them, when interviewed by the authors, would be asking us to counterintuitively believe the highly improbable.

**The story of the guards being paid off to give a false report (quoting Richard Carrier) “looks like an intervention trying to explain away a possible problem with the story ahead of time.”**

Perhaps, but it would look exactly the same if it was the record of actual events. Apparently, what something “looks like” is in the eye of the beholder, and is subject to all his prejudices. If one comes at the report skeptically, assuming it is false, then it may be said to have the look of a fake report. On the other hand, if someone comes to the record either sympathetically, or simply with no prior leanings, it looks every bit as much like a true report of the facts. This is a perfect example of prior assumptions coloring one’s conclusions. If we know in advance that someone is lying, we can think of ways to explain the lies. However, on what grounds is this first assumption founded?

**“Most Christians don’t know about...” The long ending of Mark**

Perhaps most Christians, like most skeptics, do not read the Bible much. Those who do, however, would have no reason to be ignorant of the fact that the long ending of Mark creates problems—not, certainly, for Christian faith, but for reaching a conclusion about how Mark’s book originally ended. Different manuscripts have longer nor shorter endings of Mark 16. If we were to never solve the issue, no important Christian belief would be rendered more tenuous by that. By the way, every modern English Bible makes note of this textual variant in their footnotes, so there is no secret about it. Even if many Christians (because they do not read the Bible much) are unaware of this, a book cannot legitimately be criticized on the basis of what most people do or don’t know about it.

Reid suggests that the changed verb tense—i.e., “*He is risen*”, in v.6; “*He rose*”, in v.9, somehow suggests different authorship of vv.1-8 and vv.9-20, respectively. He does not give us any hint as to why this data should yield any such conclusion. Might we request some support for such an assertion? Would anyone take note if a man said, “Jesus *is risen*” in one breath, and a few moments later, the same man were to say, “Jesus *rose* on Easter Sunday”? Christians say both regularly, without thinking that the man who says it one way must await a different person to say it the other

way. If a man is risen, it is because he rose. Both communicate the exact same information, and there is nothing peculiar about a narrator using both terms in the same paragraph. This is an example of how quickly skeptics find fault where none exists, and accept non-evidence for their critical propositions.

**“[The long ending] shows clear interpolation by the early church into the documents.” (PPT)**

Actually, it shows no such early tampering. The long ending (which Reid calls a “forgery”) did not appear in manuscripts earlier than the fourth century. Earlier manuscripts do not contain it. This means that, if it is not authentic, no members of “the early church,” in the first three hundred years, is known to have added it to this book. The fourth century is not “early.” The motivations or activities of the early followers of Christ cannot be extrapolated backward from those of religious people living three hundred years later. Contrast, for example, the beliefs and practices of modern Methodists with those of their founder, John Wesley, three centuries ago.

**“The early church has inserted texts into the bible on numerous occasions.” (PPT)**

Let us not overstate this. What does Reid mean by “numerous”? This sounds ominous. If asked, could he give half a dozen examples where this is believed, upon good evidence, to have taken place? I know of four, just off the top of my head:

- 1) the long ending of Mark 16;
- 2) the story of the woman taken in adultery, of John 8;
- 3) one explanatory verse, in John 5:4; and
- 4) the trinitarian formula in 1 John 5:7.

These are four well-known cases, known to most literate Christians. There are possibly a handful more, lesser-known cases where as much as a whole verse is believed to have been added to the text by a copyist. Christian scholars have been aware of all of these for decades, as well as many accidental omissions, misspellings and word substitutions here and there—none of which provide any significant problems to the reader in understanding the affected passages.

Given the fact that the New Testament contains approximately 8,000 verses, if we could find, say, 20 cases where some significant alteration appears to be made by copyists (though not necessarily early in the process of transmission), exactly how does this speak against the essential reliability of the text in general?

**Reid said: “If the people who altered the text are more skillful in their deception, there may be some passages that were never in the originals that we don’t know. This is a nail in the coffin of the Bible’s credibility, because, if we did not find the manuscripts missing the long ending of Mark...we would likely never know about this forgery in the Bible.”**

This assumes the validity of several unjustified propositions:

- 1) That those who copied and preserved the New Testament documents had something to gain by, or some motivation for, perpetrating a hoax, rather than a sincere desire to preserve, as accurately as possible, the documents they cherished, upon which they based their lives, and for the preservation of which they were often willing to die. This is a hostile assumption made entirely gratuitously and without the slightest evidence (nor common sense).
- 2) That, despite the discovery and analysis of 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, all the textual variants in the Gospels still have not yet been discovered, and there could be

many more significant variants that we currently do not know about. This is like the evolutionist's claim that, while millions of fossils of ancient life forms have been found, we will someday still find a few of that notoriously missing class, *viz.*, unambiguously transitional forms between major groups.

- 3) That the finding of a dozen or so minor differences among the manuscripts somehow is a "nail in the coffin" of the credibility of the whole New Testament anthology. Suffice it to say, there is not one competent historian or textual critic (including skeptics like Bart Ehrman) who would pass a student who reached such irrational conclusions from such data. Every ancient book known to man, of every genre, has come down to us through frequently re-copied manuscripts. Not one major work of antiquity has anywhere near the level of unanimity among the supporting manuscripts as is the case with the books of the New Testament. However, most scholars accept without serious question the general authenticity of the manuscripts of most of these secular documents.
- 4) That the long ending of Mark is actually a "forgery" or interpolation, and not part of the original. This is the most popular view among both Christian and non-Christian scholars, though it is not a unanimous opinion in the field. History provides many instances in which the minority opinion among experts has later been vindicated and universally accepted (e.g., the germ theory in the time of Pasteur, or the Big Bang cosmology displacing the solid-state cosmology).

Facts establishing strong confidence in the reliability of the present manuscript tradition of the Gospels, and of the Bible in general, are so easy to access (if only the skeptic really cared to be informed and honest) that it almost feels redundant for me to cite the well-known best authorities on the topic, but here are a few:

Prof. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, pp.15ff—

"The [textual] evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt."

Sir Frederic Kenyon (former dir. of the Brit. Museum), *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, p.23—

"Scholars are satisfied that they possess substantially the true text of the principal Greek and Roman writers whose works have come down to us, of Sophocles, of Thucydides, of Cicero, of Virgil; yet our knowledge of their writings depends on a mere handful of manuscripts, whereas the manuscripts of the New Testament are counted by...thousands."

Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity*, p.29—

". . . to be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament."

Sir Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*, p.288—

"The interval, then, between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant [textual] evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been

removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."

**Matthew's "Zombie apocalypse" ("horde of saints" coming to life at Christ's resurrection) not mentioned in other gospels nor Roman writers.**

I addressed this above, and will only add here that there is no mention of a "horde of saints" leaving their graves. The word used in scripture is "many"—a vague word that varies widely with context. If one says, "*Many* people were at the political rally." How many is "*many*"? It depends. If it was a Trump rally, perhaps 30,000. If it was a Biden rally, possibly more like 50. If we say, "*Many* people claim to have seen the Loch Ness Monster," we might be speaking of fewer than 40 (I don't claim to know). If we say, "*Many* of the neighbors outside the house overheard the children screaming while being beaten by their father," we might be talking about five or six witnesses. If I say, "I know of *many* cases of people who claim to have died and come back to life on the hospital gurney, I am probably referring to, perhaps, three. The more infrequent a particular phenomenon may be, the fewer cases of it will seem like "*many*."

When we say, "There were many dead people who, having come out of their graves, were encountered alive in the city," I should think that one or two would be regarded as so exceptional as to render three or four to be an astonishingly large number. For an event, like the return of a corpse to life, so extraordinary that it rarely happens at all, a handful of cases would seem an abundance! Since Jesus is reported to have raised three different individuals during His ministry, it would not be strange to hear someone say, "Jesus raised many people from the dead," without implying knowledge of any more than these three cases. If, in addition to the three named individuals, half a dozen unnamed persons were raised by Christ at His resurrection, most would see this as "many."

