Letter 5 - What evidence is there for Jesus?

Thank you for reading my fifth letter. Up to this point I have looked into the existence of God, examined how science coexists with God, discovered why monotheism seems the most valid faith system, and learned how the Christian story nicely answers existential dilemmas. What I haven't done is investigate the historical accuracy of Christianity's specific claims. That is the topic of this letter. One nice thing about Christianity is that it is easy to identify the central claim of the faith because it is completely centered around the life of one man, Jesus of Nazareth. So, to evaluate Christianity, the place to start is with investigating the historical reliability of the basic Christian claims about Jesus which are that he was an actual person in history, that he died as the result of crucifixion and the kicker, that he came back to life.

But before doing so I had to confront a personal challenge regarding the subject of my investigation. I'd been pushing off doing any direct investigation about Jesus for perhaps years. Things had been going so well with my research and I didn't want to cloud it with what I feared would be an avalanche of heavy religious dogma. I was cool with the idea of God, happy that science supported it and pleased to make sense of the spiritual soup I'd been swimming in. I was even okay investigating how Christianity made sense of existential dilemmas, but digging into the particulars of the life of Jesus felt messy and loaded, so much so that I found myself cringing at the mention of his name. In my experience the name "Jesus" had been mindlessly over prescribed by so many over-zealous evangelists that I had reflexively crossed the street fearing an awkward, irrational, and impromptu street sermon when I saw a guy wearing a sandwich board that says: "Jesus Saves". Just the mention of his name raised my indoctrination warning monitor to level 10.

That said I realized that it was time to take a hard look and I needed to find a way to be objective in my assessment of the claims about Him. I needed to establish some type of formal framework for deciding to what extent the stories about Jesus could be relied upon. In my last letter I described why I believed an absolute proof about God would be logically impossible. It's not shocking that absolute proof was out of the question. All of us already live in a world of uncertainty. We live in houses that could catch fire and drive on roads where we could be struck by a reckless driver, eat foods we could choke on, and live in bodies that could stop breathing at any moment. Never-the-less we're still able to make very accurate assessments based on weighing the available evidence.

For most of my life I assumed that the story about Jesus rising from the dead was made up or overblown but I never took the time to actually consider what evidence my opinion was based on. I figured the evidence in favor of his resurrection was a weak and I could quickly conclude with confidence that Jesus either didn't exist or that he was never crucified or that his body was hidden and that he never rose from the dead.

When it comes to establishing the degree to which the basic claims about Jesus can be found to be true, I relied upon the 4 escalating levels of proof used in the US justice system to confirm that there wasn't solid evidence supporting the claims about Jesus. The lowest standard of proof is supported by the discovery of "Some Credible Evidence". This standard is used in some child protection cases and I figured might stop the Christian claim in their tracks. If not the next most

rigorous standard is called: "Preponderance of the Evidence" which is used in civil trials where a verdict is reached based on at least 51% of evidence in support. I doubted that there was that much evidence to consider. The next most rigorous standard is called "Clear and Convincing Evidence" which refers to concluding that a claim is true if it is significantly and substantially more likely to be true than not true. This seemed very unlikely to me. And finally, the highest standard is "Beyond A Reasonable Doubt" which occurs when there is no plausible reason to believe a proposition is untrue. It's the one we hear about the most in courtroom dramas. I was very confident that there was no way that would ever be reached.

With my legal framework in place, I was ready to look at some facts. But which facts? The facts I chose to consider are those that the radio talk show moderator Justin Brierly put forward. Justin brings together believers and skeptics to discuss their views on Christ. The two groups agreed upon a list of "minimal facts" about Jesus' story that they both considered true. Here are the first four from that list:

- **1st** is that **Jesus was a historical figure**, a real human being who lived in 1st century Israel. He was not a myth and his identity is confirmed by multiple non-biblical sources.

- **2nd Jesus died** through public crucifixion in 1st century Jerusalem. He didn't avoid death on the cross or survive it.

