

Gnostic Gospels and denial of Crucifixion

1. Late Dating (2nd–4th Century AD)

- **Canonical Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John)** were written **within decades** of Jesus' death (c. 30–33 AD), while Gnostic texts like *Apocalypse of Peter* (2nd–3rd century) and *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (3rd century) appear **much later**.
- **Time gap matters:** Earlier sources are closer to the events and thus more likely to preserve historical memory.

2. Theological, Not Historical, Intent

- Gnostic texts promote **docetism** (the belief that Jesus only *appeared* to suffer) as part of their **metaphysical worldview**, which rejected the material world as evil.
- **Example:** *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* claims a substitute (Simon of Cyrene) was crucified while Jesus laughed from above. This is clearly **mythological**, not historical.
- **Contrast:** The Gospels and Paul's letters (50s–70s AD) treat the crucifixion as a real event, even though it was embarrassing for early Christians (criterion of embarrassment).

3. Contradicted by Early, Multiple Attestation

- **Christian sources:** All four Gospels, Paul (1 Cor. 15:3–5), and early creeds (e.g., 1 Peter 2:24) affirm the crucifixion.
- **Non-Christian sources:** Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.3), Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44), and Mara Bar-Serapion confirm Jesus was executed.
- **Gnostic denial is an outlier**, with no corroborating historical evidence.

4. No Eyewitness or Independent Support

- The Gnostic texts **lack any connection to apostolic tradition** or early Jewish/Roman records.
- They were written by **later sectarian groups** (e.g., Valentinians, Sethians) with no access to 1st-century Judea.

5. Motive: Rejection of Suffering

- Gnostics despised the material world and thus **denied Jesus could truly suffer** in the flesh.
- This is a **theological rejection**, not a historical claim.

Other Naturalistic Explanations

Minimal Facts Approach (per Habermas)

Habermas identifies five key facts accepted by a majority of critical scholars:

1. Jesus died by Roman crucifixion.
2. His disciples believed they saw the risen Jesus.
3. Paul, a former persecutor, converted after believing he encountered the risen Jesus.
4. James, a skeptic and brother of Jesus, converted.
5. The tomb was found empty (accepted by ~75% of scholars).

These facts serve as the test framework to evaluate naturalistic theories.

1. Swoon Theory (Jesus didn't die, only fainted)

Subpoint A: Roman execution was effective

- **Refutation:** Romans were trained executioners. Crucifixion was a brutal, public, and fatal punishment.
- Soldiers were held accountable for failed executions (Acts 12:19, 16:27).
- John 19:33-34 states Jesus was pierced in the side, producing a flow of blood and water, indicating hypovolemic shock and pericardial rupture — signs of death.
- Habermas cites medical experts (e.g., Alexander Metherell) affirming death was certain.

Subpoint B: Jesus could not physically recover

- **Refutation:** A man suffering massive trauma, scourging, and crucifixion couldn't:
 - Roll away a 1.5-2 ton stone.
 - Overpower armed guards.
 - Walk miles on pierced feet.
 - Appear glorified and victorious to disciples.
- Such a sight would evoke pity, not faith in a risen Lord (Habermas).

Subpoint C: Disciples' reaction

- **Refutation:** The disciples proclaimed victory over death, not escape from death.

- Their message centered on Jesus' triumph, not survival.

Fails:

- Fact #1 (death by crucifixion).
- Fact #2 (resurrection belief).

2. Hallucination Theory (Appearances were visions or grief-induced)

Subpoint A: Hallucinations are individual

- **Refutation:** Hallucinations cannot be group experiences. Yet multiple post-mortem appearances occurred to groups (Luke 24, Matt. 28, John 21).
- 1 Cor. 15:6 cites 500+ witnesses.

Subpoint B: Varied circumstances

- **Refutation:** Appearances happened:
 - Indoors (John 20), outdoors (Matt. 28).
 - To believers (Peter), doubters (Thomas), skeptics (James), and enemies (Paul).
 - Over 40 days (Acts 1:3), at different times.
- Hallucinations do not persist across settings, times, or demographics.

Subpoint C: Physical nature of appearances

- **Refutation:**
 - Jesus eats with disciples (Luke 24:41-43).
 - Thomas touches Jesus' wounds (John 20:27).
- These are multi-sensory, tangible interactions.