Reid thinks it amazing that, if such a thing really took place, no one but Matthew would mention it. I have early pointed out that the authors of the Gospels were not creating a catalogue of every miracle performed by Jesus, but each provides a sampling from a much larger known number of cases, sufficient to make the point that such miracles accompanied Him. That Matthew alone records this case, is no more surprising, nor damning, than that John alone includes the case of Lazarus, and Luke alone records the raising of the widow's son in Nain. We should bear in mind that hostile judges may find problems in such data where open-minded readers would find none.

The fact that Roman historians do not record the miracles of Jesus (including this one) can hardly be urged against its truthfulness. Do we know of any Roman historians in Jerusalem or Galilee at this time to be aware of it? It should be noted that Jesus never travelled more than a few miles outside Israel, was never encountered by Gentile "historians," and was never suspected, by anyone but His disciples, to be significant enough to pay any attention to until Christianity had become a global movement, generations later. How would one expect the contemporary pagan historians to know of, or write about the story of Jesus?

**"This is an obvious myth... Historians have a word for these kinds of things: it's mythology."**

"Obvious" is in the eye of the beholder. It is significant that the most intellectual men in Western Civilization for centuries did not find this suggestion to be obvious. Only in the last few centuries, with the rise of the materialist faith did it become popular to assume (without evidence) that this is the stuff of mythology. Even today, materialists comprise a small minority of rational people on earth.

Generally, however, it is not the historians that identify or speak on the topic of mythology. This is the province of classical and literary scholars. Professor C.S. Lewis, a former atheist who very reluctantly came to believe, was enamored with, and extraordinarily conversant in, pagan myths and legends. In his later Christian works, he could not resist illustrating his points by frequent reference to these ancient myths of which he was so fond. Commenting on the Gospel narratives in his essay, *“What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?”* Lewis wrote:

“Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are, they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing...Apart from bits of the Platonic dialogues, there are no conversations that I know of in ancient literature like the fourth Gospel. There is nothing, even in modern literature, until about a hundred years ago, when the realistic novel came into existence.”

Lewis did not make this judgment as a Christian partisan, but became convinced while still an atheist immersed in the study of ancient literature. If these stories were “obvious myth,” then those who are experts in such things might be expected to have recognized this “obvious” fact as readily as Reid does.

### **These stories were made up by the followers of Jesus who thought the world was coming to an end at the death of their Leader**

No evidence of any kind is provided for this allegedly-historical claim. Where do we learn that the disciples ever believed Christ’s death would bring “the end of the world”? I have not heard this theory—and I thought I had heard them all!

I do think there is some credibility in the more-common theory that they thought His *second coming* would (perhaps, in the not-so-distant future), bring the end of the world. This is a relatively common theory which is equally accepted by many believers, as well as unbelievers. However, I have not ever encountered a scholar, nor a layman (like Reid) who thought the disciples associated the end of the world with Christ’s *death*.

#### **o There are no corroborating extra-biblical sources for the resurrection.**

As I said in the debate, the four Gospels are contemporary, corroborating sources (and Paul’s writings were contemporary with them, if not earlier), and all of these were “extrabiblical” witnesses until the formation of the New Testament collection in the late fourth century. Of course, all four Gospels and Paul’s letters were recognized as authoritative by all concerned parties, essentially from their first appearances. The formation, centuries later, of the final collection in which they were later included is what made them “biblical.”

Bart Ehrman puts the facts of the case into perspective thus:

“As we will see in a moment, the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus...are the four Gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This is not simply the view of Christian historians who have a high opinion of the New Testament and its historical worth; it is the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hardcore atheists.” (Bart Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the DaVinci Code*)

Another scholar made this observation:

“Even though Jesus was on the periphery of the Roman Empire, we have as many earthly sources about his life and teaching as we have about activities and conversations of Tiberius, emperor



during Jesus's public activities...Jesus has more extended text about him, in generally closer proximity to his life, than his contemporary Tiberius, the most famous person in the then-known world." (Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*)

**o In order for the account to be believed the text has to be reliable**

No generation of Christians would ever have disputed this statement. This is the very reason these four books have been believed from the inception of the Church (while others were recognized as fake) by those who, more than anyone subsequently, were in the best position to accurately assess their reliability.

**o We do not know who wrote the gospels. They are anonymous.**

The fact that they were anonymously written is a strong point in their favor. It separates them, in a significant way, from the mass of faux "gospels" that appeared in the second and third centuries. The false gospels, because of their lack of intrinsic authority, had to misrepresent their authorship, claiming to be written by famous people of the past, like Peter, Philip, Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Judas, and others. The Christians of the second century spotted and exposed these fakes as soon as they appeared.

By contrast, the authors of the four canonical Gospels did not pretend to be anyone important, nor even identify themselves at all. They knew that their authorship was generally known to all of their original readers, since they regularly attended church together. Those in the communities where the authors ministered had accurate awareness of who wrote them, and, despite their anonymity, no one ever doubted or disputed their identities, nor falsely attributed them to more famous authors.

**o There are flagrant contradictions in the Bible.**

The word "flagrant" is misleading. It suggests that they contain glaring and embarrassing discrepancies of a sort that would cause historical scholars to treat their reliability with greater skepticism than that with which they would treat other documents. The opposite is true. Despite being independently-written accounts (which their interesting divergences from each other prove them to be), they are impressively agreeable with each other.

**o There have been additions to the Bible by the early church.**

This has been so exaggerated and misrepresented as to give the ignorant hearer a completely false impression. No documents that have been copied and re-copied thousands of times over 15 centuries have ever been preserved free from copyist errors and additions. There are exactly two places where significant additions are believed to have been inserted into some manuscripts. All textual scholars (and most ordinary biblically-literate Christian readers) know about these cases, so that they provide no impediment to our recognition of the original, or at least earliest, readings. While the 5,000 available Greek manuscripts combined do contain thousands of small, scribal errors, none of them raise the slightest doubt as to the meaning of any passage essential to our knowledge of any doctrine.

**The writers were "prone to superstition, already believing in the supernatural."**

In tying superstition to a belief in the supernatural, Reid assumes that an anti-supernaturalist worldview is self-evidently correct, though the first piece of evidence supporting this assumption remains to be discovered or presented.

“Believing in the supernatural” has historically been the default position of the human race in all ages, including our own, and is rejected only by a small minority of partisans of the historically recent anti-supernaturalist faith system. Thus, one needs more than this expression of sheer, unsupported prejudice to render his point impressive.

Belief in the supernatural is distinct, by definition, from superstition—since the latter can exist with or without a supernaturalist worldview. For example, Reid, lacking such a worldview, holds a superstitious (that is, irrational and lacking any connection with demonstrable reality) belief about the degree of gullibility among ancient Jews and Christians, and about the dishonesty of the latter. This superstition has been called “chronological snobbery”—the assumption that people in ancient societies did not possess reasoning skills equal to those of modern minds, and that modern philosophy is more enlightened than that of former generations. This widely-held superstition is easily disproved simply by reading the best thinkers of three-hundred years ago and comparing them with the rationality of the best thinkers of our day.

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***Additional claims and dialogue:***

**Complete truthfulness is “rarely the case with ancient texts.”**

I am not sure what this is intended to mean. Is it saying that ancient writers were not interested in being completely truthful? Or does it mean that, despite their best efforts, ancient writers simply did not know what they were talking about, and therefore fell short of producing completely reliable testimony? It is no doubt uncommon to find “complete truthfulness” in texts from any era, including our own. It is certainly not a characteristic of books written by modern atheist authors, whether this defect is deliberate or only from ignorance. We would be hard-pressed to say that ancient authors were less honest or less capable of telling the truth than those who write today’s literature.

**Usually they are stories and parables with some element of truth, but used to impart some sort of message, rather than an actual history book...**

The antecedent to the pronoun (“they”) at the beginning of this sentence appears to be the “ancient texts” of the previous sentence. No distinction between genres seems to be acknowledged in this naïve generality. There were various genres of literature in ancient times, just as there are today. Not all ancient writers wrote stories and parables, as this statement suggests. There are many ancient mythologies, to be sure, but there are also works of political and religious philosophy, law, national and political histories, sermons, hortatory speeches, and personal correspondence. All of these genres are found in modern, as well as ancient, literature, and most of them, with the probable exception of mythology, can be found in the documents collected into the Bible.