- **3rd** Jesus had apostles who claimed to have found the **tomb** he was laid in **to be empty** shortly after his death. (Whether or not their claims were accurate is a different story)

- **4th People reported meeting Christ after his death**. These people include all 12 apostles, two skeptics (Paul of Tarsus and Jesus's brother James), as well as 500 other witnesses. (Again, whether or not their claims were accurate is a different story)

The first two facts are easy to agree to because there is no miraculous claim. The 3rd and 4th can be agreed to by skeptics because they specify that the miraculous events were simply claimed to have happened. Together they provided "some credible evidence" that Jesus was in fact a real guy who died by crucifixion, who may have been missing after his death and was claimed by others to have come back to life. Not super impressive really. What were contentious were the validity of the third claim of a missing body from an empty tomb and the fourth claim that he rose from the dead. Those two claims needed deeper investigation and since all of this information is based on historical accounts and not repeatable scientific experiments, I'd need to look into the circumstantial evidence around both.

For context it was helpful for me to learn that using circumstantial evidence is a valid way to establish a legal judgement. Not only valid, but jurors in the US are instructed to "make no qualitative distinction between direct and circumstantial evidence in a court case". For example, although no one directly witnessed Timothy McVeigh putting explosives under the federal building, there were 700 pieces of circumstantial evidence that made it impossible to refute that he did it. Circumstantial evidence cannot lie, it is what it is. It's up to each person to assess whether an inference can be reasonably made from the circumstantial evidence. So I started investigating circumstantial evidence to see if I could understand the magnitude and

meaning of the changes made in the lives of his supporters and the strategies they used to spread the faith, starting with his number one supporter Paul of Tarsus.

- **Conversion of Paul.** Saul of Tarsus was a notable Pharisee and leading persecutor of Christians right after Christ died. He had strong reasons to despise the Christian movement which threatened the existing Jewish belief system he spent his life promoting. Strangely, Saul self-reported an encounter with Jesus and then underwent a complete conversion changing his name to Paul. Not only did he stop killing Christians, Paul went on to become Christ's greatest advocate enduring stoning, whipping, shipwrecks and prison while building the Christian church and writing the 13 books that appear in the New Testament. The books are a testament to his lucidity and conviction. There are no reports of mental instability or other irrationality. He never wavered in his claims about Jesus even though there was no earthly benefit to him in doing so and many reasons to abandon his faith including many threats on his life, ultimately resulting in him likely being martyred in Rome. Why did Paul do it? Paul tells us that he changed because he believed he saw God in the risen Jesus. It's hard to come up with another potential reason. If Paul was crazy it seemed to be a one-time thing that didn't affect his ability to commit and die for the Christina church and write complex literary works that stand today as the backbone of the New Testament.

- **Conversion of James** - A second skeptic was Jesus's brother James who appears to have doubted his own brother's divinity throughout Jesus' life. It sounds like much of his family didn't believe that the boy they grew up with as a peer was now claiming to be God. Yet, James changed his mind after Jesus's death. This would have been an excellent opportunity to disassociate with Jesus' shameful, public death and doubled down on what he believed all along. "My brother was never God". And yet James instead completely changes his convictions, believed his brother was who he said he was after Jesus died. James went on to become one of the prominent leaders of the church, also dying a martyr's death, his by stoning all while holding fast to his belief. So apparently James was all in too.

- **Miraculous success of his apostles** – Before Paul of Tarsus converted to follow Jesus, Christ had assembled a small collection of 12 apostles. The descriptions of his apostles show them to be a powerless, rag-tag group, none of whom were particularly talented nor wealthy nor well connected. While Paul was an articulate, highly educated Pharisee with respected Roman citizenship, the apostles were uneducated commoners. Qualifications weren't in their favor but perhaps they got lucky? Not likely. Unfortunately, they fearfully abandoned Jesus when he was arrested and then had their fears confirmed by Jesus' murder. This left them as uncommitted doubters with no motive to engage with Jesus any longer. But then somehow after Jesus' death all twelve of these uncommitted doubters became crystal clear about who Christ was, clearer than they were when they were following the living Christ for 3 years. They claimed to have seen Christ and became so committed and certain as to willingly suffer intense persecution as well as martyrdom when it would've been far easier for them to pick another living prophet. It seems quite reasonable that all of them had a life changing experience.

