

**A PHILOSOPHICAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS  
OF WILLIAM LANE CRAIG'S RESURRECTION  
OF JESUS ARGUMENT**

**Raphael Lataster**

*William Lane Craig is a prolific Christian apologist who has written many articles and popular books on the mainly philosophical arguments for God's existence, and is famed for his debating, and his engaging with the public. His work with philosophical arguments is significant, as there is no confirmed empirical evidence for the existence of God, nor can there be any good historical evidence; sound historical methodology necessarily being dismissive of supernatural claims. Craig has formulated a number of arguments that he presents in a clear and accessible cumulative case.*

**Think Spring 2015 • 59**

William Lane Craig is a prolific Christian apologist who has written many articles and popular books on the mainly philosophical arguments for God's existence, and is famed for his debating, and his engaging with the public. His work with philosophical arguments is significant, as there is no confirmed empirical evidence for the existence of God, nor can there be any good historical evidence; sound historical methodology necessarily being dismissive of supernatural claims. Craig has formulated a number of arguments that he presents in a clear and accessible cumulative case. These mostly philosophical arguments are riddled with problems, the most significant being that it is far from clear why the hypothetical god of the arguments must be the Judeo-Christian God that Craig personally believes in. By his own admission, the only one of these arguments that identifies his god is his Christological or Resurrection of

Jesus argument, which concludes that a miracle-working Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected from the dead, by the theistic/Christian god. In other words, refuting Craig's cumulative case for the Christian god's existence is remarkably simple: only the Resurrection argument needs addressing, and given that it is actually a historical argument, a refutation is arrived at very swiftly.

### **Craig's circular Resurrection argument**

While many of Craig's arguments are philosophical and deductive arguments, this argument is historical and inductive. As it is inductive, this argument is not formally valid and the conclusion is not guaranteed to be true. As it is historical, methodologies appropriate to history shall be employed. This already disadvantages the argument, as sound historical methodologies necessarily discriminate against miraculous claims and supernatural explanations. Due to word constraints, only a handful of key points will be discussed. The resurrection argument is crucial to Craig's case, as it is the only one of his arguments that identifies his god. This argument could also demonstrate the truth of Jesus' alleged resurrection, and could thus single-handedly justify the literal belief in the Christian faith. Craig clarifies the structure of his argument in numerous debates, and his apologetic book, *On Guard*:

1. There are three established facts about Jesus: the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of his disciples' belief in his resurrection.
2. The hypothesis 'God raised Jesus from the dead' is the best explanation of these facts.
3. The hypothesis 'God raised Jesus from the dead' entails that God exists.
4. Therefore, God exists.

Working backwards, this article will refute the conclusions and the two premises; namely, that Craig's 'established facts' are not actually facts and stem from highly spurious sources, and that his supernatural hypothesis is, in reality, extremely improbable. One striking problem with this argument, that effectively ends Craig's cumulative case, is its obviously circular nature. Craig had earlier admitted that this argument finally identifies his previously 'generic god' as Yahweh, the Judeo-Christian god. Even this point is contentious when considering other possibilities such as: Yahweh has a father, Yahweh is the *demiurge* and thus not the 'true God', Lucifer is the true God and the Bible has been written by his detractors, or that another god altogether is responsible for Jesus' resurrection. Being charitable, we can concede that Craig's god finds his way into Premise 2, rendering the argument both question-begging and circular.

The argument begs the question, as the existence of the Christian god, or even some generic god, is controversial. This is not an established fact. Of course, Craig would argue that he has proven the existence of some god in his other arguments, which are not analysed here, so this refutation will focus on other logical fallacies contained within the argument. As for my claim that the argument is circular, that is obvious from his second premise, and his commentary. Craig assumes and relies on his god's existence to make Jesus' resurrection plausible, then puts forth Jesus' resurrection as evidence that the Christian god exists. Craig could counter that 'God' in Premise 2 refers to his 'already established generic god' while 'God' in the conclusion refers to the Christian god, but that would render his argument relying on a fallacious appeal to ambiguity, which also makes his argument invalid. I'll leave it up to Craig to decide on which logical fallacy he is committing here, though my money is on circular reasoning. If the circularity of the base argument is not so obvious, Craig makes it very clear in his commentary. In a debate with philosopher Arif Ahmed on the existence of God, Craig confirms that he

has already assumed that which he attempts to prove and explains why he felt the need to commit this error of logic:

The existence of the resurrection doesn't require extraordinary evidence if the resurrection itself is not highly improbable. And I don't think there's any, uh, theory of probability which would show that the hypothesis 'God raised Jesus from the dead' is improbable. What's improbable is that Jesus rose *naturally* from the dead. But the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead is not at all improbable I think.

Likewise, nobody claims that Jack grew his impossibly large beanstalk from *regular* beans; he used *magic* beans! This bizarre claim renders any further analysis of the argument unnecessary. This argument can immediately be thrown out for assuming that which it attempts to prove. This also means that Craig's 'cumulative case' fails, as even if his other arguments did demonstrate the existence of a god, it was the resurrection argument that finally identified this god as *his* Christian god. Nevertheless, simplified refutations of the two premises will be discussed, which further refutes the argument in itself also, rather than just its role in Craig's cumulative case for God's existence. First, a refutation of Craig's claim that his supernatural claim is plausible and a Bayesian answer to his opinion that there is no theory of probability that can label such claims improbable.

### **Premise 2: The oxymoron of the historical miracle**

Craig wants his audience to believe that the best explanation of the 'established facts' presented in Premise 1 is that his unproven god raised Jesus from the dead. Unfortunately for Craig, sound historical methodology entails a swift rejection of his supernatural explanation. Biblical historian Bart Ehrman clarifies that history is not the

study of what happened; it is the study of what probably happened. He explains that historians must try and determine the most probable explanations, while miracles *by definition* are the most improbable explanations. They are considered to be miracles because they overturn scientific laws. Robert Price, another Biblical scholar sceptical of the New Testament's supernatural claims, refers to the principle of analogy; if the Gospels mention events such as miracles that do not align with what scientists and scholars know of the world today (the laws of physics for example), and it happens to be more analogous to what is known of myth and fiction, then these stories must be rejected as literal and true accounts. Influential American rationalist and revolutionary, Thomas Paine, lent his support to this approach in his book *Age of Reason*, stating that it is far more likely that a person simply lied than that 'nature should go out of her course'. Further support for the idea that historians must be sceptical about supernatural claims is provided by Bayesian thinking.

While the humanities can be perceived as being relatively unscientific, the claims about Jesus made by theologians and Biblical scholars are historical claims; and historical claims are probabilistic. While mathematics may initially seem out of place in the humanities, it is undeniable that the historian relies on probability judgements, in *trying* to ascertain what actually happened in the past. Bayes' Theorem then, a mathematical theorem that aids in calculating probabilities derived from a number of factors (and their associated probabilities), is a useful tool in analysing the sources used to establish Jesus' historicity, and his authentic sayings and deeds. Bayes' Theorem does not tell us what the truth is, or what actually happened in the past. It tells us what is reasonable to believe, after considering all the evidence and alternative explanations. Scholars such as Aviezer Tucker and Richard Carrier endorse the use of Bayesian methods by historians, with the latter arguing that most already do. Hector Avalos, a Professor of Religious Studies (Iowa State University), praised Carrier's

use of Bayes' Theorem, arguing that it could revolutionise how historical Jesus studies are done, and could even cast doubt as to Jesus' historical existence.