It is an irresponsible generality to say that “ancient literature” (any more than today’s) was more likely to be used to impart a message, rather than treating historical events. This is true of certain ancient books, as much as it is true of modern books. Think of the raft of “New Atheist” books that came out around 2006. Each was written in order to impart some “message” to the reader, and they played fast and loose when dealing with actual history. Much of the “history” they claimed to present was more legendary (i.e., the legendary conflict between Galileo and the Catholic Church). As recently as this week, those who listened to the presidential debate were treated to multiple inaccurate “historical” references. So, I guess we can say the same things about literature from all periods—some is strictly historical, while some has other agendas.

Despite the wide range of biblical genres, over half of the Bible is comprised of historical accounts. There is no reason to doubt that, when these authors wrote history, they were as capable of honesty or dishonesty as are their counterparts in any other era. There is, further, no reason to think, as the above claim suggests, that the canonical authors had only an interest in propagandizing their readers, at the expense of telling the truth. Such claims should be accompanied by evidence.

**“Supernatural claims, altered documents, mythology, other fanciful tales” are what we find in the Bible, upon which Christians’ belief in the resurrection is based.**

There would be nothing intrinsically damning against a book that contains the first two of these features— “supernatural claims” and “altered documents.” The question would have to be further explored whether the particular supernatural claims were accurate, and whether the alterations made in manuscript transmission create difficulties in knowing what the originals had said.

On the other hand, whether the Bible contains any mythology or fanciful (false) tales, or not, would have to be determined by a careful analysis of its contexts. Nothing presented by Reid resembles such an analysis, nor suggests that he would be interested in engaging in such. Why are we expected to accept his unsupported claims? It is his contention that the Bible is unreliable because its claims are (allegedly) unsupported?

**“The Bible is not a reliable text for the recording of the history of the region and the presumed resurrection of Jesus Christ...”**

Well, the question of whether the Bible is a reliable source for belief in the resurrection is the main point here under scrutiny. To affirm, without evidence, that “the Bible is not a reliable text for... the presumed resurrection of Jesus Christ” cannot be allowed as a premise into a debate over whether this is the case or not. That, until demonstrated, remains a brilliant example of begging the question.

As for the Bible’s reliability in accurately recording “the history of the region,” Reid’s claim does not seem to agree with the findings of archeologists and experts in the most relevant fields of study. Two centuries ago, a great number of historical reports in the Bible were doubted and scoffed at by the skeptics—until the archeologists did some digging around in the region. Reid did not provide any examples of an inaccurate historical statement in the Bible.

One might wish to consult those who are best informed concerning the continuous stream of modern discoveries, by which previously-doubted historical claims of the Bible have consistently been confirmed. Major individuals and entities mentioned in the Bible, whose existence was formerly doubted by critics have in modern times been confirmed to exist—including Belshazzar, Sargon II, King David, the Hittites, the Thessalonian politarchs, etc.

Yale Archaeologist, Millar Burrows (a non-evangelical) wrote:

"On the whole... archaeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the Scriptural record. More than one archaeologist has found his respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine." (Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones?*, p.1)

Archaeologist William F. Albright, Prof. Emeritus at Johns Hopkins University, has, for much of his career, been regarded as the world's greatest Orientologist. If, as Reid claims, the Bible “is not an accurate representation of the history off the region,” Professor Albright apparently did not get the memo. He wrote:

"There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition." (Wm. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religions of Israel*, p.176)

The principal concern in the present debate, however, is with the historical reliability of the Gospels, which Reid believes were not written with a mind to present true historical facts. Again, while Reid has presented no evidence for this proposition, those who have actually studied the subject have reached just the opposite conclusions. Most of the New Testament's historical information was recorded by Luke, who wrote both Luke and Acts. Here is what objective scholars (not ideologues) actually think about Luke as a historian:

"Readers with some knowledge of ancient history often have occasion to note Luke's careful writing...Luke is a consummate historian, to be ranged in his own right with the great writers of the Greeks." (E.M. Blaiklock, Professor of Classics, Auckland University)

"Luke should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." (Archaeologist, Sir William Ramsay, one-time skeptic of the reliability of Acts as history)

"Luke was an able and deliberate historian, writing more than one-fourth of the volume of the New Testament—more than any other man. Modern research has vindicated the quality of his work." (W.T. Dayton, Professor of Biblical Literature and Historical Theology)

It would be difficult to find a greater divergence between Reid's comment and the scholarly consensus on this point. Anyone who has cared to keep up with the state of discovery in these areas knows that the arguments that Reid and his sources keep recycling are shopworn, out of step with modern discovery, and obsolete. Most of them have been known to be invalid for a century or more.

As long ago as the 1970s, *Time Magazine* (a publication that has never been friendly to conservative Christianity) revealed to the public what scholars had long-since known. *Time* ran a cover story about critical challenges to the Bible and the state of present knowledge. The article's conclusion was fascinating:

"After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps the better for the siege. Even on the critics' own terms—historical fact—the Scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack." (*Time*—December 30, 1974)

**"The four Gospels are literally the only documents that claim there was a resurrection of Jesus, and these documents were copied from one another, and not entirely accurately..."**

All scholars know this to be false. In addition to the Gospels, we have the writings of Paul, some of which predate any of the four Gospels. Paul affirms the resurrection of Christ in Romans, Philippians and 1 Corinthians. Neither the authorship nor date of these books has been seriously challenged—even by skeptics like Bart Ehrman. In 1 Corinthians, written about A.D. 55, Paul lists (well within the lifetimes of the witnesses he names) many who saw the risen Christ. He says there were above 500 people who saw Him thus, and he mentions that the majority of them were still living when he wrote, though some of them, he acknowledged, were no longer alive to consult.

**The stories are myths, like those of Odin**

If so, not one step has been taken by Reid in an attempt to demonstrate this. It is certainly not what the authors, or their contemporary readers, thought, nor the view of modern scholarship. Unlike Odin, Christ's followers regarded Jesus to have been a historical character, who had lived very

recently in their own region, and whom many of their friends had known and interacted with. I would say that the Gospel stories have precisely nothing in common with the myths of Odin, whom no one ever claimed to have met, and who probably was never even believed to have been a historical figure.

### **Some people say an angel preserved Trump from being killed**

That would be someone's theological interpretation of a recent event. I have never heard anyone claim to have seen an angel there, and the event was witnessed by hundreds of witnesses who saw no angel. The degree of similarity to the Gospel accounts is easily calculable as exactly zero.

### **We don't know who wrote the Gospels, so if they were not eye-witnesses we cannot rely on them.**

Perhaps Reid and his ilk don't know who wrote the Gospels, though the first-century Christians obviously did. It is clear that Reid has put no effort (nor interest, apparently) into studying the question, which makes his admitted ignorance quite understandable.

Of course, even if the authors were not those whom we think they were, this does not itself justify the conclusion that they were not eye-witness, and even if they were not eye-witnesses, this does not mean we cannot rely on them. There is no logical connection between the parts of Reid's sentence. As I mentioned earlier, competent and honest historians do not have to be eye-witnesses in order to be reliable—and two of the traditional authors, admittedly, were not personally eye-witnesses, though their primary sources were. This invites the question, if Mark and Luke were not the real authors of the books attributed to them, as Reid implies, why didn't whoever came up with fake names for the authors choose some candidates who actually were impressive eye-witnesses?.

### **The writers were skillful in deceptive transmission of stories**

How can one who does not even claim to know who they were, claim to know their personal skill sets? Since we are not aware of any cases of their practicing such skillful deception, their alleged adeptness at it must remain a conjecture, at best. Even if they did possess such imagined skills, this does not mean that they ever had either motivation or occasion to practice such deception.

### **Luke was a tax-collector.**

Luke was a physician; Matthew was the tax-collector. We can give Reid a pass on this mistake, since he admitted to me, off camera, that Gospel scholarship is not in his wheelhouse. Who knew? He clearly mistook Luke for Matthew in this comment, which he made (I believe) twice during the debate. On the other hand, one who knows no more than this about the subject might refrain from making confident pronouncements about the Gospels while debating someone who actually cares enough about the subject to have spent a lifetime examining the relevant evidence. The modern internet debunkers of the Bible appear to be entirely unaware of the many hundreds, or thousands, of scholars who have spent their lives in the in-depth study of every conceivable issue in Gospel studies—nor how accessible their publications are to anyone interested in learning the truth of these matters.