- **Unappealing Message** – Let's assume that by a miracle the apostles somehow cleared the multiple hurtles discussed in the last bullet point and wanted to share their beliefs with other people. Unfortunately, the story they had to share was not just uninspiring but frightening. It **would have been unappealing** because in ancient Israel claiming that a messiah arose from the dead would not have been an effective way to convert other Jews to one's religion. At that time in history Jesus's resurrection would have been untraditional because the Jews had no expectation that the Messiah would rise from the dead. To the Jew the central tenants of Christianity were disturbing, counter-cultural, and uninspiring, plus they were layered upon Jesus' tragic and humiliating death confirmed by his disciples who abandoned Him. If anyone thought the apostles or disciples used some clever marketing strategy to spread the word, they would be greatly mistaken.

- **Terrible Branding:** To make their message even more unpalatable **Christians made the central symbol of their movement** the image of a crucified man hanging from a cross, which at that time in history was a frightening depiction of torture used to dissuade serious criminals and dissenters out of fear of becoming a public spectacle through a shameful death. The cross was a show of authority and a reminder of what would happen if people did not stay in their place. In short, the cross was a dire warning sign and the last thing you would pick as a symbol to attract new followers to a novel faith that may subject new recruits to this same type of torture symbolized by the cross. It would be like using a photo of a person on a ventilator with emphysema to try to sell cigarettes. And yet new people chose to believe and follow the publicly killed leader despite the obvious distaste and danger in doing so.

Upon seeing this evidence my mind went looking for ways to discredit each. It was hard to find sources to discredit the five points, the best I could do was assert that they don't prove that Jesus' coming back to life is the underlying force that made those unlikely events happen. But I didn't have another idea to put forward. After considering this additional evidence, I concluded that together with the first 4 facts "Preponderance of the evidence" indicated that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead meaning that the evidence was simply more likely to be true than untrue. Perhaps there are other explanations out there that I am unaware of but baring new evidence I had to admit that "Preponderance of the evidence" was wear I stood.

But there was still additional evidence to consider and who knows maybe enough to have the confidence of the next highest standard and conclude that there is "clear and convincing evidence" that Jesus rose from the dead. But before digging into that it's time for a little break.

Okay, I'm back and ready to dig into 4 more pieces of circumstantial evidence indicating the scale of changes experienced by his followers after his death which all seem to point to a resurrection.

- **First, Christ's supporters made major changes to their key Jewish social structures** shortly after Jesus' death. This included changing their 1,500 year old tradition of worshiping on Saturday to instead observe the sabbath on Sunday because that was the day when they believed Jesus rose from the dead. They also stopped sacrificing animals after Jesus' death and even stopped practicing their belief that one finds salvation solely by following Moses' laws. Up to that point the Jews had an amazingly stable religious

structure that endured assimilation by other cultures for over a millennium. And yet they were suddenly willing to abandon that foundation to follow the dead Jesus.

- **Second, Christ's supporters challenged the monotheistic views of the Jews.** The idea of a trinity or of a man also being God was considered heresy and yet 10,000 people gave up their tradition within a decade of the start of the movement. These people were not fluid in their values like people today. They were entrenched in the context of their religious structures at a time when old ideas had the most value. They were not likely to make a change, especially not to some new idea, because they had a lot riding on the existing system. Unlike the atheists of today, these people were Jewish and believed that they risked damnation if they deviated from the established path. It was a foolish thing to do. Yet within weeks of the resurrection Jesus' Jewish followers were doing this.