Subpoint D: Does not explain the empty tomb

- **Refutation:** Hallucinations don't remove bodies.
- The tomb was empty, and enemies couldn't produce the body.

Fails:

- Facts #2 (appearances), #3 (Paul), #4 (James), #5 (empty tomb).

3. Theft Theory (Disciples stole the body)

Subpoint A: No motive

- **Refutation:**
 - Disciples had no incentive. They gained persecution, not power.
 - Their message led to martyrdom, not wealth or status.

Subpoint B: Sincerity of belief

- **Refutation:** People do not die for known lies. All evidence indicates disciples genuinely believed Jesus rose.
- Liars make poor martyrs (Habermas).
- Suffering and martyrdom are used to demonstrate the sincerity of the apostles' belief in the resurrection of Jesus—not to directly prove the resurrection itself. For example, a Muslim might die as a martyr for Islam; this doesn't make Islam true, but it does show that the Muslim sincerely believes in it, since people generally do not willingly die for something they know to be a lie.

Subpoint C: Body could be produced

- **Refutation:**
 - If theft occurred, authorities would locate the body.
 - Christianity began in Jerusalem—where the body had been.

Subpoint D: Guards at the tomb

- **Refutation:**
 - Matthew 28 reports guards at the tomb.
 - Overcoming them unnoticed is implausible.

Fails:

- Fact #2 (genuine belief), #3 (Paul's conversion unexplained), #5 (empty tomb).

4. Wrong Tomb Theory

The Burial of Jesus in a Known Tomb: A Historically Credible Fact

I. Scholarly Consensus: Strong Support for the Burial

Gary Habermas (in *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*):

"The burial account of Jesus is one of the most well-established facts of the Passion narrative. Roughly **75% of critical scholars** accept the burial by Joseph of Arimathea as historical."

Even **atheist and agnostic scholars**, like **John A.T. Robinson**, **Gerd Lüdemann**, and **James Crossley**, do not deny the burial.

II. Reasons the Burial by Joseph of Arimathea Is Historically Credible

1. Multiple Independent Attestation

- **All four Gospels** record the burial by Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15, Matthew 27, Luke 23, John 19).
- The account in **Mark** is believed by most scholars to be the **earliest Gospel**.
- The **pre-Pauline creed** in **1 Corinthians 15:3–5** ("that He was buried...") likely dates to **within 3–5 years** of Jesus' death.
- This early creed **preserves the burial as a core event** of the resurrection proclamation.

Multiple independent sources in both **Gospel tradition** and **Pauline tradition** increase historical confidence.

2. Joseph of Arimathea Is Unlikely to Be Invented

- He is described as a **member of the Sanhedrin**, the same Jewish council that **condemned Jesus**.
- **Invention of Joseph** would be counterproductive:
 - The Sanhedrin were seen as **enemies** of Jesus.
 - Early Christian authors would not likely **fabricate a favorable role** for such a person.
- **Specific name + elite status = high falsifiability**:
 - Jewish opponents could have **easily debunked** a false claim by saying, "No, Joseph didn't do this. We know him."
- The Gospels were written **within living memory** of the events (Mark ~AD 65–70), while **eyewitnesses were alive**.

Making up a named, high-profile Jewish figure would be foolish if the story were false.

3. Criterion of Embarrassment

- It is **embarrassing** for the disciples to say:
 - A **member of the Jewish leadership** (Sanhedrin) — not Jesus's own followers — had the **courage to bury Him**.
 - The disciples themselves had **fled in fear** and did **nothing**.
- The early Christians had **no incentive** to invent a story that casts them in such a weak and cowardly light.
- This increases the **credibility** of the account.

Embarrassment is a key criterion historians use to test truth: **no one invents self-damaging details**.

4. No Competing Burial Traditions

- There is **no historical record or tradition** (Jewish or pagan) of Jesus being:
 - Left on the cross to rot,
 - Buried by Romans in a mass grave,
 - Or thrown into a pit.
- Even critics like **John Dominic Crossan** who suggested "dogs ate the body" **do so without any evidence**, and their view is **rejected by the majority** of scholars.

Absence of alternatives strengthens the claim that **this is the only remembered and preserved account**.