### **"John didn't speak ancient Greek."**

I will admit that I heard Reid wrong when he claimed this, and I mistakenly thought that he had made this claim about Mark. He corrected me, but I misremembered and asserted that it was Mark

about which he had earlier said this. My bad. It makes no difference, however, to the validity of the claim, whether it is made about Mark or John, since there is no more reason to think this true of one than of the other.

The statement is simply out of touch with the universally acknowledged fact that koine Greek had become the primary language of the Empire by the edict Alexander the Great three-hundred years before Christ, and was known and spoken by most everyone in the formerly-Grecian (subsequently Roman) Empire.

Skeptics do not claim to know who John was, or even if he really existed, but they are quite sure that, whoever he was, he was the one man who did not speak the koine Greek that was common to virtually everyone in the Roman Empire in that time.

### **The Gospel of Mark, mistakenly “said that all Jews washed their hands before eating, but that wasn’t actually true in the area.”**

Mark said that “the Pharisees and all the Jews” practiced certain ceremonial washing habits. If Reid’s contention is that there were some Jews, somewhere, who neglected this Pharisaic practice, this ignores the frequent, legitimate, convention—both in scripture and in speech of every era (including our own)—of using “all” hyperbolically. It is known that Mark’s mother owned a house in Jerusalem, where he almost certainly grew up. He was thus a Jerusalem native. To find him ignorant of the local practices of his own people and his own religion would be very surprising indeed.

### **He also didn’t have a knowledge of the geography of the area.**

To such a charge I would say, “Prove it.” My opponent is certainly opposed to Christians making historical claims without sufficient “proof.” Yet, his entire debate contained little more than one alleged historical claim after another—like this one—none of which were accompanied by any “proof”—nor even the lower bar: “evidence” (because none exists).

### **Mark misunderstood the Hebrew scriptures.**

To qualify to make this judgment would seemingly require that one has studied the Hebrew scriptures, and personally understands them sufficiently to assess the correctness or incorrectness of another’s interpretation of them. I doubt that either Reid, or many of his sources, really command any such expertise on these scriptures.

While there are obviously many more-expert than myself, I have a pretty decent grasp of this subject, having conducted intensive and focused studies of both the Hebrew scriptures and of the New Testament for over fifty years, my assessment differs completely from Reid’s on this matter.

I do not doubt that Reid can find internet sources and self-proclaimed experts who agree that Mark misunderstood the Hebrew scriptures (though Reid has offered no evidence of this allegedly “historical” claim about Mark). Almost all Orthodox Jews would agree that the Christian interpretation of many of their prophetic scriptures is off-kilter, whether it be Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, Peter, or Paul whose treatment of the texts is being criticized.

One must not decide too hastily what the correct interpretation of the Hebrew prophets may be, since there was widespread disagreement among the rabbis themselves. The Jews have a saying, “Where there are three Jews, there are four opinions.” In order to credibly claim that another man is misunderstanding a passage of scripture, one must be prepared to provide one’s own superior exegesis of the passage, demonstrating that the true understanding contradicts the opinion of the

one criticized. Whether Reid, or his sources, are capable of even attempting such exegesis, we may never know. No attempt of any kind was made to provide any such demonstration in any passage.

**What if they weren't actually witnesses? "That destroys the whole credibility of the Bible. They were written by people in a religion with a motivation to make this religion surge and get greater and be appreciated."**

If the authors of the Gospels were not eye-witnesses (two of them, Mark and Luke, were not and no one ever claimed they were), this has no bearing on whether their records are correct. Almost all history books that we deem reliable were written by persons who did not live in the days of the people or events they record. Almost everything written by journalists, as well, is based upon the reports of witnesses. Few news reporters have been present to see most of what they report. Being an eye-witness is not a prerequisite for knowing something happened, and repeating it accurately. I myself can authoritatively relate stories about my parents' and grandparents' childhoods, though I am not the eye-witness behind any of the anecdotes.

Every claim that Reid made about the writing and transmission of the New Testament is something he hopes we will believe, though neither he himself nor his sources were around to see the process of writing or transmitting that they so confidently describe.

Two of the Gospels (Matthew and John) have been attributed, from their first appearance, to witnesses who were present for most of the events they recorded. Such first-hand authority is helpful, but not essential, to the credibility of their reports. People living very near the time of the life of Christ, like Papias, whose life probably overlapped the lifetime of John, gave us credible information not only of the authorship of some of the Gospels, but also some details of the circumstances of their writing. Is there a living skeptical scholar today who is in a better position to speak to these questions?

As for the motivations of the writers, Reid pretends to know these, while not even claiming to know who they were. If you don't even know who you are talking about, it becomes very dicey to psychoanalyze them and to declare their motivations. The writers themselves give every evidence of writing their narratives in order that their knowledge of events occurring in their time might be preserved for future generations. Any alternative theories as to their motives, floated by people who do not even claim to know who they were, must stand on the shakiest of ground.

**"These are based on oral stories. It's not as if they sat down and wrote a book." They were "tales, and stories, and scraps of manuscripts and documents" that people had "found," and they later turned into a book.**

This is certainly not the opinion of any credible Bible scholars I have heard of. I would like to see the evidence for this "historical" claim. I think my opponent has read, much too hastily, certain skeptical websites, and mistaken much of what they said. Skeptics certainly would say (and so would Christians) that the stories in the Gospels were recited orally for years before they were written in the four books we now possess. Luke, of course, mentions earlier written accounts available to him. If any man were to write the very first biography about any given person, he would have to base much of what he writes upon material that had not previously been written (someone has to be the first to write things down). The facts and anecdotes of such a book would have been gleaned from a variety of public records, interviews with friends, associates and family members of the subject, etc. Yet, when the book was written, it would be absurd to say that no one sat down and wrote it as a book.

**“It seems that they found these documents, attributed them to these people, but have no real way of saying who wrote them at all.”**

Of all the biblical scholars I have read (I have been reading them steadily for 50 years), I have never encountered one (even among the non-Christian ones) who ever thought the Gospel writings were simply “found” somewhere and arbitrarily assigned to certain authors for no reason. If there is anyone in this debate making up unsupported historical claims, it would have to be anyone asserting this absurdity as if it were fact.

**“You’re saying we should take this as a history book that someone sat down and wrote as a history, and that’s not what it is. That’s not how historians treat it. It’s treated as a religious text.”**

How any given historian may take such books is his own individual preference. Most scholars, while recognizing that the Gospels contain information relevant to the Christian faith (and that they are, thus, “religious”), do not discount their character as written historical documents. It is one of the most unusual strengths of Christianity that it is based on historically testable event claims. This is not the case with the Koran, the Upanishads, Buddhist texts, etc.

Assuming these historical events actually occurred (a thing never once disproven—and not intrinsically unlikely) it would be hoped that the historical records would form a basis for belief in, and sympathy with, the main hero in the stories. If that character was also a prophet, messiah, or divine person, this would thus render his biography, both historically accurate and “a religious text” to those who shaped their religious views upon the historical facts recorded.

This cannot be counted as a criticism of the document until one has found some evidence that the recorded historical events did not occur. This cannot intelligently be done by making the vacuous claim that their writers were not purporting to record history (one only needs to read them to disabuse oneself of this notion), nor that they were not the writers to whom the works were universally attributed from the time of their first appearances. Obviously, any man can say, “I doubt it,” when confronted by any proposition. However, a skeptic’s personal doubts do not translate into “evidence” against the universally held view.