- **Third, Christ's followers ignored common sense and suspended their desire to end their oppression.** It is worth noting that Jesus lived in occupied Israel 100 years after the Romans took it over. For a century Romans siphoned the Jewish wealth and resources back to Rome through taxes. In addition, Rome was the final authority on what the Jews could and couldn't do. There were good reasons why the Jews were looking for a military leader to initiate the first step to move them away from oppression and towards autonomy. It was a position the Jews would hold for another 40 years before their temple was destroyed by the Romans in response to a Jewish rebellion. Jews expected that the messiah would be that political leader who would destroy the Roman armies. They weren't looking for someone who would die for the sins of the world and then leave the Jews under the control of their oppressors. Upon this political backdrop Jews chose to follow the dead and seemingly failed messiah Jesus even though he didn't deliver - nor claimed to deliver - what they wanted? It makes no sense at all politically or personally for Jews to follow some new unarticulated Jesus' path without some major, miraculous, and motivating intervention, like seeing Jesus alive again. How could so many people be persuaded not only that Jesus rose from the dead but that his strange message that defied common sense wasn't merely valid but urgent. Their new belief commanded them to stop fighting against their oppressors and instead follow a recently killed, pseudo-Messiah. It certainly appeared shameful and foolish making no sense at all. Now if the Romans somehow gave Christians a break and didn't persecute them because they weren't Jews, then perhaps an argument could be made that they chose to be Christians to protect themselves. However, the people espousing the Christian message were treated worse than the Jews because they were seen as threatening, crazy and foolish and received the worst persecution from both the Romans and from other Jews.

- **Fourth, Christians began practicing communion which was a strange ritual,** especially to attract new followers. This is because people came together not primarily to recap Jesus's teachings, but to recognize his crucifixion. That is a very strange way to attract a following and inspire energy and hope. As an example, people who loved JFK would never have gotten together to celebrate his shooting by Lee Harvey Oswald. Jesus's death was seen as a necessary step to a much larger victory. One big piece of evidence supporting this victory seems likely to have been seeing Christ alive again.

I recognize that sometimes people are crazy and share false ideas with others who mistakenly believe them or groups become susceptible to a social contagion deemed fashionable at the time. While it is possible for false ideas to spread at any time, I imagine that false ideas and social contagions spread best when they have an attractive component to them, become fashionable or have the support of powerful people. However, in investigating the biblical and non-biblical sources they seem to paint a picture of an unattractive, unfashionable movement without ties to influential people. They also seem designed to point to a single explanation.

For example, looking at the story of Jesus' apostles around Jesus's death they display cowardice, abandonment and a critical lack of faith. A more motivational story could have had Jesus' apostles portrayed a being capable, fighting for his freedom from crucifixion and then promoting his cause. That would have been an inspiring story arc that people could get behind. Instead, the apostles are presented as feeble in response to Jesus' capture as they fell into disarray. It's hard to come up with a less likely group of people to start a movement and inspire others much less succeed at it.

Another example is the story of Paul of Tarsus. He was an early leader in the Christian movement but not a particularly trustworthy one because he carried the reputation of a Christian persecutor. The only thing worse than following a person you don't know about a religion that violates the tenants of your own is for that person to be the guy who recently killed those who did so. In this regard Paul was the perfect Christian repellent. Either he's a pharisee who'll persecute you directly or he's sitting dormant in the gateway to the Christian movement making you wonder if he's a spy or a crazy person who may switch allegiance at any time. The take home point is that Paul was another barrier to entry for those who may be drawn to Christianity because of its inherent attractiveness or association with influential people.

As a third example, Jesus' story is grounded in an unremarkable birth into a family of lowly stature with essentially no back story to explain the significance of his upbringing. Unlike Siddhartha (The Buddha) Jesus could not lean on his status as a prince to explain why he was special, wise and able to attract followers. The fact that he arrived on the scene apparently out of nowhere historically speaking as the son of an unmarried couple erases the notion that he as the center of the Christian movement possessed some kind of inherent worldly influence or status.

These three examples paint a picture of an underdog, a less than inspiring story involving a flawed apostle group and a miraculous turn of events that followed a well documented, public tragedy upon a man of common origin but with divine claims. None of the core stories indicate a fashionable religious option for people to mistakenly follow. The closest person to have power and influence was Paul who completely rejected the ideology that gave him power. Together all of the stories appear to me to provide "clear and convincing evidence" that Jesus rose from the dead as a plausible explanation of the radical change in motivation, direction and the unlikely success of his apostles. It explains Paul's miraculous conversion from Christian killer to Jesus' biggest promotor. It explains why all twelve apostles switched from abandoning Jesus to dying as martyrs for the Christian clause. It explains why Jesus's brother James changed his opinion about who Jesus was after Jesus' death.