5. Jewish Burial Customs Would Require Burial

- **Deuteronomy 21:22–23** commanded Jews to bury even executed criminals **before sundown**.
- The Jewish people were **scrupulous** about honoring burial laws, especially before the **Passover Sabbath**.
- Even under Roman occupation, Jewish authorities were often allowed to **collect and bury bodies** (cf. Josephus *Jewish War*, 4.317).

It is **culturally plausible** that Joseph, even as a Sanhedrin member, would want to **honor Jewish burial law** for Jesus.

6. The Known Tomb Supports the Empty Tomb

- If Jesus had been buried in a **known tomb**, then:
 - The **location could be verified**.
 - Anyone could have **produced the body** to refute resurrection claims.
- Yet the early Christians proclaimed the resurrection **in Jerusalem**, where the tomb was located, and **no body was produced**.
- If Jesus had been **secretly buried** or thrown in a mass grave, the resurrection claim could have been dismissed **instantly** by opponents.

The fact that **nobody could counter the empty tomb narrative** suggests that people **knew where the tomb was** and that it **was indeed empty**.

As **Habermas and Licona** note:

“The burial by Joseph of Arimathea is one of the most secure facts we have regarding Jesus's final days.”

Did the Apostles mistake a wrong tomb for his resurrection?

Subpoint A: Women knew the tomb

- **Refutation:** Mark 15:47 states Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where Jesus was buried.

Subpoint B: Joseph of Arimathea was well-known

- **Refutation:**
 - The tomb's owner was a Sanhedrin member.
 - The location was public, not secret.

Subpoint C: Officials could correct the error

- **Refutation:**
 - Producing the right tomb or Jesus' body would instantly crush resurrection claims.

Fails:

- Facts #2 (appearances still occurred), #5 (tomb was empty).

5. Legend Theory (Resurrection was a myth that evolved)

Subpoint A: Timeframe too short for legend development

- **Refutation:**
 - 1 Cor. 15:3-7 is an early creed dated to within 3 years of Jesus' death.
 - Paul received it from eyewitnesses.

Subpoint B: Eyewitnesses were still alive

- **Refutation:**
 - Paul invites verification: "most of whom are still alive" (1 Cor. 15:6).

Subpoint C: Embarrassing details

- **Refutation:**
 - Women were first witnesses (Luke 24).
 - Women's testimony was culturally devalued.
 - Invented stories wouldn't use women to validate truth claims.

Subpoint D: Resurrection was unexpected

- **Refutation:**
 - No Jewish sect believed in a **singular resurrection** before the final judgment.
 - The idea of a crucified Messiah was scandalous (1 Cor. 1:23).

Fails:

- Facts #2, #3, #4, #5. Myth development theory is chronologically implausible.

6. Twin or Impersonation Theory

Subpoint A: No historical support

- **Refutation:** No source, ancient or modern, claims Jesus had a twin or look-alike.

Subpoint B: Disciples knew Jesus intimately

- **Refutation:**
 - Three years of close association makes impersonation implausible.
 - Resurrection appearances include personal identifiers (Luke 24:30-31).

Subpoint C: Physical wounds were shown

- **Refutation:**
 - Thomas is invited to touch crucifixion wounds (John 20:27).
 - Impersonators couldn't produce pierced hands and side.

Subpoint D: Doesn't explain Paul or James

- **Refutation:**
 - Paul and James had independent, vision-based conversions.
 - Impersonators couldn't appear to Paul in a vision (Acts 9).

Fails:

- Facts #2, #3, #4.

7. Spiritual Resurrection Only (No physical body)

Subpoint A: Jewish concept of resurrection

- **Refutation:**
 - "Anastasis" always meant bodily resurrection.
 - Jews didn't conceive of an immaterial resurrection.

Subpoint B: Physical interactions

- **Refutation:**
 - Jesus eats and is touched (Luke 24, John 20).
 - Disciples feared a ghost; Jesus invited physical inspection.

Subpoint C: Empty tomb remains unexplained

- **Refutation:**
 - If the resurrection were only spiritual, the body would remain.

Subpoint D: Paul's "spiritual body"

- **Refutation:**
 - "Spiritual body" in 1 Cor. 15:44 = body **empowered by the Spirit**, not non-physical.
 - Paul contrasts "natural" vs "spiritual," not "physical" vs "non-physical."

Fails:

- Facts #2 (bodily resurrection claim), #5 (empty tomb).