Speaking of “evidence,” Simon Greenleaf, the founder of Harvard Law School, and the author of its principal text on the “Rules of Evidence,” did an analysis of the Gospels. Having done so, he wrote:

“The presumption of law is the judgment of charity. It presumes that every man is innocent until he is proven guilty, that everything has been done fairly and legally until it is proved to have been otherwise, and that every document found in its proper repository and not bearing marks of forgery is genuine. Now, this is precisely the case with the sacred writings. If any document concerning our public rights were lost, copies which have been as universally received and acted upon as the four Gospels have been would have been received in evidence in any of our courts of justice without the slightest hesitation...When we have this degree of evidence, it is unreasonable to require more. A juror would violate his oath, if he should refuse to acquit or condemn a person charged with an offense, where this measure of proof was adduced.” (S. Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists*)

Another lawyer and biblical scholar, Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, wrote:

“...historical and literary scholarship continues to follow Aristotle’s dictum that the benefit of



the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself. This means that one must listen to the claims of the document under analysis, and not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualifies himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies... Careful comparison of the New Testament documents with inscriptions and other independent early evidence has in the modern period confirmed their primary claims." (J. W. Montgomery, *History and Christianity*).

**We don't treat [Luke] like we treat a history book—like if somebody writes the Koran, we don't treat that like a history book. It's not a book of history, because it's governed by the religion which is governed by the propaganda that comes with the religion. There's no getting away from that. That's just religious beliefs. They put in the books what they would like the world to see. That's just the way they operate."**

Reid seems to be claiming for himself some knowledge about these writings and the motivations of their writers—as well as the genetic relation between the documents and the religions with which they are associated. The validity of his claim is far from self-evident, and not supported by any evidence. Why should we impute to it any credibility?

I do not think that the Koran was based upon the beliefs of the Muslim religion. It seems as likely, historically, that the Muslim religion was based upon the Koran. It is the same as the chicken and the egg problem.

I am not sure that even the Muslims treat the Koran as principally a historical book, so there is little reason for anyone else to do so. I am no expert in the contents of the Koran, but from what I have gathered, it is not so much about history as it is about law and theology. There are stories there of the life of Mohammed, which may contain some historical facts.

Much of the Bible is likewise not historical records. The largest book in it consists of prayers and poems. Some of its books are practical philosophy, while many of them are prophetic. In the New Testament, most of the books are simply personal correspondence, in which historical or biographical stories are not prominently featured. These are primarily concerned with morality, church management and theology. Some of the books in the Bible purport to be historical narratives—and those which do so have never been found to err, which is why they are to this day regarded as generally reliable even by the best educated readers. Some of the historical events recorded in them can and will never be verified by external historical research (especially records of private conversations of which no other record was ever made). But the narratives have been a reliable source of an abundance of information about geography and history which has been confirmed by archaeology and other ancient historians, and relied upon by explorations in non-biblical fields.

It is a partisan claim (not a fact) that the books of the Bible were governed by the propaganda of their respective religions (Judaism and Christianity). According to their writers, their beliefs were influenced by the historical events, rather than *vice versa*. The best evidence supports this scenario. To deny it is simply to express an ideological preference without evidence.

**The "zombie apocalypse" [of Matthew 27:52-53] is something a historian should have written down.**

This incident has garnered much interest with skeptics—possibly because the "zombie fiction" genre is so popular with the youngest generations today. First, of course, there is no "zombie" element in

this story, any more than there is in the story of Lazarus or Jairus' daughter being restored to life. Zombies are, by definition, dead. These raised people had become alive again, in the precise sense that you and I are alive today.

I am not sure why this particular account of revivification of dead folks would be so frequently mentioned by skeptics as if it had no parallels. It is true that Matthew alone records this instance of the dead being raised. However, John alone tells the story of Lazarus (ch.11), the raising of the son of the widow in the town off Nain is recorded only in Luke (ch.7). The raising of Jairus' daughter is found three Gospels—Matthew (ch.9), Mark (ch.5) and Luke (ch.8).

It is evident that all the authors knew of dead people who had been raised by Jesus, and there is good reason to believe that all the authors were familiar with all these cases we know about. So why did they not all record every case? I can't see why they would. In fact, they may have known of numerous other cases about which they tell us nothing. No Gospel author set out to record everything Jesus did—not even every remarkable thing.

For example, the four Gospels, combined, record the events of about 39 separate days in the life of Jesus. These 39 days were spread over a period of about three years. Certainly, in a period of this length, the events of more days could have been recorded. In addition to the specific events of these few days, we have multiple summary statements about Jesus making extensive itineraries—e.g., in Galilee (Matthew 4:23; 15:29-31), Decapolis (Mark 7:31) and Perea (Matt.19:1)—during which, He performed many additional unspecified miracles—apparently too many for one author to attempt to record. John summarizes his book by saying:

*“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name”* (John 20:30-31).

He also says:

*And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.* (John 21:25)

Clearly, it was not the intention of the authors to provide a comprehensive encyclopedia of the miracles of Jesus. They knew of many others, which they did not record. Each one included only a sampling (perhaps his own personal favorites) sufficient to make his point—namely, that Jesus proved who He was by confirmatory miracles.

Those today who say that He did not do these thing ought to tell us how they know such things, and why those who lived with Him mistakenly believed that He did them.

### **Testimonium Flavius. A “proven forgery inserted by Christians.”**

In the writings of the Jewish (non-Christian) historian Flavius Josephus, who was born in Jerusalem during the early apostolic times, there is a passage that speaks briefly of Jesus (*Antiquities*, xviii:3:3). This paragraph is sometimes called the *Testimonium Flavianum* (or “*the Testimony of Flavius*”).

As it stands, it appears to confirm that Jesus was the Messiah, that He did many marvelous works, that He was seen again alive after He had died, and that He fulfilled many Jewish prophecies. These are distinctly Christian affirmations about Jesus. This has led many to say that Josephus, who was not a Christian, could not have written the passage. It is suggested (even asserted, by some) that some Christian in the third or fourth century must have interpolated it into Josephus' text.

However, there is no textual proof that the passage, as a whole, is a Christian interpolation. It is true that the text, as we have it from late manuscripts, seems unlikely to have been written by a non-Christian writer. However, more than one explanation exists to be considered. Anyone who says that Christian forgery has been “proven” here is simply demonstrating the limitations of his own research and of his knowledge concerning the state of scholarly debate on the case. For those wishing to research this further, I provide the following link: <https://www.josephus.org/testimonium.htm>

As it stands, the passage reads as follows (I have underlined the portions that raise suspicions):

*“And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvelous deeds, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks. This man was the Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross. . . those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him: and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.”*  
(*Antiquities*, xviii:3:3)

Though this pericope contains very Christian-sounding elements, scholars have noted that it also uses certain terminology which Christian writers would not be expected to use—such as referring to Christ as “a wise man,” referring to Jesus “leading away” (i.e., leading *astray*) many Jews, and referring to Christians as a “tribe.” These are seemingly un-Christian verbal choices.

Therefore, we cannot assert that it is a Christian author who wrote the passage, since the same kind of evidence that suggests it was not written in its present form by Josephus (i.e., it *sounds like* something an unbeliever would not write) equally tells against a Christian writing it (it *doesn't sound like* something a Christian would write)! This raises serious questions about the theory of a Christian interpolation to the text.

One theory that is believed by many scholars, both Christian and otherwise, is that the passage is original in its basic content, but that a copyist, whether deliberately or by accident, omitted a word or phrase here and there—like the phrase “*it is claimed*” (meaning by Christians), or “*reportedly*.” Also, the Greek word “*truth*” (*Gr. alethe*) is very similar in appearance to the word “*strange things*” (*aethe*), lacking only the letter *lambda*, and may easily have been mis-copied. It requires only a couple of textual corruptions of this sort to account for the present “Christian” appearance and form of an originally non-Christian passage.