I always assumed that the majority of the evidence around Jesus was largely based on fables and that those who believed had to do so through blind faith. I had no idea it was even possible to put together a historically backed case in support of the death and resurrection of Jesus. What I found was the reverse of my original assumption in that there appears to be clear and convincing evidence involving situations, people and behaviors that all support the claim that Jesus rose from the dead.

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

Clear and convincing evidence is nice but can still be wrong. What about reasonable doubts? Up to this point I hadn't dug deeply into pushback against what I found as clear and convincing evidence. I've heard jury trials on T.V where the prosecution comes up with clear and convincing evidence that the defense lawyer then casts into doubt with a few well-placed facts. That said I also recognized that reasonable doubts needed to stay on topic and not drift into nonspecific conjecture. Before I dig into investigating reasonable doubts let's take another break.

Okay, I'm back and ready to dig into the first category to target for a reasonable doubts,

The Empty Tomb

Critics and skeptics both agree that Jesus died by crucifixion. Christian's claim that his tomb was empty suggesting that he rose from the dead. Finding a weakness in the empty tomb claim seems an easy way to demonstrate a reasonable doubt. Here are some potential scenarios that could raise doubts to this Christian claim?

The Authorities stole the body – The idea is that the people in power stole or hid the body. One giant problem with this was that the authorities were motivated to disprove any divinity associated with Christ. If someone misplaced his body (just a few days after his death) they could have quickly found it, displayed it and shut down this Christian claim in its infancy. This dismissal is dependent on the Gospel account from Mathew in chapter 28 where he states that the chief priests and Pharisees and Pilate decided to secure the tomb with a big stone and monitor it with guards so that the disciples wouldn't steel the body. In other words, they had nothing to gain from steeling the body and in response to a missing body Mathew says that the guards were bribed to say that the disciples stole the body. This claim looks dead on arrival.

The Disciples Stole the Body – This explanation raised two complications. The first is that if this was the case the disciples would have all had to fabricate their tomb and resurrection stories including the story in which they claim a group of women were the first to witness the empty tomb, even though (unfortunately) women's testimony was considered unreliable culturally. Why would they all create the same strange cover story that was also unreliable by definition? A second complication is that this hypothesis insinuates that the apostles were willing to die brutal deaths for what they knew was a lie? Maybe one or two could be claimed to be crazy or stubborn, but all twelve claimed to have seen him after death, spent their lives promoting Christ and all died brutal deaths, never denying their belief. The third is that Matthew indicates that the Authorities concerned and ready for an attempt to steal the body and so placed a huge stone and stationed guards. This claim looks like a longshot.

The followers went to the wrong tomb – In the absence of the Romans and Jews with an incentive to put to rest a missing body narrative this may be a possibility. However, assuming pressure was put on the Romans and Jews to shutdown Jesus and his movement it seems very unlikely that the location of such an alternative tomb site could remain unknown for long. This rebuttal assumes that the Romans were aware of the details around the Apostles claim of a missing body early on such that the Romans could dispel their misunderstanding by producing the body which is indicated by Mathews's account.

The whole thing was a legendary fiction that caught on – This claim directly contradicts the first two facts confirmed by both believing and skeptical academics that Jesus was a historical figure who died through public execution he was a real guy in a real place at a real point in time. This claim is vague and doesn't amount to a reasonable doubt due to its lack of articulation.

The disciples experienced hallucinations – This is another vague claim that doesn't affect the facts related to the empty tomb. Even if a dozen people had a hallucination of an empty tomb, you'd think there was someone in Jerusalem with their wits about them to present the actual body and a second person to confirm it. Hallucination don't seem to play into the empty tomb story.

I could continue to consider stranger variations of even more implausible explanations of the empty tomb but when run through the logical filters of the first two agreed upon facts and common sense they also fall apart. Alternative claims need to do more than mention a poorly articulated doubt, they need to offer a reasonable alternative explanation. Absent a credible alternative explanation, it's hard to make sense of the empty tomb outside of the Apostles claims which are better articulated.. If you know of a credible alternative theory, let me know.