Delving into the actual formula and calculations is often unnecessary, especially when the claims to be examined are of a supernatural or miraculous nature. In a natural language version I call 'Bayesian thinking', the crucial elements to consider are: the explanation in question, alternative explanations, current evidence, and background evidence. The use of such methodology in history would be hard to challenge, given that good historians already do take background information into account ('internet amateurs' take notice), and consider how alternative theories fit the evidence. The fact that miraculous and supernatural explanations are extremely implausible by definition (key background information), given that they disobey the currently understood laws of physics, and that fabrication is a naturalistic and probable explanation (alternative hypothesis), Bayesian thinking demonstrates that it is unreasonable to believe miraculous claims such as Jesus' alleged resurrection. At least, that is the case when there is a lack of extremely convincing evidence. Bayes' Theorem shows us, in a formal manner, why 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence'. Compounding these issues is that the 'current evidence' for Jesus' resurrection, and even for his life, is extremely poor.

### **Premise 1: Craig's 'established facts'**

So far we have seen that Craig's argument is circular, resulting in the rejection of his conclusions. Premise 2 is also rejected for revolving around an incredibly implausible and question-begging miraculous explanation, while many naturalistic explanations (fabrication for example) are possible, and are ignored by Craig. The argument then, is already thoroughly discredited, but can also be dismissed due to the assumptions made in Premise 1. The fact of the

disciples' early belief need not be seriously considered, as there have been deluded and misguided people in many non-Christian religions also, so the focus shall be on 'facts' such as the empty tomb and the alleged post-mortem appearances. These 'facts' are derived from books (namely the canonical Gospels and Pauline Epistles) that are extremely unreliable sources of historical information.

The Gospels are anonymous, make supernatural claims, contain ahistorical information, and are heavily influenced by the Old Testament and much earlier mythical stories. And like the Pauline Epistles, the Gospels are not contemporaneous to Jesus' life, and are not penned by eyewitnesses. Paul's epistles present even more challenges as there are indications that he is discussing a purely 'visionary' and divine Christ, rather than a historical Jesus. Paul further clarifies that his sources are not human, but supernatural (Galatians 1:11–12, 2:11, 1Corinthians 15:3–4). In his 2009 article, *Jesus and Ned Ludd: What's in a Name?*, religious studies scholar Arthur Droge goes so far as to say that Jesus is 'probably apocryphal'. It is from these works, that may one day be labelled by serious scholarship as pure fiction, that Craig gathers his 'mundane' and even 'supernatural' facts about Jesus.

Avalos introduces the idea that the Gospels cannot be assumed to contain accurate and reliable historical information due to the legendary material contained therein, wondering why scepticism ought not to be shown on these more mundane claims (such as the empty tomb), when it can so easily be shown on the more miraculous claims. Philosopher Stephen Law concurs in his recent article, *Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus*, framing his 'contamination argument' whereby sources contaminated with obviously ahistorical information should be viewed upon with suspicion, even when it comes to the more 'natural' and mundane portions of the text. William Lane Craig's supernatural explanation from more mundane facts also serves as the perfect example of Law's 'bracketing' idea: a process whereby religious apologists temporarily

ignore the supernatural claims of a story, claim the benign portions as 'established facts', then use these so-called facts to assert that the only reasonable explanation for these facts is a miraculous one. Coincidentally, the miraculous explanation is the same one provided by the text; any work of fiction can thus be labelled 'historically accurate'.

### **A caveat: Do Biblical historians confirm these 'facts'?**

Craig implores with us that these so-called facts are 'recognised by the majority of New Testament historians today'. Unfortunately for the critical sceptic, Craig is correct. We have already seen that Craig's argument is circular, so the conclusion must be rejected. We have also seen that Craig's supernatural explanation in Premise 2 is extremely implausible. The sources used to establish Craig's facts in Premise 1 were then found to be very problematic. But do they still contain historical facts? Craig is not the only one to think so. Biblical scholars, including *secular* Biblical scholars, also tend to proclaim that the Bible does contain authentic historical information. So what right does the humble philosopher have in critiquing facts from the New Testament, which are 'confirmed' by even atheistic Biblical scholars? To answer that, we must understand and critically examine the methods used by Biblical scholars, to say nothing of their motives.