The original passage, before the accidental omissions, might then have read as follows:

*“And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man [this quip may have been added sarcastically]; for he was a doer of marvelous deeds, a teacher of men who receive [strange things] with pleasure. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks. This man was [reportedly] the Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross. . . those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he [reportedly] appeared to them on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him: and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.”*

In 1972 Schlomo Pines, a non-Christian Jewish expert in many ancient Middle Eastern languages, discovered a 10th century translation of Josephus' *Antiquities* written in Arabic by a Melkite historian Agapius. It appears not to have suffered the scribal corruptions of all the Greek

manuscripts that have been handed down through the Western Church. Here's how it reads as translated by Pines into English:

*"At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. Many people among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have reported wonders. And the tribe of the Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day."*

If, as some scholars believe, this preserves a more accurate version of the passage in question, it removes all questions of Christian tampering. In any case Christians place no dependence upon Josephus for their belief in the resurrection of Christ. What the passage seems to support is that Josephus, in the first century, knew of the story of Jesus—perhaps as told by the earliest Christians, and had no problem accepting it as a genuine anecdote in Jewish Antiquities. That Josephus did in fact know about Jesus' existence, and of His reputation for being the Messiah is beyond reasonable dispute, since he mentioned in an entirely different place that James (to whom the Book of James is ascribed) was "the brother of Jesus, the so called Messiah." Here is that passage:

*". . .so [Ananus, the high priest] assembled a council of judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Messiah, whose name was James, together with some others, and having accused them as law-breakers, he delivered them over to be stoned." (Antiquities, xx:9:1)*

While the *Testimonium Flavianum* might (tenuously) be said to have relied on the New Testament for its source, the same cannot be said for this second passage, since, though the New Testament mentions Jesus having a brother James, it never mentions any circumstances of his death. Josephus apparently had his own independent sources for his knowledge of "*Jesus, the so-called Messiah.*"

### **Many Jews didn't believe that the resurrection happened.**

True, conspiracy theories, in place of facts, have always been popular—especially among those who find the facts to be unacceptable to their religious or philosophical commitments. The Bible says that the common belief among many Jews was that the disciples stole the body of Jesus. What no one has yet been able to do is present a credible case that they would have either the ability or the incentive to do this, and to permanently conceal that they had done so. If they did such a thing, they were apparently unaware of it, and were convinced, unto their deaths, that Jesus had actually risen.

It is not surprising that those enemies who had not seen Christ risen, would disbelieve that it happened. For example, look how easily Reid, without any grounds whatsoever, disbelieves it. The fact that many Jews rejected this belief demonstrates that the ancient Jews were not as quick to embrace strange, supernatural claims as the skeptics usually claim about them. Even the apostles did not believe in the resurrection, when the women first reported it. When they were later convinced, by His multiple appearances to them, they became immovable in their convictions.

What is remarkable is the number of the Jews who *did believe* Jesus rose from the dead—a number exceeding five thousand within a few days of its first being proclaimed in Jerusalem. There is no need to explain why so many people would *not believe* such an astonishing account. What requires rational explanation is how it was that so many formerly-skeptical and hostile Jews came to change

their minds and to fully embrace that an itinerant, peasant preacher, who had so recently been crucified and buried before their eyes.

### **Sorcerer and magician. Reid seemed to think “sorcery” meant something like “unholy” or “blasphemy.”**

At one point, I mentioned that even the unbelieving Jews admitted that Jesus did supernatural deeds. However, they interpreted them as “magic” of Satan and not “miracles” of God. I mentioned that this was essentially the same accusation the Pharisees made against Him, recorded in Matthew 12:24 (cf., John 8:48). Reid seemed to doubt that the Jews accused Jesus of doing magic, so I alluded to the Talmud, which says:

*“On the eve of Passover, Jesus the Nazarene was hanged and a herald went forth before him forty days heralding, Jesus the Nazarene is going forth to be stoned **because he practiced sorcery and instigated and seduced Israel to idolatry.** Whoever knows anything in defense may come and state it.’ But since they did not find anything in his defense they hanged him on the eve of Passover.”*  
(Sanhedrin 43a)

Strangely, Reid kept challenging me on the claim that Jesus was accused of doing “magic.” He did not deny that they accused Him of “sorcery,” but he pretended not to know that sorcery and magic are synonyms. He implied, rather, that sorcery refers to “being unholy,” or, perhaps, to “blasphemy.”

Reid correctly pointed out that sorcery was not actually the charge that was officially brought against Him in the Jewish courts, and that Jesus was charged, rather, with claiming to be the Messiah. This I gladly acknowledged, and had not said that this was the charge they brought against Him in court. What I said was that this is the charge the Jews brought against Him in the Talmud. The Talmudic passage also says other false things—like that Jesus was arrested forty days before they crucified Him, and that they originally intended to stone Him. We know these points are false. Reid knew that Jesus was not charged in court with the crimes recorded in the Talmud, but (I pointed out) the reason he knew this was only because the Gospels tell us so. Reid was inadvertently assuming the Gospels were historically accurate—at least in their disagreement with the Talmud on this point.

### ***Thar be (pet) dragons?***

The interchange about pet dragons took me by surprise, and I was not able to formulate a very well-considered answer on the spot. If I had been given a few minutes to analyze the question, I could have done better. Reid asked what evidence I would need in order to believe a claim that he had a pet dragon. This was intended to illustrate the skeptics’ oft-repeated dictum: *“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.”*

In view of the fact that *supernaturalism* has been the default worldview of almost the whole human race—including modern, highly-educated, living specimens—it must be recognized that *Naturalism* (i.e., *anti-Supernaturalism*) is the more extraordinary claim, requiring extraordinary proof.

Naturalism is highly counter-intuitive. No unbiased, thinking person possessing modern knowledge would instinctively imagine it probable: a) that matter arises from nothing at all; b) that life arises spontaneously from dead chemicals; c) that an existing, self-replicating cell would ever develop into a conscious organism of millions of diversified cells; d) that coded information exceeding the complexity of that found in the complete Encyclopedia Britannica (i.e., the instructions in every DNA molecule) was programmed without intelligent design; e) that brains, capable of

contemplating philosophical questions irrelevant to survival, would self-develop through natural selection; or f) that a universe without meaning would spontaneously generate creatures obsessed with meaning.

To accept such extraordinary beliefs should require confirmatory evidence of a very impressive quality. We still await such evidence. In the meantime, we reasonably doubt these things.

To illustrate the point of extraordinary claims needing extraordinary evidence, Reid gave the following example (paraphrasing here): *"If I told you I had a pet dog, you might believe me without requiring any evidence. On the other hand, if I told you I had a pet dragon, you would naturally be skeptical and require some impressive evidence. The bar would be higher still if I said I had a pet angel."*

Right up front, I can say I would reject, upon any conceivable evidence, that someone had a pet angel, since, although the existence of angels cannot be disproven, they simply are not available as pets. That is not the relationship they bear to man.

It is a different matter with a "dragon," however. It depends on what it is one is referring to as a "dragon." Legends of dragons (probably actually referring to what we would today call "dinosaurs") are abundant in the cultural lore of many societies around the world. Such have been portrayed in ancient cave drawings, architecture, and ceramic figurines. Not a few modern people have claimed to have seen such creatures. I do not profess to know, prior to investigation, what the truth value of any such claims may be.

I might wonder what it is that is actually being identified as a "pet dragon." I once held in my hands a living "water dragon" which I caught on a trail in Byron Bay, Australia. Had it not been illegal, I would gladly have kept it as a pet. If dinosaurs ("terrible lizards")/dragons refer only to very large reptiles, many people today have had them as pets. A zookeeper might tell me that he cares for a Komodo dragon, and I would not find this incredible. A friend of mine, for many years, had a smaller version of this very creature—a large monitor lizard—for many years. Ancients might readily have spoken off such a beast as a "dragon."

Since we have fossil evidence even of winged pterosaurs, and monstrous sea reptiles, the suggestion that all legends of dragons are groundless would seem a mere prejudice on our part. For thousands of years, no European knew of the existence of Komodo dragons. For all any of us knows, there may be as-yet-undiscovered, large reptiles to be discovered in unexplored jungles, or swim in unexplored seas. Without a more exact definition, if someone told me that he had a pet dragon, I would not immediately discount the claim, though I would eagerly wish to see it, if possible. Although I have never seen a twelve-foot-long Komodo dragon, a twenty-foot-long crocodile or a thirty-foot-long Anaconda, I do not doubt their existence, nor the existence of other possibly unknown fauna of a similar type on this planet.

If Reid told me, "I am not talking about Komodo dragons, but winged, fire-breathing dragons," then I would have to say that I highly doubt the existence of such, and know of no credible reports of anyone encountering such. Reports such as that of St. George and the dragon may be true—even if the features of the dragon were exaggerated. There is no reason to credit such details as flying and fire-breathing into the legends. Look up images of this duo, and you will find that most depict the dragon as no larger than a Nile monitor lizard.