Reports of Jesus Rising from the Dead

Even if Jesus's body was missing from the tomb that doesn't mean he rose from the dead. He could have just disappeared or have been magically transported somewhere else. Those who follow Jesus don't just say "His tomb was empty so he must have risen from it as God." The Apostles said just the opposite. According to the Gospels they didn't believe Jesus had come back from the dead when they saw the empty tomb but only believed after seeing him later. That means that an empty tomb is not enough, you also need to confirm that people saw or interacted with the risen Jesus. This seems like a ripe opportunity to find some reasonable doubt. There are multiple claims about Jesus rising from the dead. All of the 16 people named in the Bible but two were followers of Jesus before his death. The two exceptions are Paul of Tarsus and Jesus's brother James. (Paul also references 500 people in Corinth to whom Jesus appeared but these additional names are cited). It looks like 14 of the named people were emotionally attached to Jesus and likely disappointed by his death. Assuming they didn't collectively conspire to lie about what they saw what other reasonable doubts could exist?

They all experienced separate hallucinations.
This theory would allow each to earnestly believe that Christ has risen from the dead and yet still have been incorrect in their assessment. Research over the past 100 years indicates that

hallucinations sometimes appear to those who have lost loved ones, usually older adults losing a spouse. However, 93% of those with hallucinations claim to only hear or sense their loved one's presence and only 7% see a visual hallucination. In this case all 16 people claim to have witnessed a visual appearance of Jesus. In addition, in the case of Thomas Jesus offered Thomas the opportunity to put his finger on his hand scar and reach out his hand to touch his side according to the apostle John. Most psychologist agree that mass hallucinations don't occur. In the Gospels the Apostles experience more than just a vision of him. On one occasion Jesus requested a piece of fish and ate it in the presence of a group of them. Assuming the Gospel of Luke is accurate and that all of them had the same experience seeing Jesus eat in their presence, this would land fully in the discredited category of group hallucination.

Friends of Jesus added their own dramatized details

The Bible is comfortable sharing a huge range of metaphoric interpretation that can be interpreted as exaggeration or a mistaken identity. Perhaps the stories in the New Testament were also overly optimistic to communicate the intensity of their feelings? One challenge with this doubt is that many of the encounters with Jesus were claimed to have occurred in the presence of other disciples. It's one thing for each disciple to one-up each other with exaggerative stories about their separate encounters and something quite different for them to do so about the same experience. Assuming that one of them did do so it seems reasonable that another apostle would call out the exaggeration when it came time to either denounce Jesus or be put to death.

While both of these theories of doubt aren't particularly strong, some may see them as remotely possible if they just look at the biased group of believers who all claimed him as a friend while Jesus was alive. The biggest obstacle to these two theories is Paul of Tarsus. If there was one person who was closed to the idea of a risen Jesus, it was Paul. His background places him firmly outside of the group of sympathetic followers and instead in the epicenter of Jesus skeptics. And yet Paul's testimony is loaded with tangible experiences related to his conversion to Christianity. He claims to have been with companions on the road to Emmaus when a light shone around him from above and he heard a voice asking "why are you persecuting me?" He said he was blinded and given directions to go to Damascus where he was blind for 3 days before being approached by a man named Ananias. Ananias also claimed God had talked to him and told him to find Paul and help him to regain his sight. Paul claims his sight was healed and then he fully converted to Christianity. As a critic it would be nice to brush it off as just an unimportant anecdotal story but Paul wasn't an ordinary man. Not only did he have a solid history as a Jewish Pharisee and leading Christian skeptic but Paul went on to demonstrate throughout the rest of his life his 100% commitment to the Jesus he claims to have met on the road to Emmaus.

Paul's story destroys the theory that claims of seeing Jesus were simply a series of exaggerated stories between supporters or mistaken identity. To erase even more doubt Jesus's brother James, who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah while Jesus was alive as mentioned in the Gospel of John (7:5) where John wrote "not even his brothers believed in him". John goes on to share that initially James and his family thought Jesus had lost his senses and did not support his claims. However after Jesus's death James is said to have seen Jesus and afterwards had a profound transformation. James's commitment in the early church and consistent service to Jesus eventually led to his martyrdom around AD 62. Together these two outsiders contradict

the idea that reports about Jesus were merely exaggerations or mistaken identities on the part of all of his supporters.