Ignoring those that simply assume that every word of the Bible is true, the primary scholarly tools used to extract 'kernels of truth' regarding Jesus' sayings and deeds from the New Testament sources, are the 'Criteria of Authenticity'. So vital to studies on the Historical Jesus, the Criteria are becoming increasingly criticised, even from within the fields of Biblical and Religious Studies. In regards to the Criteria themselves, many of them are contradictory, redundant, and speculative. With regards to their application by Biblical historians, use of the Criteria can often be inconsistent and inadequate. The evidence of



the inadequacy of this methodology is provided by the result. An astonishing diversity of views on who the 'Historical Jesus' was, what he said, and what he did. In *The Historical Jesus*, respected Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan elaborates:

But that stunning diversity is an academic embarrassment. It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.

**A. Multiple attestation:** It seems obvious that the more independent references to an event, the more likely it happened. While generally a logical principle, its use by historical Jesus scholars could be invalid, due to the scarcity of sources and the timelines involved. The Gospels are reliant on each other (particularly on Mark) so may not actually be independent, hypothetical sources such as Q, M and L, and even second and third-generation hypothetical and non-existing sources behind these sources, cannot be used to determine anything with certainty, the writings of the Apostle Paul mention little about the events of Jesus' life, while extra-Biblical passages appear later in the record, are disputed, and cannot be ruled out as being influenced by Mark and the other Gospels. As noted by independent historian Richard Carrier, scholars cannot presume multiple independent attestation when the authors of the Gospels are anonymous, and present additional problems:

All we have are uncritical pro-Christian devotional or hagiographic texts filled with dubious claims written decades after the fact by authors who never tell us their methods or sources. Multiple Attestation can never gain traction on such a horrid body of evidence.

**B. Embarrassment/dissimilarity:** A favourite of Craig's, the criterion of embarrassment (along with the similar criterion of dissimilarity) supposedly indicates that if a saying or event found in the Jesus story is embarrassing or counter-intuitive to Jews, early Christians, or both, it is likely to be true. Firstly, it could be possible that the author purposely provides an 'embarrassing' or 'dissimilar' example to make a point (perhaps on humility, or separation from the ego), or to provide a feeling of authenticity and credibility. Secondly, given the diversity of Jewish and Christian religions, it cannot be assumed that the author would find the event or teaching in question to be embarrassing. In his book, *Sources and Methods*, Biblical scholar Christopher Tuckett (University of Oxford) argued that 'The very existence of the tradition may thus militate against its being regarded as "dissimilar" to the views of "the early church"'. With regards to the criterion of embarrassment, Stephen Law mentions that it is not unheard of that a new religion would make embarrassing and untruthful claims, pointing to the fantastic and embarrassing claims of intergalactic wars made by Scientology founder, L. Ron Hubbard.

New Testament scholar Stanley Porter wrote an interesting critique of the Criteria in his *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research*, and describes determining what might have been embarrassing to early Christians as 'very difficult... due especially to the lack of detailed evidence for the thought of the early Church, apart from that found in the New Testament'. Indeed, this problem highlights the circularity of using such Criteria. As with Tuckett, Carrier agrees that the very fact a tradition of Jesus survived in the Gospels is actually evidence that that traditional saying or deed is not dissimilar to what early Christians believed. It does seem illogical to proclaim that a Gospel author is writing stories that contradict what early Christians believed, when the Gospel authors themselves presumably were early Christians, and among the earliest Christians on record; from which later Christians would derive their faith!

Carrier also notes that any reason to preserve a supposedly embarrassing and truthful passage, which could have been altered or removed by over-eager scribes, would also be reason to fabricate the passage.

**C. Coherence:** This criterion indicates that a saying or action of Jesus is more likely to be authentic, if it coheres with other authentic sayings and actions of Jesus. With a lack of primary (contemporary or eyewitness) sources, and anonymous authors for the main secondary sources of information about Jesus (the canonical Gospels), finding what is authentic about Jesus is not a simple task. Without a solid base of certain sayings and deeds that do stem from a historical Jesus, using this criterion would be somewhat circular and relying on other criteria, as implied by Stanley Porter, who also notes that when it comes to the criteria for authenticity, 'each of them seems subject to valid criticism'. Nor is it impressive if sources that could borrow and evolve from each other show signs of 'coherence'. It is obvious that coherence can be fabricated, especially when the documents in question are separated in time, often by decades. John Gager also criticises this criterion in his article, *The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts About Method*, alluding to the 'floodgate' of improbable claims that are consistent with other information:

To allow a saying that is simply consistent with or does not contradict another saying is to open a floodgate, for the range of such a criterion is virtually limitless.