8. Psychological Projection / Wish Fulfillment

Subpoint A: Disciples were not expecting resurrection

- **Refutation:**
 - Luke 24:11 – Disciples dismissed the women's report as nonsense.
 - Jewish belief expected general resurrection at the end of time.

Subpoint B: Psychological state of disciples

- **Refutation:**
 - Disciples were fearful, defeated, and in hiding.
 - These are not conditions that foster visionary experiences.
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Subpoint C: Opponents converted

- **Refutation:**
 - Paul and James were not grieving or hoping for Jesus' return.
 - Wish-fulfillment does not explain hostile conversions.

Fails:

- Facts #2, #3, #4.

Naturalistic Priori Objections

I. What Is Naturalism?

Naturalism is the worldview that holds:

“Everything that exists is physical or has a physical explanation; nature is all there is.”

Under this framework, **miracles**—defined as supernatural interventions into nature—are ruled out a priori, not because of evidence, but because the worldview itself disallows them.

Key Claim:

“Miracles can’t happen because they violate the laws of nature.”

This claim is usually based on **David Hume’s argument against miracles**, which we will examine and refute below.

II. Rebuttal to “Miracles Can’t Happen”

1. Hume's Argument Against Miracles Is Circular and Flawed

Hume’s claim (in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*):

“A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature... which is established by firm and unalterable experience. Therefore, no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle.”

Problems:

A. Circular reasoning

- Hume assumes that uniform experience rules out miracles, but **how can one know** if all experience is uniform *unless* you first reject all miracle claims?
- He defines miracles as violations of laws that are never violated — a circular definition.

B. Testimony matters in history

- History relies on testimony. If we reject testimony *because* the event is extraordinary, we make it impossible for **any** unusual event to ever be believed—no matter how well-attested.

C. Selective skepticism

- Hume is overly skeptical about religious testimony but **less skeptical** about ancient historical claims (e.g., battles, coronations) that have fewer witnesses and less corroboration.

D. Miracles are not violations but interventions

- Miracles are not violations of natural law. They are **exceptions caused by an agent outside the system** (like a programmer inserting a new line of code into running software). Laws still operate normally before and after.

Philosopher Richard Swinburne points out that if there is a God, He could **occasionally suspend** His own laws without contradiction.

2. A Priori Rejection of Miracles Is Dogmatic, Not Rational

If you start with the assumption that **only natural causes exist**, then of course miracles are impossible. But this is not a **conclusion** from evidence—it's a **presupposition**.

- **Naturalism** says: “No miracles, because nothing exists beyond nature.”
- But this is **question-begging**. You can't disprove a miracle by **defining it out of existence**.

It's like saying: “Invisible ink can't exist, because I've never seen it.”

Response:

We must **evaluate miracle claims the same way we evaluate any historical claim**: through evidence, eyewitness reports, corroboration, etc.

3. The Resurrection Is Not Just a Miracle Claim—It's a Historical Claim

Habermas and Licona emphasize that the **Resurrection** is not asserted in a vacuum. It is supported by:

- Multiple independent eyewitness sources
- Early, pre-Pauline creeds (1 Cor. 15)
- Transformations of enemies (Paul, James)
- Willingness of disciples to die for their belief

- The empty tomb (acknowledged by many critics)

This is not a random or superstitious miracle claim. It is a claim embedded in **specific time, place, witnesses, and aftermath.**

Even if one is skeptical of miracles, **the historical data must be explained.**

4. If God Exists, Miracles Are Not Only Possible, but Expected

The argument is simple:

- If God exists, He can act in the world.
- A miracle is God acting in the world.
- Therefore, miracles are possible.

If the Resurrection happened, it supports the **existence of God**, but if God exists, the Resurrection becomes **entirely plausible.**

So naturalism is not a neutral starting point. It's a **belief system** that excludes God before any evidence is examined.

III. Final Summary: Miracles Are Not Illogical or Impossible

Objection

Response

Miracles violate natural law They are not violations, but **exceptions by a higher cause.**

We never see miracles That assumes **uniform experience**, which is disputed by eyewitnesses.

Testimony is unreliable **All history** depends on testimony; multiple witnesses matter.

Naturalism is proven It's a **presupposition**, not a conclusion from evidence.