But Martyrdom Isn't Reliable

Another potential doubt involves challenging the credibility associated with martyrdom. While martyrdom is remarkable, it is not necessarily compelling. It does not validate a belief so much as it authenticates a believer by demonstrating his sincerity in a tangible way. For example, the September 11, 2001 suicide hijackers undoubtedly believed in the power they died for as evidenced by their willingness to die for it. However, they could not and did not know if the original experiences associated with their religion were true. They put their faith in traditions passed down to them over many generations. In contrast, the early Christian martyrs were the first generation. Either they saw what they claimed to see, or they did not. They didn't have the luxury of leaning on prior generations to prop up their belief, instead they had direct, personal experience to ground their faith.

Maybe The Bible is unreliable

Perhaps the Bible itself is unreliable. For this doubt to be put forward one needs to look at specific claims to show that they are contradicted by other more reasonable sources or have no basis in history or some other compelling reason to believe that the Biblical account is wrong. The New Testament was written over about 50 years and contains many specific references regarding what people said and did. Extra-biblical historical writing by people like Josephus validate the identity of key people in the Bible such as Pontius Pilot, John the Baptist, Jesus' brother James and Jesus himself. Another author, Clement of Alexandria, extended the narratives forward when he wrote "Exhortations" around 200 AD which relied upon his wide philosophical knowledge and sophisticated argumentation to show pagan unbelievers that Christianity was reasonable. To those who question Rome's persecution of Christians, Roman administrator Pliny The Younger (AD 61 – 113) wrote a letter to his Roman Emperor explaining his use of interrogations, torture, and threat of death to extract information from Christians. He also shared that those who refused to curse the name of Christ were executed for stubbornness. The point is that calling out the biblical account as untrue involves surgical precision to not inadvertently run afoul of other works that concur with it. While not impossible it is difficult, tedious and involves a great deal of knowledge of both biblical, non-biblical and second temple literature to support removal or correction.

The trouble is that cumulative circumstantial evidence and multiple biblical accounts restrain the options available for alternative explanations. As an example, consider the targeting of Paul's reputation as a way to sow doubt because Paul has a unique perspective as a skeptic and is a prolific writer of books on the New Testament. However, his existence and story is perhaps the most documented in the Bible shared by other Christian thinkers including Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Tertullian, Dionysius and Origen. Bart Ehrman, one of the biggest critics of the reliability of the Bible has debated unscholarly atheists who claim that Paul is not real and struggled to not laugh at his atheist friends for making the foolish and unfounded claim that Paul was not a real person. Taking out Paul in one fell swoop is a non-starter. To pursue Paul one has to take out their microscope and navigate a targeted attack being careful to also sort through the repercussions of discrediting any of the 76 people in Paul's 13 books of the Bible.

In the absence of clearly articulated objections it seems to me that the best theory that fits the historical facts is the most simple. I find myself compelled to admit that the claim that Jesus rose from the dead appears to be true beyond a reasonable doubt. If there was ever a person in history whose story supports the supernatural rising from the dead, it seems reasonable that Jesus would be the best candidate. His life, death and resurrection have been far more thoroughly documented than any other person of his time and Jesus's moral claims are the most noteworthy of any human being in history.

Not everyone has to come to the same conclusion. As I mentioned in an earlier letter it appears to me that the free will required to make a meaningful choice as a human requires less than absolute certainty about truth claims otherwise our unique value as independent decision makers is erased. However, where once I assumed blind faith was the only way to make sense of the Christian claims, I now believe that there is plenty of evidence to create a solid historical and logical case for doing so.

There are likely a whole bunch of implications that flow out from that conclusion, but I'll save the discussion about what it may mean for a man who claimed to be the son of God to rise from the dead for a future letter. For now, I am taking a break. Thanks for taking the time to read my letter and as always please give me feedback. Enjoy the rest of your day.