If the possibility of one's having seen a dragon is compared to the claim of seeing a man risen from the dead, I would have to say that neither is so uniquely extraordinary, in terms of frequency of similar historical claims. To me such would require no more extraordinary evidence than the extraordinary claim, say, that a twenty-year old youth, determined to conquer the Persian World, accomplished this in twelve years' time. It is an extraordinary thing, but, not knowing such to be impossible, I would require only good, reliable witnesses to convince me of it.

Unlike many skeptics, I do not discount out-of-hand the credible reports of honest people who have been in the proper place, at the proper time, to have seen the events to which they bear witness. The fact that there have been numerous (probably thousands) of modern-day cases of clinically-dead people being resuscitated—either spontaneously or artificially—in hospitals, renders any honest claim of one having seen a man come back from the dead not innately incredible. I have close personal knowledge of one case, and have credible reports of a couple of others.

I would also be more willing to believe that someone had a "pet dragon" if that person lived, explored, or worked in a field where unusual beasts have been commonly reported and might possibly be found. This is because the particular claim fits the context of the person's real life who is asserting it. If some ordinary man, otherwise unknown to me, simply told me that his wife had risen from the dead three days after her burial, I admit that I would regard his claim with a high degree of skepticism. But take the case of a man who appears at a particular time and place in history, coming through the distinct lineage, of one having been foretold by reliable prophets. Suppose that this man, did the very miracles that the prophets had foretold of him, so that He Himself raised others from the dead and predicted His own death and resurrection, as well. Suppose there suddenly arose a report among those who followed Him that his resurrection had happened just as He predicted it would, and was witnessed by many. I would consider such a claim in the context of this man's whole story, not in a vacuum. I would think the claim to be very plausible and fitting under these unique circumstances. I would then require extraordinary evidence to believe that all these people were liars—especially if dishonesty was one thing expressly forbidden by the religion for which they gave up their possessions and their lives.

When Christians bring up, as evidence, the martyrdom of the witnesses, the unthinking response of the skeptic is often, "Yeah, well people of many religions are foolish enough to die for their beliefs. This does not make them true."

While many Christians and non-Christians have died for "beliefs," which they acquired at second-hand, the men to whom I refer were not killed for their beliefs, but for their "testimony"—meaning what they "witnessed." One who dies for his beliefs may well die in a state of delusion. However, when dozens of men endure torture and die claiming to have seen, heard, and touched something, the likelihood of their being deluded seems much less than the likelihood of the skeptic's being deluded about the matter.

Unique and surprising events occur every day, and we are not always there to see them when they happen. Some of them occur in ways that are hard to explain other than to call them miracles, whether they actually involve supernatural intervention or not.

When I hear of such things (i.e., a Canadian friend's highway accident where his car was run over by a tractor-trailer truck, leaving every inch of the car squished flat, except for the driver's seat where he remained sitting unharmed), I think, "That's extraordinary!" The question of its demanding extraordinary evidence has little to do with whether it is a commonplace event, whether I observed

it myself, or whether I think the event to be repeatable for demonstration, like a laboratory experiment. I believe that story because the witness is credible (in that particular instance, I also saw the newspaper photograph—but believed my friend prior to seeing that proof).

If a given miracle were to occur, it would presumably be unrepeatable, like most events. As with any historical occurrence, the best evidence for an unrepeatable occurrence would be to have seen it oneself, or else to have an impeccable witness. Such a witness is one who is honest, an expert on the facts, and competent to testify. Such are those who wrote the Gospel accounts, and the community of which they were a part, so far as we can ascertain from available reports.

### ***The Texas Sharpshooter analogy (fallacy)***

*(This refers to the drawing of a conclusion by consideration of favorable data, while ignoring contrary data—as when a Texan shoots wildly at the side of a barn, and then draws a target on the wall encompassing the tightest group of bullet holes, and concluding that he is, indeed, a skilled sharp-shooter!).*

Reid compared the evidence garnered from answered prayer to this phenomenon. Most Christians will concur that not all of their prayers have been answered, but that some, remarkably, have been. The criticism is that this is drawing the target, after the fact, around a cluster of cases when prayers seem to have been answered, while ignoring the (probably numerous) instances when prayers were not answered.

If some have followed this method of reasoning about their prayers, I have not become aware of them. My own process is quite different. I begin with the biblical teaching about prayer, and examine my experience in the matter, discovering it to be true, and predictable in terms of the teaching.

It is not a scientific process, and no one should imagine it to be. There is no universal cause-and-effect element in the biblical teaching of prayer as there is with a vending machine. Prayer is, instead, a relational phenomenon. While many shallow readers of scripture conclude wrongly, from a few verses taken out of context, that God promises to answer every request we present to Him, the actual teaching on the subject is more nuanced.

The Bible teaches that prayers may not be answered due to a number of factors. For example, they must be requests directed to God by one of His actual children, offered in unwavering faith and in accordance with His will. They must be unselfish and offered in the name (that is, in the interests) of Jesus Christ, by one authorized by Him to approach God. Many prayers are clearly disqualified on one or more of these grounds. To the skeptic, his may seem like special pleading, but it is what the Bible teaches on the subject.

Unlike the thinking of many religious people, the Bible in no sense presents God as a genie in a lamp, who is obligated to grant our wishes. The teaching of Christ and the apostles is the opposite of this. God is a King to be revered and obeyed, but He is also a Father to all who love Him. Prayers to God are analogous to requests made by a child to his father. The foundational assumption is that a father loves his children and is eager to aid or assist them. He provides for their needs as he wisely assesses them, though not necessarily as the child imagines them.

A father routinely meets the real needs of his children, whether they ask or not, but they are entitled to make special requests for special circumstances. The wise child knows that the father has the superior understanding of all situations, and possesses the prerogative of vetoing any request in which He sees dangers or disadvantages, either to the child or to the whole family agenda.



I was raised in a home like this. My father, eager to please, granted many of my special requests in addition to providing all my real needs on a daily basis. He also saw some things I requested as ill-advised to grant, and often exercised his legitimate and compassionate right of veto.

While we might prefer to be in the position of control with reference to prayer, this is not the arrangement that God has made with man. Jesus taught us to pray to God as *"Our Father,"* and to be concerned that *"Your will be done..."* Jesus Himself prayed, *"Not my will, but yours be done,"* and had His specific request denied. Paul also found his request denied, but was pleased to have God's will done instead (2 Cor.12).

We may also present requests according to our own wishes, but we expect God only to grant those which He knows to be wise and good. This means that we expect Him to grant some, but not all requests. When we put this into practice, we find it to be true.

But the skeptic will say, "If not all prayers are answered, then those that appear to be answered do not indicate anything about the reality of God answering prayer. So long as you can excuse every failed experiment with 'It was not the will of God,' or 'God must not have thought this would be best for me,' the possibility of different outcomes renders the experiment meaningless."

Not exactly. I do not approach prayer as an "experiment" to "prove" some theory of mine. I approach it as a feature of my relationship with God, to whom I can bring legitimate requests, as to a loving father.

Suppose a boy tells his friend, "My dad has been stationed overseas since I was born, and I have never seen him. However, my mom says that he cares about me and provides all we need. I can ask my dad for lots of stuff, and, if he sees it as a good thing, he generally sends it to me." If the boy's friend says, "I don't believe you, let's conduct an experiment. You send him an email right now, asking him for a new skateboard, to prove your statement." The first boy might, very reasonably, say, "This is not a testable theory, and I have no need to prove my statement. Any provision is ultimately based upon my father's will, not mine, and it is not predictable like some scientific experiment. Relationships are not explored or lived under laboratory conditions. They exist and function on their own interpersonal terms, and proving this to you is no concern of mine."

Even if the boy's requests were frequently denied him by his father, this provides no confirmation or disconfirmation of his belief in his father's intervention whenever it does occur. If the boy asks his father to give him a certain, specific game system for his birthday, and he receives it on that day, he would be foolish to mistake this for a coincidence. If he were then to ask for a particular bicycle for Christmas, and he received it, this would be additional confirmation that it was his father who was providing these special things on those occasions. It would not matter how many of his requests were not granted, if there were hundreds of such specific answers of this kind throughout his childhood, even though it was not the result of any experiment, the boy would have very good reason to believe that he had a loving father who was providing these requested things. He would also reasonably conclude that the provision of his routine, unspectacular needs, day by day, were, as his mother said, also coming from the considerateness of the same benefactor. The boy could prove no hard and fast rule to his friend about this matter, but he would be fully justified in his beliefs about the matter.