IV. Don't Assume What You're Supposed to Prove

To dismiss the Resurrection *just because it's a miracle* is to avoid dealing with the evidence. Habermas and Licona argue persuasively that even using only **minimal historical facts accepted by critical scholars**, the Resurrection remains the best explanation.

Naturalism cannot be used as an axe to cut down the Resurrection if naturalism itself is what's being challenged by the Resurrection.

God of the Gaps Fallacy?

I. What Is the God of the Gaps Argument?

The objection goes like this:

“You don’t understand how something happened, so you insert God as the explanation. But that’s just a ‘gap in knowledge.’ As science progresses, these gaps shrink, and God becomes unnecessary.”

Applied to the Resurrection, skeptics say:

“Claiming God raised Jesus from the dead is just a ‘gap-filler’ because we don’t know what really happened. But eventually we might find a natural explanation.”

II. Refutation: Why the Resurrection Is NOT a God of the Gaps Argument

1. The Resurrection Argument Is Based on Historical Evidence, Not Ignorance

We don’t say, “We don’t know what happened, so it must be God.”

We argue:

- We **do know** certain historical facts:
 - Jesus died by crucifixion
 - His disciples believed He rose and appeared to them
 - Paul and James converted based on appearances
 - The tomb was found empty (by women, which is historically awkward for a made-up story)
- These facts are supported by **multiple sources, early creeds, and hostile witnesses**

Then they analyze **naturalistic explanations** (hallucination, legend, stolen body, etc.) and find them wanting.

Conclusion: The Resurrection is not posited because of ignorance but because **all known explanations fail**, and the **only explanation with sufficient explanatory power is that God acted**.

This is **inference to the best explanation**, not a “gap filler.”

2. A Good Explanation Is Not Disqualified Just Because It’s Theistic

Critics treat “God did it” as a cheat code. But why?

If God exists and can act, then “God raised Jesus” is not an arbitrary answer, it’s a **theologically and historically contextualized** explanation.

Compare:

- “The fire was caused by arson.”
- “The explosion was caused by a bomb.”
- “The resurrection was caused by a supernatural act of God.”

Each of these is a **causal claim**, not a retreat into ignorance.

Theistic explanations are only invalid if you assume from the start that God doesn’t exist, which is the exact point being debated.

3. Scientific Gaps and Historical Singularities Are Different

“God of the gaps” applies best to **natural processes** (e.g., weather, disease).

- Ancient people said, “Zeus causes lightning.”
- Science explains lightning as electrical discharge.

But the Resurrection is not a **repeatable natural process**. It’s a **one-time historical event** that defies natural explanation.

You cannot say:

“Someday science will explain how a dead man came back to life after 36 hours, appeared to hundreds, and sparked a global movement overnight.”

There’s no analogy for that.

As philosopher **William Lane Craig** puts it:

“This is not a ‘gap in nature’ but a unique event that *overturns* nature’s normal course. That’s the whole point.”

4. The Resurrection Was Predicted and Theologically Meaningful

It’s not just “strange thing happened — maybe God?”

- Jesus **predicted** His death and resurrection multiple times (e.g., Mark 8:31; John 2:19).
- The early church **interpreted** the Resurrection as God's vindication of Jesus as Messiah (Acts 2:22–36).
- The Jewish framework **expected** resurrection only at the end of time — not a single man rising early. This was **theologically disorienting** and required a **new explanation**.

So it’s not an unstructured appeal to God, but a **coherent, anticipated, and interpreted event** within a religious-historical framework.

III. Summary Table: Why This Is NOT God-of-the-Gaps

Misunderstanding (God of the Gaps)	Actual Resurrection Argument
"We don't know, so let's say God did it"	"We know a lot, and God is the best explanation of the data."
Fills ignorance in science	Explains a historically verified singularity
Assumes God because there's no explanation	Infers God because all other explanations fail
Arbitrary "divine magic"	Coherent fulfillment of Jesus's own claims and Messianic mission
Refuted by future science	Not reducible to scientific laws or repeatable conditions

IV. Final Thoughts

The **God-of-the-Gaps fallacy** warns us not to use God to explain things we simply don't understand.

That warning is valid **in science**, but **it doesn't apply** when:

- There's strong **positive evidence** for divine action,
- Competing explanations have been considered and found inadequate,
- The explanation fits a wider **worldview context**, and
- The claim is **historically anchored**, not mythological.

That's exactly what the Resurrection case provides.