**D. Vividness of narration:** A story's vivid details could supposedly indicate it to be an authentic eyewitness report. This is very speculative, with Biblical New Testament scholar Craig A. Evans calling it 'dubious'. A genuine report could be very brief, and it could be unnecessarily long, depending on the eyewitness; and we must remember, the

Gospel authors are unknown to us. A fictitious report could also be brief, or exhaustively detailed. J. R. R. Tolkien's decades long work on his *Middle-Earth* saga for example, whilst providing entertaining stories for novels and films, does not prove the events actually happened, or that the sayings really did originate with Gandalf the Grey or Bilbo Baggins; in fact vividness would be expected of fiction. This criterion also directly contradicts the criterion of **least distinctiveness**. If less vivid and more vivid descriptions both point to authentic deeds and sayings, scholars could 'authenticate' any aspect about any Jesus, or any other historical or mythological figure.

**E. Other criteria:** Another pair of potentially contradictory (yet also complementary) criteria would be the criterion of Greek context and the criterion of Aramaic context. Why should it be assumed that Greek or Aramaic context would indicate that the tradition originates from Jesus, rather than the Greek or Aramaic-speaking Gospel writer, or a pre-Christian source? And surely Jesus was not the only Aramaic-speaking person of first-century Palestine! Used together, these criteria could potentially validate every word of the Judeo-Christian Bible, including the inherently implausible supernatural claims. Finally, the criterion of historical plausibility (as well as the related and lesser-known criteria of contextual plausibility and natural probability) seems superfluous given that it is the historian's core duty to determine which explanations are more plausible; something that Craig seems blissfully unaware of.

The use of the Criteria by Biblical scholars points to an uncritical faith in the New Testament sources. James Charlesworth provides such an example in his book, *The Historical Jesus*, arguing that, 'we also should assume a tradition is authentic until evidence appears that undermines its authenticity'. Perhaps the strongest indictment of the authenticity criteria (and how they are used by Biblical scholars) however, is demonstrated by the result: an 'embarrassing' diversity of theories on who Jesus was,

what he said, and what he did. Clearly, the methods used by Biblical historians are incredibly flawed and uncritical, exposing Craig's fallacious appeal to authority.

## Conclusion

This, Craig's key argument, fails for many reasons. Firstly, the argument itself, and in the context of Craig's cumulative case for God's existence, is circular, assuming God's existence in the premises. Secondly, Craig portrays his supernatural explanation, 'God raised Jesus from the dead', as not only plausible, but the 'best explanation', while it is actually extremely implausible, as well as question-begging. Furthermore, far more likely and naturalistic explanations exist, such as fabrication. Thirdly, Craig's 'established facts' are nothing of the sort; they are stories derived from very spurious sources via equally spurious methods.

In clarifying his 'established facts', and eventually concluding that a supernatural explanation is the only reasonable option, Craig reveals himself to be more theologian than scholar; more sophist than philosopher. As this is the most crucial of Craig's cumulative case of arguments for the existence of his Christian God, his case is thoroughly refuted. This was the only argument from his cumulative case that identified the 'generic god' as Yahweh, the Judeo-Christian god. When Craig's Resurrection of Jesus argument is rightly dismissed, he is left only with a handful of problematic and controversial arguments that, at best, argue not for *the* God, but merely *some* god.

*Raphael Lataster is a teacher of religious studies at the University of Sydney. [raphael.lataster@sydney.edu.au](mailto:raphael.lataster@sydney.edu.au)*

## Notes

This is only a summarized case. I am working on a far more refined and scholarly refutation of this argument in my upcoming work.