That some prayers do not get the results we desired does not disprove the general truth that God answers prayer, just as that doctrine of the survival of the fittest is not disproved by the fact that occasionally a superior specimen may die before a particular less-fit specimen does. Such may be

due to unfortunate accidents, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or even missing an advantage in a fight with a weaker opponent. In general, and on average, the fittest specimens do survive better than do less-fit. Exceptions to the rule do not nullify that fact.

**“In a court of law you cannot present hearsay evidence.”**

This is true, though I am not pleading in a court of law. Reid said (paraphrasing): “If you testify in court that you heard someone say such and such, your testimony will be rejected by the court.” Fair enough. I will never do so.

By the way, no man is required to abide by the high bar of proof required in a court of law in deciding matters of personal conviction. Everything that we know regarding anything that ever happened outside of our sphere of personal observation (e.g., in realms of history, geography, microbiology, quantum physics, deep-space astronomy, etc.) we know only by hearsay. And there is nothing wrong with this. Not everything we need to know is verifiable by the methods of courtroom justice or the experimental laboratory.

The analogy of the courtroom, however applicable, is being skewed in Reid’s criticism. The judge hears the case and the witness testifies. Reid mistook me for the witness and himself for the judge. This is not the state of affairs that actually exists. In my mind, Reid and I are both the judges, and the witnesses are the authors of the Gospels and original witnesses. With many of them, their testimony is not, “I heard someone say that Jesus rose from the dead.” Even if they did say this, we might not rule out the truthfulness of the report they heard, depending on the quality of their sources. The early church was listening to the witnesses who said, “We saw this with our own eyes”—and we can listen to those same witnesses. This is, in fact, the kind of evidence that courts of law desire to hear, and the kind we hear in the Bible.

Reid was thinking that I was the witness expecting him (the judge) to take my word, concerning a matter I did not witness but have thoroughly investigated. This is not my position. My position is that each of us must judge the matter for himself. Fortunately for us, if we choose to make such an inquiry, we have reputable witnesses who were themselves “at the scene of the crime,” so to speak. We can listen to them or ignore them. But the choice to simply ignore them disqualifies us from making any respectable judgments as to the merits of their case.

**Inference to the best conclusion**

Throughout the debate, Reid repeatedly used the expression, “We don’t know with certainty...” to which I reply: We believe many things (most things, actually) without grounds for absolute certainty. This is what honest scientists acknowledge. Any theories presently accepted might someday be proven wrong, just as many earlier theories have been. In lieu of absolute proof, scientists reach very many of their conclusions (as do all rational people) by what they call “inference to the best conclusion.”

If absolute certainty, in the nature of the case, cannot be had, we must satisfy ourselves either with a mental void (not a luxury many people feel they have concerning matters of ultimate meaning, purpose and destiny) or with whatever can most reasonably be inferred by all the available evidence. In our case, all the evidence is on the side of the resurrection of Christ, while all opposing positions seem to be based on mere skepticism arising from prejudicial, ungrounded assumptions (i.e., *naturalism*).

Good evidence for the resurrection of Christ exists in the records of the four Gospels, and elsewhere. The response given by my opponent is, "We cannot trust these records." This is obviously the view of anyone who denies the resurrection. However, rational reasons for disbelieving them have not been forthcoming.

It is claimed that no historical verification exists outside the Gospels for their validity. However, when each Gospel is assessed individually, this is not the case. Each Gospel enjoys the corroboration of three other contemporary, historical documents for its main narrative. We have no better historiographic evidence for the life and times of any historical character that this. What more can reasonably be required?

In addition to the testimony of the four Gospels, we have agreeable written evidence from multiple sources, including Paul and Peter, for the resurrection. The second generation of the Christians, who also knew the apostles, also provide confirmation of key details. The very existence of Christianity as a phenomenon, first verified in pagan Roman documents telling of Christians being in Rome in the time of Claudius (A.D. 50), is very significant. How does a stupendously fake story of a resurrected man come to be believed by skeptical people throughout the Mediterranean World within twenty years of that man's lifetime?

There is the other fact, inconvenient to the skeptic, that the tomb where the dead body of Jesus was interred was found to be empty a few days after the burial. This is not a question of faith but of undisputed fact. That Jesus died by crucifixion is a matter of universal agreement among historians. That His body, after burial disappeared is the inescapable conclusion reached from the fact that those most willing to disprove the Christian message could easily have done so, were the corpse of Christ discoverable at the time. Without an actual empty tomb, the Christian message would have been aborted before its birth, and no one today would ever have heard of Jesus of Nazareth.

All the explanations of how the body became unavailable, so soon after its burial, fail—except for the obvious one, attested by all the evidence. The theory of the misidentification of the tomb by the women shipwrecks on the fact that they were not the only people who investigated it. Since the tomb belonged to a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, it would have been easy enough for the Jews to locate the correct tomb, even if the first witnesses had been mistaken about the location.

All theories involving the theft of the body suffer from fatal flaws, since, if the body was stolen by Jews, Romans, or other hostile parties, those persons would quickly have presented the body in evidence as soon as the disciples began talking nonsense about the resurrection. On the other hand, if one suspects the disciples of the theft, one needs to credibly suggest both motive and opportunity, as well as explaining their consistent behavior for the rest of their lives after the event.

To the unbiased, no alternative explanation of the empty tomb can be found that is as reasonable as the one which says that a man whose life had been characterized by supernatural phenomena, and who predicted that He would rise from the dead, actually did so, thus vacating the tomb.

Reid compares this story (and, probably, other miraculous stories about Jesus) to the development of myths and legends about other important characters, but there is no known parallel to such myths growing up about a man during the lifetime of his contemporaries. Alexander the Great was a most amazing man, worshipped by many as a god. Eventually, myths arose about him doing miraculous things. His real accomplishments were truly astonishing, providing just the kind of soil in which legends readily grow. Yet it was over two-hundred years, after his death, that myths about the miraculous arose around him.

By contrast, Jesus was an obscure Jewish peasant, having no international recognition, no armies, and (initially) no important followers. His life was witnessed within the confines of a single small country the size of New Jersey. Yet, somehow, practically before the blood on the cross had dried, there were thousands of people, in the very venue of His death and burial, who counterintuitively believed that He had risen from the dead. In the history of Jewish legends about their greatest leaders such a claim was entirely unique. Jews never claimed such things for Abraham, Moses, David, or any prophet in Israel. The followers of the many false Messiahs of the time never made such claims for any of their slain heroes. It was not a characteristically Jewish story line.

There was simply not sufficient time between the crucifixion and the reports of the resurrection to account for the development of the latter as a myth. Even unbelieving scholars have affirmed the very early origins of the resurrection story. Gerd Lüdemann, of the University of Göttingen, Germany, is an atheist, who believed that post-resurrection appearance to Peter was a guilt-induced hallucination. He wrote, in 1994:

“The elements in the [resurrection] tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus...not later than three years...the formation of the appearance traditions mentioned in 1 Cor.15:3-8 falls into the time between 30 and 33 CE.” (Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology*)

The scholar who wrote this assessment has received high praise from Bart Ehrman, who said of Lüdemann: “*He is a major figure in scholarship and is noteworthy for not being a Christian.*” Lüdemann and Ehrman clearly did not accept Reid’s theory that the reports of Christ’s resurrection represent a late-developing myth.

In any case, there are numerous physical and historical realities that call for explanation, for which none exists as good as the thesis that Jesus arose from the dead. There is irony in the fact that Reid, and all skeptics like him, criticize a belief for which impressive evidence exists, while proposing as a substitute one for which no evidence of any kind exists. One may fairly say, “I do not believe your view because I am not impressed with the mass of evidence that you present.” A reasonable rejoinder would be: “That is your prerogative, of course. However, I prefer to believe that for which evidence that you find unimpressive exists, rather than to take a position like yours, which rests on no evidence whatsoever, other than prejudice.” Some prefer a reasonably-grounded faith while others prefer gratuitous skepticism. To each his own.